

It Depends on the Situation: Women’s Identity Transformation in Prison, Jail, and Substance Abuse Treatment Settings

Kayla M. Hoskins and Jennifer Cobbina

Reasons for Research on Women’s Identity Change in Correctional Settings

There is a large body of evidence of the negative effects of imprisonment. Research on men has produced evidence of identity changes that are related to recidivism and desistance from crime. Less is known about system-involved women’s identity changes in carceral (i.e., prison, jail) and treatment settings. Our key aim of this study was to understand the nature of identity change in relation to the correctional spaces women occupy, in order to identify characteristics of incarceration/treatment interventions that either help or hinder women’s reentry and efforts to desist from lawbreaking.

The Study

To understand women’s narrative identity change in connection to their experiences in prisons, jails, and substance abuse treatment settings, we analyzed data from life-story interviews collected from 118 women who had five or more felony convictions at the start of their participation in the study. Of the 118 women, 75 women were on probation and 43 were on parole. The life story interviews ask about key events in women’s lives, and we examined changes in how women narrated the significance of these key experiences in connection to their identities, or if there was no change/shift in their identity. Identity changes were counted and compared by the context of the experience (whether it took place in prison, jail, or in a substance abuse treatment program). These themes indicating identity change included:

+ Positive Identity Change Themes:

- + **Cognitive Shifts** in which women felt **dissatisfied with crime** or substance use, imagined a **new prosocial role** for themselves (crime-free future lifestyle), and/or grabbed onto **hooks for change** (opportunities for change) to build a new prosocial identity.
- + **Identity Shifts of Redemption** (i.e., a shift from a negative state to a positive outcome), in which women found ways to make good out of a negative situation (such as crime or substance misuse) and see themselves in a more positive light; either by means of faith – **religious redemption**, or by determination to use their experiences to help others – **generative redemption**.

- Harm to Identity [Negative] Themes:

- **Contamination**, a narrative shift in which a positive state is irreparably spoiled, ruined, or undermined by a negative event.
- **Pains of Setting**. Situational hardships women suffered in carceral or treatment settings, such as traumatizing and dehumanizing experiences. These pains included forced separation from children and loved ones “on the outside,” degrading treatment by correctional staff, unsafe and inhumane living conditions, deprivation, and poor quality of physical and mental health care.

Key Findings: Women’s Identity Change in Correctional Contexts

Generally, women in substance use treatment settings had positive identity development and took steps to build prosocial lives.

- + In treatment settings, women came to **see illegal behavior as undesirable, imagined a new prosocial role, and seized opportunities (hooks for change)** to commit to a prosocial identity and prosocial connections with peers.
- + **Hooks for change primarily occurred in substance use treatment settings.** Women in treatment described the importance of exercising their own agency to voluntarily choose to take steps to change.
- + **Generative redemption** more commonly occurred in substance use treatment programs than in jails or prisons. In addition to making good out of a negative situation, women used their treatment experiences to help others in treatment and in the community.

Women in carceral settings more commonly experienced harmful consequences to identity.

- + Although women in prisons and jails **desired a prosocial, noncriminal identity**, few grabbed onto “hooks for change” and took steps to attain a new prosocial identity. Incarcerated mothers typically described maternal goals for reentry to be “better” mothers.
- + **Religious redemption** was commonly narrated in carceral settings, suggesting that faith/spirituality helps women cope with challenging situations, especially if access to other resources is limited.
- **Contamination** to women’s identity was most common in carceral settings.
- **Over twice as many women in prisons and jails endured pains in the setting.** Situational pains were more prevalent in the context of incarceration than treatment. Disconnection from children loved ones and the struggle for safety/survival impeded women’s opportunities to construct a prosocial self. Women’s histories of trauma were exacerbated by the hardships and indignities they endured during incarceration. **Nevertheless, few women said they were deterred from crime by pains of incarceration.** These findings suggest carceral environments deprive women of choice, safety, meaningful opportunities to change, and prosocial support. In turn, these deprivations discourage women’s positive identity change.

Recommendations for Practitioners and Policy Makers

- 1) Reduce the number of substance-involved women incarcerated in prisons and jails to avoid damaging effects on women’s identities.
- 2) Increase the number of substance-involved women referred to community-based treatment programs.
- 3) Programs targeting women’s prosocial identity development (away from substance use and crime) should be voluntary and prioritize women’s agency to determine treatment plans and goals.
- 4) Treatment interventions may facilitate women’s positive identity development by incorporating narrative therapies.
- 5) Treatment programs and carceral environments may improve women’s outcomes by providing generative opportunities for women to use their experiences overcoming challenges to care for and assist other people. For example, providing opportunities for women to volunteer, share recovery stories, support and mentor peers, training in ways to support others facing similar challenges in the community, and providing resources and support for mothers to care for children.

Source:

Hoskins, K. M., & Cobbina, J. E. (2020). It depends on the situation: Women's identity transformation in prison, jail, and substance abuse treatment settings. *Feminist Criminology*, 15(3), 340-358.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1557085119878268>