DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 468 445 CE 083 707

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TITLE	Incarcerated Women and the Construction of the Self.
INSTITUTION	Georgia Univ., Athens. Dept. of Adult Education.
SPONS AGENCY	Kellogg Foundation, Battle Creek, MI.
PUB DATE	2001-05-00
NOTE	16p.; In: R. M. Cervero, B. C. Courtenay, and C. H. Monaghan, Comps. The Cyril O. Houle Scholars in Adult and Continuing Education Program Global Research Perspectives: Volume 1. University of Georgia, 2001. p14-27.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.coe.uga.edu/hsp/monographs1/clark.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Educational Research; *Adult Development; Adult Education; Adult Learning; Discourse Communities; *Females; Interviews; *Personal Narratives; *Prisoners; Psychological Characteristics; Self Concept Measures; *Self Congruence; Self Evaluation (Individuals); Social Development
IDENTIFIERS	Contradictions; *Identity Formation; *Self Discrepancies; Self Talk

ABSTRACT

A study examined how one group of marginalized women, the incarcerated, construct their sense of self. Using the notion of nonunitary subjectivity to analyze life history narratives, the study demonstrated how they create and sustain thematic coherence in their sense of self and how they manage contradiction, primarily through constructing a split self and by positioning themselves within discourses they see as advantaging them. Data were collected in two ways from 24 women incarcerated in Texas whom prison school faculty considered to be reflective, capable of human growth, and socialized to prison life. Ten were African-American, 7 were Hispanic, and 7 were Anglo. Life history interviews were conducted with each women. They were unstructured interviews done in two or three sessions of approximately 90 minutes each. After the interviews were completed, group meetings were held weekly for two hours over the course of a year. The cases of two women were studied in detail. For each, major events of her life were summarized, overarching themes in her narrative were identified, and a segment of her interview was examined in which she was in dialogue with herself about her life. Findings indicated two strategies dominate the way women manage contradiction. The first was to construct a split self, a conscious division of their subjective experiences and feelings that enables them to organize contradictory elements and manage them. The second was to position themselves within discourses that they see as advantageous to themselves, such as portraying themselves as "good mothers," whatever the reality of their mothering. (Contains 19 references.) (YLB)

Incarcerated Women and the Construction of the Self

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This study examines how one group of marginalized women, the incarcerated, construct their sense of self. Using the notion of nonunitary subjectivity to analyze life history narratives, I demonstrate how they create and sustain thematic coherence in their sense of self and how they manage contradiction, primarily through constructing a split self and by positioning themselves within discourses they see as advantaging them.

If you're going to commit a crime, you'd be smart not to do it in Texas.

I remember thinking this the first time I walked into one of the Texas state prisons for women. The sense of oppression, of dehumanization, of regulation of all that is personal was overwhelming. Fragments of memory float past. Guards on horseback in the fields outside the prison overseeing groups of women in dirty white uniforms who are swinging their hoes in unison and chanting something I can barely hear. The coils of razor-wire along the top of the tall fences. The parallel lines on the ground within the courtyard, defining how and where the inmates can walk. The officer telling me with a sneer that this unit has one inmate with a Ph.D. The omnipresent guards making Foucault's panopticon real. Being told that the slot in the cell door of the isolation unit was how the offending inmate's meals are delivered–a normal meal put through a food processor and shaped into a flat loaf so that no utensils are needed and no human contact during delivery is required. The roll of toilet paper by the door of the classroom, where the women take what they need if the guard outside gives them permission to use the bathroom. In this place all that is personal is regulated, controlled, squeezed tight. This is the place of diminishment. Seriously, if you're going to commit a crime, you'd be smart not to do it in Texas. The price is higher than you would believe possible.

I didn't set out to go to prison, at least not at first. My interest was in marginalized women and how they construct their sense of self. I was looking for women on the edges of society–not well educated, not well connected, not powerful in any of the ways we think about power, and certainly not visible. The prisons seemed an obvious place to begin. These are women who have been marked as unfit for civil life and relegated to our trash heap. It was impossible to imagine any marginalization greater than this.

The Issue/Problem

Initially I framed my question in terms of women's identity development and its link to learning. Research on women's development is relatively recent, and most of it, as Caffarella (1992) notes in her extensive review of this literature, focuses on white, middle-class, educated women. There have been few studies of the experiences of marginalized women. The major research on identity development in women, most notably Josselson (1990, 1996) and the scholars at the Stone Center (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiner, & Surrey, 1991) likewise have focused on majority women. Josselson's work is shaped by Erikson's theory of psychosocial development as operationalized by Marcia's (1966) concepts of identity status. Jordan et al. (1991) works within psychoanalytic theory and has developed the notion of a relational self. Both bodies of work have made significant contributions to our understanding of women's identity development, but neither approach was particularly helpful in my effort to understand how women at the margins, in this case incarcerated women, construct their sense of self. I needed a different approach.

Theoretical Framework and the Purpose of the Study

I found my theoretical ground in the literature on subjectivity, particularly approaches by feminists (Bloom, 1998; Flax, 1990, 1993; Griffiths, 1994; Weedon, 1997), working from postmodern and poststructural perspectives, who seek to understand how subjectivity is constructed within the complexities of social

interaction and discourse. Weedon defines subjectivity as "the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world" (p. 32). Griffiths echoing Marx, asserts that "we collectively make ourselves, but not in conditions of our own choosing" (p. 79). How we think about ourselves is shaped by culture, ideology, and language, therefore our subjectivity is not straightforward but is, in fact, contested, usually at a level beneath our conscious awareness. It is important to emphasize, however, that the self is not a passive receptacle that is filled by sociocultural forces; it is far more dynamic than that. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) argue for "a more actively formulated social self...[that is] a social construction that we both assemble and live out as we take up or resist the varied demands of everyday life" (p. 10).

