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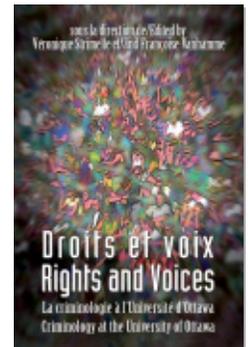Published by University of Ottawa Press

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Spare Some Social Change?: Older Women's (Re)Integration Struggles in Neoliberal Communities

by

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INTRODUCTION

Women leaving prison are confronted by many immediate needs, but shelter, food, a source of income, and access to health services top the long list of basic requirements. For older women leaving prison, these needs both intensify and multiply as they face the challenges of being ex-prisoners who are growing older. Older ex-prisoners have often experienced long-term exposure to correctional regimes that regulate their behaviour according to a set of norms (see Foucault 1979; and Wahidin 2004). As they re-enter society after experiencing the controlling environment of the prison, older female ex-prisoners often feel overwhelming pressure to conform to their new environment and to social expectations, even though they are often ill-prepared for these challenges and unable to conform. However, the professionals who work most closely with women exiting prison do not see a need for *individual* change. Rather, they problematize the neoliberal policy environment, and contemporary discourses that individualize and responsibilize citizens, highlighting a need for a broader *social* change in the treatment

of older (re)integrating women. Drawing on governmentality theories, I examine women's struggles in the community by exploring how individuals, rather than the social environment, are responsibilized in order to effect behavioural and lifestyles changes.

1. OLDER WOMEN AND (RE)INTEGRATION

The population of older female ex-prisoners consists of women aged fifty years and older who have experienced imprisonment and who are living in communities with or without ongoing state surveillance. Women are considered to be "older" at fifty years, rather than the more typical sixty or sixty-five years, because the harsh conditions in prisons, the marginal lifestyles, and the lifelong poor health care that many prisoners experience accelerate the ageing process, exposing them to challenges normally confronted by seniors (see Uzoaba 1998; Wahidin and Tate 2005; and Wahidin 2006). Ron Aday (2003) notes that many older female prisoners suffer from chronic health conditions, some of which stem from the poor diets, insufficient exercise, and detrimental mental health impacts associated with incarceration. These women face intersecting challenges based on their gender, age, abilities, and racial and class markers (see Shantz, Kilty, and Frigon 2009). Any one of these areas can constitute a disadvantage, causing women to face discrimination or criminalization. However, their cumulative effects can be much stronger, causing women greater disadvantages and placing them at the margins of society. These conditions pose unique challenges as older women return to the community.

While communities can take many forms, including virtual communities and kinship networks, here my focus is on physical, geographical communities. Depending on where a woman is released, she may benefit from special resources and support or encounter challenges and hostility. Thus, the community can be a significant factor in determining whether or not a woman remains on the outside after release (see Holtfreter, Reisig, and Morash 2004). Members of a community do not share the same advantages and opportunities within their environments. Often, those who are relatively advantaged receive the greatest benefits (see Bourdieu 1993). In addition, communities

may ostracize those who "don't belong" or do not fit in (see Brody and Lovrich 2002). Community spaces are often considered to be the property of the young and are sometimes seen as out of bounds for older adults, who are depicted as frail and weak (see Shilling 1993; and Tulle and Mooney 2002). While the acceptance of ex-prisoners into communities varies, based on these and other local attributes, research has shown that the communities into which ex-prisoners integrate are often marked by a lack of resources (see Richie 2001; Robinson 2003; and Maidment 2006). While communities can provide many benefits, they can also create further challenges for (re)integrating ex-prisoners.

Researchers have challenged the notion of "successful reintegration," arguing that the notion is misleading: many criminalized women lack social ties and were never truly integrated into their communities in the first place, making *re*integration impossible (see Richie 2001; Maidment 2006; and Shantz, Kilty, and Frigon 2009). The idea of success is also contested. While the mission statement of Correctional Service Canada (2007) links the term to desisting from crime, exercising self-discipline, and engaging in pro-social behaviours, ex-prisoners themselves often view short periods of independent community living as successful (see Comack 1996; and Maidment 2006). The disparity between these definitions highlights the dissonance facing ex-prisoners. They often struggle to meet their own modest expectations, but are judged based on standards set by correctional officials who have not faced the same disadvantages and challenges (see Comack 1996; Hannah-Moffat 2000; and Maidment 2006).