The self is nonunitary in the sense that there is no single, core self that exists separate and unaffected by its sociocultural context. Instead we experience multiple selves. Flax (1993) puts forward a fluid understanding in which "subjectivity is conceived as a set of processes rather than as a fixed entity locatable in a homogeneous, delimited time and space" (p. 37). It is important not to think of this multiplicity as disabling fragmentation, a core self shattered, but instead to see it as a means by which we can better conceptualize the complexity of our subjective experience. With Bloom (1998) I see nonunitary subjectivity as "an alternative view of the self located historically in language, produced in everyday gendered, racialized, and cultural/social experiences, expressed in writing and speaking, and employed as a political feminist strategy" (p. 6).

Bloom's (1998) argument suggests how subjectivity can best be accessed and studied, namely through language. It is through narrative that the complex self is made visible. This approach takes as its starting point the fact that we understand ourselves and present ourselves to others by means of stories; in a very real sense we lead storied lives (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). Those stories, through both their content and their structure, give us a way to understand a person's inner experience and the meaning that it has for them. As a methodology, it is particularly suited to the study of subjectivity and identity (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 1993) because it is through narrative that identity is created and maintained (Linde, 1993). Paired with the notion of nonunitary subjectivity, it offers a way of accessing the various selves through their different narratives.

The definition of narrative is somewhat contested. Usually we think of it as having clear boundaries, like beginnings and endings. It can be as broad as a life history, in which the informant constructs the story of his or her life or as narrow as the account of a particular event. Sequence is a necessary element, and this can be chronological, consequential, or thematic (Riessman, 1993). I agree with Linde (1993) when she suggests that coherence is essential–the narrative must make sense–and that coherence is a construction of both speaker and listener, who "have a cultural supply of expected events in a life course, commonly recognized causes, and shared possible explanations from which to construct individual coherences" (p. 19). She identifies two principles of coherence: causality and continuity. It's the task of the speaker to create adequate causality for the events that constitute the narrative (things can't be random) and to sustain continuity of the storyline, so the elements remain connected in some way. Causality and continuity give a narrative its structure. It is by analyzing both the structure and the content of the narrative, then, that the complex experience of subjectivity can be assessed.

This is the theoretical framework that guides my thinking as I walk through the gates of the prison and come to know some of the women within. My goal is to gain an understanding of how these women construct their sense of self. As an adult educator, it is my hope that what I learn here will give me new insight into the process of personal or life-experience learning, and into the more complex process of transformational learning.

Data Collection and Analysis

I identified my sample with the assistance of the prison school faculty. I asked them to nominate women who were reflective and who showed potential for personal growth. I also asked that they be socialized to prison life, that is, not recently incarcerated, so that they wouldn't be engaged in the difficult process of adjusting to being in prison. The faculty nominated 24 women: ten were African-American, seven were Hispanic, and seven were Anglo. The ages ranged from early 20's to late 40's. I met with the women as a group and explained the purpose of the study to them. Their participation was voluntary. All agreed to participate.

I collected the data in two ways. First, I conducted life history interviews with each of the women. These were unstructured interviews done in two or three sessions of approximately 90 minutes each. These were audio taped and transcribed. After these interviews were completed, I met with the group weekly for two

hours over the course of a year. The purpose of these group sessions was to develop an educational process to foster personal development and insight. In this aspect of the study the inmates functioned as co-researchers. The results of this second phase of the study will be reported elsewhere. I was assisted in the data collection process by two of my doctoral students, Susan Hill and Deborah Kilgore, both of whom completed their dissertations on different aspects of this study.

There are multiple ways to analyze narrative data. Lieblich et al. (1998) identifies four broad approaches. The first is holistic-content, which examines overall themes in the life history. Second is categorical-content, which separates the narrative into meaning units and looks for patterns across those units. The more familiar term for this is the constant-comparative method. Third is the holistic-form, which examines the overall structure of the narrative, considering it as an unfolding plot line. The final approach is the categorical-form, which examines the structure of the language itself, for example noting metaphors or tracking active and passive constructions.

I chose to use a modification of the holistic-content approach. For each woman I identified the overarching themes in her life narrative. Next I closely examined one or more portions of the narrative in which she appears to be in dialogue with herself, within the context of one of the major themes. I then used that segment as a lens through which to view the theme more closely, paying particular attention to how her multiple subjectivities were made visible in this process and how she positioned herself within the various social discourses available to her.

In the following section I will present the cases of two of the women, Sabine and Reba. For each I will summarize the major events of her life, identify the overarching themes in her narrative, then examine a segment of her interview in which she is in dialogue with herself about her life.

Sabine

When I first met Sabine she told me that her life was about "hurt and pain." She wasn't wrong. A black woman in her early forties, she had served four years of her 20-year sentence for the death of a child in her care. She was adamant in her claim that she was not responsible for the child's death, and I believed her. Her family had retained a lawyer (an uncommon practice among the women we knew) and continued the appeals process, and in the spring of the year we were together, her conviction was overturned and she was released.

Most of the women in our group were well socialized to the prison and the majority of them had been incarcerated before. Sabine was different. Even four years into her sentence, she still seemed stunned to be there, and she reminded us often of a deer caught in the car headlights. She didn't have the hard edge the other women had; instead, she was undefended and vulnerable, and she suffered greatly from being in prison.

Sabine had trouble narrating her life story–she said she goes "blank" when asked to describe it, as if it were too much for her to get her mind around. She asked instead that I ask her questions, and initially I did that, though I had to press her for actual narratives. She described her family as "typical" but it was more typical of dysfunction. Her father worked steadily but he was an alcoholic, so a lot of the income was lost to drink and gambling. Sabine refers often to the poverty of her childhood as a significant burden, "a hurt." Despite his drinking and his abuse of her mother, she pictures herself as "a daddy's baby" and forgives him for his faults–"I still love him no matter what." She is less positive about her mother, even though her mother clearly held the family together. Sabine focuses instead on her emotional neglect, arguing that her mother had "picks" among the children and she wasn't one of them. This longing for acceptance and love is an ongoing theme in her narrative.

Her description of her childhood is largely negative. Her first accounts are of her father, first a happy one about her habit of eating off his plate, the second a darker one about a family vacation in which the father gets picked up for drunk driving and the family ends up in a rat-infested motel for the night. The father then essentially disappears from the narrative and she focuses instead on their poverty (symbolized most poignantly by the hand-me-down prom dress she was forced to wear) and on her mother favoring the other kids. She was slow in school, so that was a negative experience for her, too. Her uncle molested her at some point and her mother discovers it and retaliates against the uncle, an action that Sabine blames herself for. Self-blame is another large theme in this story.

When she is 13 she leaves home, against her mother's wishes, and moves in with an abusive man. Two years later she moves back home, this time on adult terms. Her mother tells her she has to either go to school or work, and she chooses work. It was when she was working at her first job, Church's Chicken, that

she was gang raped. She seems to stumble into this story; she clearly didn't intend to tell me this, but suddenly she's into it. She was raped at a friend's house and the girl obviously set her up. Afterwards she told no one, and she maintained that secret until now. Then she attempted suicide, after which her mother hospitalized her against her will. Interestingly, when she tells this story, she is surprised to recall that her mother intervened here. This memory obviously goes against the interpretation she has constructed about her mother.

The chronology gets shaky from here on. She marries her first husband, a man who isn't "worth even discussing," and has her two boys. Later she divorces him and marries again. This relationship, while rocky at times, endures and provides her with some measure of stability, including during this current period of incarceration. She worked at various service jobs until she fell and injured herself and was put on disability. It was during this time that she did a favor for a neighbor and took over the care of her infant nephew during the day. The details are hazy–it was a crack baby, the mother was involved with an abusive boyfriend, and the child fell in the bathtub when Sabine wasn't looking. What mattered in Sabine's life is that the child later died and responsibility for that death was placed on her. The conviction was for failure to render aid; the sentence was 20 years. She was devastated, even four years later when I first met her, and it was clear that she was still trying to make sense of what had happened to her.

There are several themes that pervade Sabine's story but the one that dominates is her role as victim. This includes her life circumstances (the emotional neglect of her mother, the family's poverty) and particular experiences (molestation by her uncle, the gang rape, her current conviction). However, she inverts the usual victim structure. For Sabine blame of others is reduced, and often is totally absent, while self-blame predominates. An offshoot of her victimization is her isolation. She keeps the rape a secret from everyone, even from the counselor whose job it is to help her, and of course from all her family members. This seems to be a protective strategy–if it's secret, she can't be blamed or condemned–but it also deprives her of any support she might find, and it prevents her from making sense of and integrating this experience into her sense of herself. In prison she maintains the secret of her crime (with good reason; inmates convicted for the death of a child are at risk of harm from other inmates), but this also separates her from others. She also actively isolates herself from painful memories and feelings, so she is also isolated within. There is also the theme of trust/mistrust in her life. Certainly there is no one who is consistently there for her, so she never established basic trust as a child. As an adult she is pretty consistently disappointed by others. But what dominates is the absence of trust in herself that is reflected in the mistrust she experiences from others.

There is a striking passage in which Sabine is in dialogue with herself around the theme of her victimization. It consists of three stories, told essentially without prompting from me, and framed by an initial story about her first husband. She discovered that he was doing drugs and that he was unfaithful to her. In response she takes up with someone herself, but her husband finds out and she's the one who ends up being hurt because now he doesn't trust her. The stories follow directly after this. [Note: Short pauses are indicted by ellipses; those longer than two or three seconds are noted in parentheses.]

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

And then I did something to her that ah...was really hurtful. (pause)

One time ah...she was...we was behind on the bills, or something like that, and she had some money and I took some money from her. And ah, now today, I don't know if she knows that I'm the one that took the money from her but...after that...Oooh...any time I...it hurted me more than it probably hurted her, because it stayed on my mind for a long time, and it really bugged me for a long time. And ah...(pause) I had went to my sister and I told my sister about it, and I told, and she said, "Well, why don't you talk to her about it?" you know, she told me she said, "Why don't you talk to her about it?" I said, "I can't" because I was really embarrassed and ah... and that really got next to me because... I knew it wasn't mine, but I took it anyhow. I don't know if I took it to hurt her or...I could have, I could have called the people that we owed this bill for, I could have called them and asked for an extension, but I didn't. I took her money, and I went and I paid this bill...and I felt real bad behind it. And um...If you could get me to do, ask me to do it now, I wouldn't do it for nobody because that's just how I feel about it, and so...(pause)

I've...That's probably the reason...she didn't too much care for me, you know. I don't know but that's probably the reason being I turned around and I....I really sit back, and I've thought about it, maybe...maybe she did know...that I took her money and, you know, and maybe that is the reason she don't too much care for me, because if somebody comes and takes something that belongs to me, and I know it was there, and it turn around me and you or another person is the only one there, and I know they didn't do it, and so it had to be you, and so you know...I probably would dislike you too, you know, I'd probably have some ah, ah vibes about you, too, you know. And that... that's the kind of way that was, and ah...And I did everything I could to sit up here, to try to make it up, you know, and stuff like that, you know? And...you see, I didn't, I just didn't feel it no more, you know. Then I felt like when I'd go around her family, I felt like everybody in the family knew about it, you know, and that bothered me...

I: ***So it really preyed on you...***

Yeah. It bothered me, it bothered me a whole lot, you know. And uh...That was, that was an experience right there.

I: ***Was that the first time you stole anything?***

Uh huh. Outside of when I was a kid, when I went in ah Nieman-Marcus (hearty laugh).

I: ***Tell me about that.***

Me and my cousin went in, me and my cousin and a friend went into Nieman-Marcus. So we was gonna go to this concert and we wanted an outfit, and, and like I told you, my mom and my dad didn't have the money to ah pay for it. And so we went in there and we was gonna go take an outfit. And we walking through the store, we done put on the clothes, and then we turned around and we put some clothes on--the same clothes we had on, we put them over the clothes that we was gonna take. We walking all through the store, and stuff like that, trying to find stuff that go with the outfit...(extended laugh). And my tag is sticking out (ascending laugh)...

I: ***Oh no!***

...my tag is sticking out in the back. And so when we get ready to leave out the store, it was two, two men then at the front thing, and he told us we wasn't going anywhere, we was going upstairs with them. And we kept on asking them what was...and here it was, and he said, "Next time you try to take something, at least put the tags on the inside." (laugh)

I: ***Oh my.... (laughing)***

Oh, we laughed about it, ooh, we laughed about it. So we went upstairs but my mom and my aunt and them didn't think it was too funny when they came to pick us up, because we was, we was minors at the time. I think we were about...I think we were about 12 or 13, something off in there. And ah, they didn't think it was too funny, so we got a whipping behind that, and then...

That was, that was the only time that I took something from somebody, and then that made...When it come to something being taken or something like that, it made my mom not trust...trust us anymore, you know. When something come up missing, or something like that, you know, the first person they look at was us, you know, they didn't trust us anymore, so...

And so ah...Then it turned around I was in an incident that ah...I was at somebody's house and (unclear) their dad had took the money. I had, had went to somebody's house, well.... My hus-, the husband I have now, it was his cousin, we--I went over to her house...And.....(pause) She was telling me about some money that she had, or something like that. And she turned around and she asked me would I hold it for her. And I told her "No," you know, just like.. because I didn't want to be responsible for it. And ah...she had left it in her purse or something, I don't know how it went down. OK...Next day, you know, I was at the motel because my husband,

he's a truck driver, and I was at the motel. Next day, you know, ah, ...banging on the door, it was banging on the door, and stuff like that, and so, ah.... They turned around and they asked me was I that person and I say, "Yes," and they turned around and they said, "Well, you under arrest for ah.... for ah..." How did they put that? (pause).... Some kind of theft or something like that because it was, oh it was 500 or something dollars, so it was some kind of theft. And someone was asking him...asking the officer, "What are you talking about?" you know, and stuff like that.

And so..I went to jail. I went to jail..... And I stayed in jail for like...um.... almost 2 weeks, I was in jail for 2 weeks. So I got out on ah...probation, they let me out on probation, 6 month probation. So I had to pay that 500 and some dollars back. I had to pay it back. And so after I paid it back, and ah she got her money back, I told her, I said, you know, "That was very unfair for to you, for you to sit up here and tell the officers and, you know, tell the people that I took your money, and I did not take your money." I said, "I could understand if I had took your money." She turned around, she told me, she said, "Well, you was the only person there." And so I said, "Well...." I just left it alone because I went on, I paid the 500-some dollars, you know. But it hurt, what hurt me because I knew I didn't do it, but yet...I got accused of it.

And like I said, it started from the time when I actually took the money from my mother-in-law. It started from then. And then when we got caught in Nieman-Marcus, you know, it it got started from there, you know. And from there on, it was like (small laugh), I said "Whatever I did, I hope nothing come up missing" because I didn't want to be accused of it. I didn't want them to accuse me of anything. And so...

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

Ah-huh....I don't like that feeling, I didn't like that feeling at all. And...let's see .....(long pause). Then after that, it was like.....(long pause). I don't know, I started being angry with myself, I started being angry with myself....I started being angry with myself, because I felt like I was, I went to jail for nothing, you know, that's how I felt, you know, I started being angry with myself. I said "Well..... I wouldn't have never been there...I wouldn't have never been accused of it", you know....

In these three stories we see Sabine reflecting on her identity as a victim. It's an interesting structure that she uses. The story about stealing from her mother-in-law is situated within their strained relationship and addresses that relationship more than the theft itself. In many ways this is a shadow story about her relationship with her own mother. Her motivation for the theft is ambiguous (perhaps to pay a bill, perhaps to get back at the mother-in-law) but the outcome is unambiguous. Sabine is the one who gets hurt. Things backfire on her. The Nieman-Marcus story begins as a lighthearted account of a childish prank, but then it goes dark when her mother appears. Again Sabine is the one who is hurt, this time because she's lost her mother's trust. What should have been a childish prank becomes a permanent scar on her character. She moves immediately to the story of the theft of the $500, which is the darkest of the three. This story is also the least coherent; we are uncertain what exactly happened. She says she didn't take the money, but twice she says that she "paid it back," language that suggests she did do it. The ambiguity and the inner contradictions parallel her later story about the death of the child, and this story serves as a precursor for that one. In both cases she is punished for something she didn't do. She ends with an evaluation of the three stories, which essentially is a summation of her victimization. The most prominent feature of this interpretation is her self-blame–four times she expresses anger at herself, not at the people or the circumstances that caused her such pain.

The overarching theme of Sabine's life history is her identity as a victim, but this passage provides insight into the structure of that victimization. Most victims engage in outward blame, but for Sabine this is inverted. Her victimization has two dimensions. The first is what I call the backfire phenomenon. Her actions against others end up hurting her more than hurting them. We see this in the mother-in-law story, in her infidelity to her first husband, even in the Nieman-Marcus story. In a real sense she becomes her own enemy. The second dimension occurs at the level of discourse. She actively positions herself within the dominant discourse of judgment, aligning herself with commonsensical wisdom, but in doing so she condemns herself. She justifies her mother-in-law's dislike of her by saying that if she were in her position and someone took something from her, "I probably would dislike you, too." She does the very same thing when she tells the story of her conviction, saying that if she were the prosecutor and heard the two conflicting stories she gave, she wouldn't believe the person either. This dimension of her victimization makes her her own judge. Sabine then is doubly victimized, but in her case the sources of both are within her. There is a kind of destiny here, as if

this is bred into her bones. There is no way she can win. The theme that is the major source of coherence for her life story is locked in place and guarantees her a life that is about "hurt and pain."

Reba

When I first met her, Reba was ready to jump out of the study before she even started, arguing that her memory was too damaged by long term drug use to enable her to be of any help to us. But she was ambivalent, too, and unwilling to actually make a decision about this. This ambiguous engagement was my first sense of this woman.

She reminded me of many of the women I saw when I was an addictions counselor–looking older than she was with an aged prettiness, tired and drawn. She was a white woman, almost 40, both distant, friendly, and highly defended. She was in her second year of a 15-year sentence for drug dealing. She described little about her childhood, saying she couldn't remember much. Her mother married three times, so there was a lot of change for her and her siblings during her childhood. She runs away from home at 13, catalyzed by her stepfather's tentative attempt to molest her. She plays down this incident and it is difficult to interpret it. She moves in with her sister, goes back to school but then drops out. She gets involved with a series of men, most of who initially seem stable but then turn out, to her surprise, to be criminals and drug addicts. She takes up with Joe and marries him two years later, with her mother's permission since she was under-age. At this point in their relationship Joe is jealous and even somewhat violent and the marriage is rocky. She leaves Joe after a couple of years, and moves in and out of relationship with various men. It is during these years, in her early twenties, that she begins to abuse prescription drugs. These were relatively easy to obtain, either by seeking out doctors who dealt in drugs or by forging prescriptions, and her use quickly escalated. An ex-girlfriend murders one of the men she was involved with, and Reba is deeply shaken by this. She attempts suicide by overdosing, recovers, and goes to live with her father for a while. More relationships with questionable men follow, as do several trips to Mexico with different men. She describes these trips as time away from everything, a kind of respite, and says that getting drugs there was not the focus. Eight years later she runs into Joe again and they remarry. He is more stable now, in marked contrast to the other men she'd been involved with, but she isn't ready to settle down so the marriage is rocky and her drug use contributes to this instability. On the verge of leaving again, she "comes up pregnant," so they decide to give the marriage another chance. She stops using drugs while she is pregnant but within a year after her son is born she resumes her habit. Her drug use is extensive and covert. She describes a complex double life in which she tries to play the part of wife and mother, but deals drugs out of her middle-class home in order to support a habit that now controls her life and effectively isolates her from any meaningful interaction with her family. She's arrested once, goes into treatment to avoid doing time, but continues using, despite the fact that Joe has put up most of their savings so that she can post bond. A master deceiver, she fools even her probation officer. She's later picked up for a violation of her parole and is sent to prison. She half wonders if Joe or her mother tipped off the police to save her from the slow suicide of her drug addiction.

When I met Reba she had served just over a year of her sentence. In multiple ways she seemed out of place in prison, like she got on the wrong bus and is shocked to see where she's landed. She kept to herself within the group for several months and seldom volunteered any information about herself. Yet she would hang around after the group sessions to help us put the classroom back in order, and it was during those times that she seemed most relaxed. At one point she said that she could imagine walking out with us and getting into our car and driving away. That was much more natural to her than being in this prison of 1200 women. Over time she did open up to the group and even became friends with another inmate. What never changed, though, was her thinking about her addiction. She knew the language of recovery and used it, to an extent, but she never went to AA meetings, nor did she opt for drug treatment while in prison, even though both choices would have shortened her sentence. Yet she desperately wanted to go home. Joe brought their son, Will, to see her regularly, and she talked about the pain of watching him grow up apart from her. But she remained at high risk for relapse and she knew it. Having lost so much because of her addiction, she still was unwilling to do the serious work of recovery.

An overwhelming theme in Reba's life story is disconnection–both from life around her and from herself. Her drug use certainly separates her from others emotionally, especially her family, and now physically. It also, through the repression of feelings and the memory loss, separates her from herself. She speaks of the drugs as taking her "somewhere else" and it's clear that she wants to be somewhere else. She often feels out of place, so she carries that sense of disconnection with her. It was true when she was going to

school when living with her sister; it was true when she was in treatment, or on probation; it's true in prison. This woman has no place where she sees herself belonging.

The disconnection gives rise to a consistently split self. She has for years put up a "good front," pretending to be one thing (normal housewife) while being another (drug addict/dealer). She spun an elaborate web of lies and deception to maintain this separation. She also speaks of herself as split within, often in terms of the split between her emotions and reason. She exerts enormous effort to control those emotions outwardly, but is not totally successful in controlling them inwardly. There's an active self (leaving home, doing drugs) and a passive self (coming up pregnant, falling back into drug use). These splits are unresolved for her.

More than anything else, Reba is defined by living on the edge, by a constant tension. She marries a dull, stable man, then pushes this respectability away with her drug use. Danger and safety are held in tension. She uses the image of the roller coaster to describe herself and I think that captures her well–danger and safety held in tension. I pressed her on what life was like off the roller coaster and her response consisted of two stories; together these reveal a lot about how she understands herself and her life at this point.

I: ***What picture do you come away with? If you were sitting in my chair, (she laughs) how would you describe you and your life?***

Well, I'm not sure, I'm not, well, I'm not real good with my words, ah... I'm not sure how I would describe it. Ah... I've...(pause) had a lot of emotional....I don't know what you call them, ah.... give me some help here. (we both laugh) I'm not sure. I think I described to you once as being on a roller coaster, and ah I think what I meant by that is I've gone through so many highs and lows ah....with myself, ah different experiences, different times in my life and um... I think like my husband said one time, he said, ah...um...he grew up but I didn't, you know? And I think that mentally, he probably did develop in many, many ways that I didn't. Or... I took the...the road that leads to a dead end. Ah.....It's funny how things can seem so easy for one person, and they can't, they aren't that way for the other.

I: ***If your life has been a roller coaster, Reba, where are you now? Where is the roller coaster now?***

Um....I think the roller coaster's pretty much on level ground. Ah.....ah....I think my all time low was when I came to prison, and ah I think my all time high will probably be when I get out and can start over. Ah... What I thought was high back then, um....wasn't real. Um, I think if we let our feelings get in our way ah, or lead us through life, ah.....I don't know, our feelings are gonna lead us sure in some directions. But I think that ah it really takes more than that, it takes ah mature ah developed outlook on situations to ah assess a situation, or whatever. Because if I let my feelings be my guide here throughout, ah....there's no telling, no telling, um... You know, even if, even when drugs are concerned, you know, if I start feeling, letting my feelings, you know, I don't know, I might slip back and say, well you know, I can do it one more time, and I'd like to try it, you know, feeling the want or the need. But ah.....the outlook I would like to take is ah, you know, be reasonable, be sensible. Look where you're at, look where you could go back to. Look what you have to lose--you've come this far, you know. It's not worth it. Just say no, and stay away from it.

I: ***Nancy Reagan was right?***

(Laugh) Yeah, yes...ah...

I: ***Talk to me a bit about what it's like for the roller coaster to be level. What does that mean to you? Because you're used to it going up and down. What's it like now?***

Ummm, It feels good, but it hurts. Ah... Because I haven't been at an even keel in a long time, that I can remember ever. Ever. And ah....

I: ***Even as a child?***

Even as a child...even as a child I just, ah... I don't remember...(pause). I really don't ah...Well maybe I do, some instances, but ah...as far as a direction...

I: ***What comes into your mind when you say, "Well maybe I do"? What memory comes forward?***

Ah....ah...The memory of being at my aunt's house, ah...being a kid....playing with my cousins.

I: ***Doing what?***

Ah....Going through her clothes, trying on her different colored fishnet hose, getting ready for church (laugh).

I: ***Putting on high heels?***

Oh yeah, oh yeah.

I: ***Walking around...***

Umhum...Getting into the makeup umhum, yeah...(pause) Ah, and you know, I can see my aunt's house just as clear as a bell, and I must have not even been a teenager yet, you know. I don't know how old I was, maybe I was 9. I don't know.

I: ***And that was a happy memory.***

Mmhmm, yes...(pause). Um, it's funny, ah..., ah..I say she's my aunt, she's my aunt by marriage, my stepfather's sister. And she had two girls, Marcie and Polly, just the two sisters, that's all. Marcie was my age and Polly was a little younger, and we would play....ah... And I haven't heard from them in I don't know how many years. I mean, it's been probably 30 years. And ah, I got a letter from Marcie....she's, you know, a businesswoman, and she sends cards, and um....I wrote her one letter, and sent her a card, you know, just to say hello, but...it's really amazing. She sent me a picture, and I mean, she's all, of her and her sister, and I mean, they're just all grown up. You know, they look older than I do, and it's just... it's really strange, because I just remember it, remember I was a little girl.

I: ***How did it feel to hear from her?***

Good, it felt good. You know, I'm kind of curious as to what's been going on in their lives. I'm sure, I think one of them's married or both of them divorced. I don't know if they have kids, or, you know, I don't know a whole lot about what's going on in their lives, but they got their...Marcie has her mom's same address, mailing address, so I don't know. But...(pause)

I: ***Did you just hear from her recently?***

Mmmhmm...yeah...Mmhum. Ah, Alma keeps in contact, has kept in contact with my mother. And my mother... gave them my address. Yeah.....(pause) It really surprised me to hear from Marcie, I mean there's, what can you say to someone that you haven't seen or talked to in 30 years? Ah, you know, but yet we know where our roots come from, so to speak. She certainly doesn't know that I've forgotten all of mine, you know, but....ah.... it's kind of strange.

I: ***Well you haven't forgotten all of them.***

No, not all of them. And I guess the ah...longer I'm sober, the more I begin to remember. So it's good.

I: ***Okay, so that memory in your aunt's house, putting on some of her clothes....***

It was a good memory. Right now I feel like I'm kind of at an even keel, ah...I don't have a lot of control over anything, which of course bothers me, ah....You know, I find myself worrying about my son sometimes, but I know that I shouldn't. Ah because there's nothing, nothing I can do, not one thing. Ah.....
And my husband and my son came to see me last weekend, and it was the first time they came without telling me they were coming. And they come once a month, but I wasn't expecting them. Ah...They said they knew that this weekend would be real busy, the Mother's Day weekend, so they want to make sure they get a table,

and we had a good visit.... (pause) When Will went to getus a coke, at one time, I told Joe, I said, "You know, I have been real worried about that gun of yours. Ah, I didn't want to bring it up in front of Will to give him any ideas, but ah, do you keep it put up and unloaded, and..." you know. I said," because he gets home from school and you don't get home til later, is all that under control?" You know, things like that, I find myself in here thinking about....Of course, his reply was, ah "No, me and Will both sleep with a gun under our pillow," or something off-the-wall that just...but you know, he he was telling me that so that I would be reassured that it was far taken care of, you know. He made a joke out of it, but it was serious to me.

I: ***Sure, sure...***

But things like that, ah, my son does real good in school, he's very athletic, ah... He's got everything a kid could imagine, you know...besides a car and he's not old enough. But ah....um.... I find myself right today on a (sigh) a pretty even keel, ummm...

I: ***And is even good?***

Yes, it's good, ahmm.

I: ***What are the ways it's good, and what are the ways it's bad?***

Well....(pause) I've learned to be very very patient. Ah....ah... There's no such thing as having a temper here, unless you want to stay. And ah... 9 times out of 10, when you put 1300 women, or 1200 women together, there's gonna be problems. I've learned to really ah control...my feelings...ah...

I: ***Were those feelings out of control?***

No, they weren't out of control, but I let a lot bother me, I guess. I took things ah..to heart. Ah.....(pause) here, you just ah learn to watch out for number one... In and however you have to do that is what you have to do to survive.

This is a fascinating juxtaposition of stories. Reba uses the roller coaster as a metaphor for her life and she initially links the highs and lows to her emotions, suggesting that this is a sign of immaturity. She links this to the discourse of recovery from addiction ("If I start feeling...I might slip back") where feelings lead to trouble, and where reason and control can save her ("Look what you have to lose"). This discourse isn't really persuasive to her though. When I press her about what it's like being on an even keel, she's ambivalent ("It feels good but it hurts") and tries to claim that it has never been her experience before. Then that childhood memory swims into consciousness and is immediately dismissed; she would not have shared it except that I ask her to bring it forward. Because of her extensive and long-term drug abuse, Reba doesn't remember a lot about her childhood, so the return of this particular memory is significant. It's striking in its innocence. Children playing at being adults....safe....happy. It probably came to mind because she had heard from one of these cousins sometime before, and she is quick to move from the past to the more recent contact. But what is particularly significant is the connection she makes between being on an even keel and not having control over anything. For someone who has successfully lived a double life for some time, not having control is fatal. What intrigues me is the story that follows on the heels of this admission, the story about her fears for her son. She frames this as control (the gun being "put up and unloaded") and her inability to exercise any control on her son's behalf ("There's nothing, nothing I can do, not one thing..."), but I think at a deeper level she's talking about herself. In this segment she exposes an inner contradiction. The roller coaster is her life on drugs; the even keel is what a drug-free life would be like. For her, being on an even keel is potentially safe (the childhood memory) and potentially menacing (the fear for her son's safety), but the more potent feeling by far is that of threat. I believe these two stories expose these contradictory feelings and explain why Reba remains at such high risk for resumption of her drug use.

Findings

Narrative is the fundamental vehicle for meaning making and coherence is a fundamental property of narratives. A major way that we create coherence within our life story is by organizing the telling thematically. These themes are more than the sum of their constituent parts; they organize the whole and determine the selection and arrangement of particular memories and interpretations. We all do this, and it is an efficient way to manage the complexity of our life experience, at least in a broad way. Coherence, after all, gives us the sense that our lives are not chaotic but in fact have meaning that can be recognized by others.

But there's a problem. It isn't exactly true. The themes don't catch everything; they don't quite hold. I agree with Ewing (1990) who claims that what we construct is not coherence but the *illusion* of coherence. It's as if we need to believe that things in our lives hang together, add up, make sense, for the most part, all the while experiencing contradictions that would otherwise give the lie to that outer sense of coherence. The thematic coherence is obviously a complex and fluid construction that provides a degree of solidity to our lives. But what happens beneath it is also complex and fluid and highly creative. I believe that the more significant task lies here, in the management of contradiction. A kind of logic governs the thematic constructions, but logic doesn't work in dealing with contradictions. What I think is happening here is an effort to maintain a working balance. In a way it's like getting your sea legs–figuring out how to live with contradictions within ourselves. We all do this, too, but I think we're less conscious of it and therefore less aware of how we manage it in the ordinary living of our lives. Conceptualizing the self as nonunitary provides one way to uncover this process.

In each of the life history narratives of the women in this study there are clear overarching themes. In examining passages within each interview in which the woman is in dialogue with herself in terms of one of the themes, I am able to watch her engage some of the perplexing contradictions in her story and examine the various ways in which she manages these in order to create a working balance. Originally I thought of these contradictions as gaps or fissures within the outer coherence of her story, but that's too static a metaphor. Now I think of the contradictions as a kind of interpretive slippage within the larger coherence system–they are fluid and require tending, the kind of effort necessary to hold together things that are moving in different directions. I see these points in the narratives as significant because they are the sites of potential change. Management of contradiction maintains a negotiated status quo; if transformation is to happen, it will probably begin here.

I don't have examples of transformation among the women I studied. But I am able to examine how they manage some of the contradictions within their understanding of themselves, and this suggests how they are protecting themselves against change. By implication it may also suggest how transformational learning might happen in their lives.

The women use many strategies to deal with inner contradiction. It's tempting to use the psychoanalytic categories of denial and repression to explain what is happening here; after all, the women are ignoring or significantly minimizing aspects of their life stories that go against something they want to believe about themselves. But this is too dismissive an interpretation and it fails to catch the complex and quite sophisticated work that each woman is doing to effectively manage contradiction within her life story and to construct a particular sense of herself. I'm reminded of a dramatic story that Mishler (1986) tells about one of his interviews. Asked to discuss a difficult time for the family, the man describes a time in which expenses for his son's surgery presented a serious challenge to the family budget, but it was a challenge that the father met head on, refusing the surgeon's offer to reduce the bill. Only later, and from another source (the man's wife), does Mishler discover that the man is an alcoholic. His story in the original interview not only omits this fact, but it carefully presents an alternative picture of himself and he accomplishes this through complex narrative work. Throughout he positions himself within the discourse of the good father, someone who is caring and responsible, willing to make whatever sacrifices are necessary to provide for his family. He further empowers himself by refusing the assistance of someone more powerful (the doctor) and achieving the goal (payment of the medical bill) on his own terms. To say that this man is in denial about his alcoholism is certainly accurate, but to stop there is to miss the sophisticated means he has used to manage these major contradictions within his life. And it is this complex and delicate task of management that I consider to be the most significant aspect of the on-going construction of subjectivity.

In this study I found that the women manage contradiction in a number of ways, but two strategies predominate. The first is to construct a split self, a conscious division of subjectivity that enables them to organize contradictory elements and claim them as authentic selves. Essentially they are using nonunitary subjectivity as an interpretive tool, much as theorists do, but they do so in order to create a sense of coherence.

The second strategy they use is that of positioning themselves within discourses that they see as advantageous to them. We always select from the multiple discourses available to us as we construct our sense of self. We have no choice but to express ourselves in the language and conceptual symbols of our cultural-surround and these discourses are by necessity conflicting and often contradictory. The women manage contradiction by positioning themselves within discourses they see as more powerful, in an effort to balance out conflicting claims.

Splitting the Self

Several years ago, when I was preparing a paper on nonunitary subjectivity, I tried to explain what I was doing to a friend who is a scientist. Before I could get very far she stopped me, saying: "I know exactly what you mean–I have names for mine" and then proceeded to tell me about several of them, including the self that occasionally buys outrageous clothes, only to have them buried in the closet by her more restrained self. If I was ever uncertain about the reality of nonunitary subjectivity in ordinary life, those doubts disappeared at that moment. Consciously having different selves is a common and useful way to explain and therefore manage the contradictions within.

Probably the best example of this in my study was a woman I'll call Nita. She grew up with a lot of violence and had violent impulses herself. She picked fights when she was a kid and as an adult robbed people for the rush it gave her. This wild self is freely narrated in her story. But there's also a self that she calls lost one that is overwhelmed by feelings of despair and loneliness. This is the self that attempts suicide, and that drifts without meaning from one place to the next. She is really puzzled by this lost self and doesn't understand these feelings of desolation. Significantly she talks about going home during one of these periods, as if home would be a refuge, but home isn't available to her. In fact, she doesn't have a place to put this self–it doesn't belong anywhere. The split self is a way in which Nita holds together two very different experiences of who she is, but it is a tense and uneasy division.

We see a different use of this strategy in Reba. She worked hard to create a good front when she was doing drugs heavily, and she was successful at it. Her split self–outwardly together, inwardly addicted–creates a life living on the edge, and that tension between danger and safety seems to define who she is. Nita creates a split self to make sense of her inner contradictions; Reba's split creates a world of contradictions and it's the excitement of living that way that sustains her.

Positioning within Discourses

One way of understanding the construction of subjectivity is in terms of social discourse. In these terms the self is "dynamic and multiple, always positioned in relation to particular discourses and practices and produced by these" (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn & Walkerdine, 1984, p. 3). Various and competing discourses surround us all the time, and they form further resources for constructing our understanding of ourselves. Hollway (1984) argues that we position ourselves within a particular discourse in order to gain an advantage of some kind. I saw this happening the first time I met the women inmates. I was explaining the research project to them and I was especially careful to describe how their identities would be kept confidential. They weren't interested in this at all. Instead they wanted to know if this research would benefit their children, especially their daughters, by helping to prevent them from ending up in prison. This was the first way in which they identified themselves to me, by positioning themselves within the discourse of the good mother. What is especially interesting about this is the obvious contradiction between the discourse and the reality; most of these women had not been good mothers. Their narratives tell stories of neglect, occasional abuse, and functional indifference to their children, especially for those women who were drug addicts. Yet by positioning themselves within the good mother discourse, they gain the power associated with that discourse and use that to offset the contradiction with their lived experience. This doesn't work logically, but emotionally it is quite successful.

We see a less successful example of this in Sabine's story. One dimension of her identity as victim is her positioning of herself within the common discourse of judgment. Several times in her interview she says that she understands why others judge her harshly (her mother-in-law, the jury that convicted her), because she would do the same if given the same evidence (money taken, conflicting explanations given). Here she is aligning herself with commonsensical wisdom, a position of power. What is sad is that by doing so, she condemns herself, so the attempt to gain an advantage backfires.

Reba is somewhat more successful with this strategy. She has learned the discourse of recovery from drug addiction. It was a discourse she learned when she was in treatment and it is one she hears from the prison officials. She can talk the talk, which is an attempt to gain some advantage in her situation, if only by making herself less of a target for the prison officials. But it also helps manage the inner contradiction between her desire for drugs and her desire to be reunited with her family, and this is where the strategy is most successful.

These two strategies of managing contradiction, creating a split self and positioning themselves within discourses they think will advantage them, are not the only ones used by the women in my study, but they were the most common and the most powerful. Together they provide a way for the women to maintain a sense of coherence in their understanding of themselves, and that is no small accomplishment.

Impact

The women in this study show enormous creativity and skill in constructing a sense of self that sustains them in the midst of very difficult circumstances. They maintain thematic coherence in their life story by adroitly managing contradictions, primarily through constructing a split self and by positioning themselves within discourses that advantage them in some way. It is this process of managing contradiction that I consider the most significant finding of this study, because these contradictions are sites of potential change. In this study I saw the women largely maintaining a psychic status quo, but I think this suggests how transformational change could occur. I believe that process can be conceptualized as a narrative engagement of fluid and complex subjectivities that leads to a new and significantly different sense of self. It is my hope that this study, the first phase of a larger project on identity development in marginalized women, will enable me and others to begin theorizing about transformational learning in these terms.

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