Despite their marginal positions and limited social ties, ex-prisoners are expected to rely on their families and communities for support (see Silverstein 2001; and Maidment 2006). Ex-prisoners with social networks and connections linking them to others can benefit from these ties, which can help them to fit in, gain access to resources, and structure their time (see Bourdieu 1993; Harm and Phillips 2001; O'Brien 2001; Castel 2002; and Farrall 2004). However, community ties, where they exist, are not uniformly beneficial. Generally, these ties reinforce existing class positions, providing the greatest benefits to those who are already advantaged (see Bourdieu 1993). For those without these ties, communities can reinforce poverty and marginality, or exert excessive pressure to obey dominant norms and values, resulting in

exclusion or ostracism for those who are unwilling or unable to conform (see Brody and Lovrich 2002; Reisig, Holtfreter, and Morash 2002; Severance 2004; and Bezanson 2006). As neoliberal states shift responsibility for monitoring ex-prisoners to their families and communities, their social ties are mobilized to extend state surveillance (see Foucault 1991; Garland 1997; and Silverstein 2001, 2005). Ex-prisoners who lack friends or family ties experience stigma due to their criminalization, and enter marginal communities with few resources or with social networks that promote criminal lifestyles. They may therefore find that communities hamper their prospects for (re)integration (see Severance 2004; and Uggen, Manza, and Behrens 2004).

2. (RE)INTEGRATION AND GOVERNMENTALITY

Foucault (1979) described a broad shift in penal practices and social control strategies in Europe in the 18th century, as states moved from physical punishment to mental discipline. Prisoners came to be subjected to routines that sought to shape and "normalize" their behaviour, as well as surveillance to ensure their conformity and punish transgressions. These practices attempt to make prisoners internalize discipline, transforming them into "docile bodies" acting in their "own" and society's best interests. Docile bodies allow the state to govern at a distance (see Foucault 1991; and Garland 2001), limiting the need for direct, physical control. As professional rationalities of discipline have grown, they have spread outwards from the correctional environment into communities (see Cohen 1985). Theorists have explored the manifestation of disciplinary techniques in society, both through formal state mechanisms of surveillance by police and parole authorities (see Silverstein 2001; Maidment 2002; and Norris and McCahill 2006), as well as through routinized discipline in other structures, including schools, workplaces, and the home (Simon 1994; Adams 1997; Moore 2000; and Gleason 2003). More recently, according to the Foucauldian view, disciplinary techniques have become entwined with governmental rationalities. Now individuals are expected to internalize discipline and control their own behaviour, acting in their own best interests without the intervention of the state (see Foucault 1988, 1994; and Rimke 2000). Disciplinary

techniques are not supplanted: rather, they are augmented, strength-ened, and ultimately internalized. In practice, these rationalities are enmeshed with discourses of risk, which attempt to identify and control "dangerous" activities, situations, and individuals (see Garland 2001; and Hannah-Moffat 2001).

Canadian correctional regimes use risk technologies and discourses to assess women's chances of reoffending, and subsequently use disci-plinary practices and discourses of self-responsibilization, or "empow-erment," to transfer accountability for women's social (re)integration on to the women who are released and away from the state (see Rose 1996; Hannah-Moffat 2000, 2001; and Cruikshank 2001). To secure release into the community, prisoners must enter a regime of self-responsibilization, presenting themselves as "good risks" or as non-risky, subjecting themselves to a myriad of surveillance regimes, and taking full responsibility for their own "success" or failure upon release (see Rose 1996; Hannah-Moffat 2000; and Silverstein 2001, 2005). This process isolates women from state and community support, individualizing risk and denying collective responsibility (see Cohen 1985).

3. METHODOLOGY

The research presented in this paper comprised an extensive review of (re)integration literature and a small qualitative exploratory study of the (re)integration experiences of older female ex-prisoners in Ottawa. As there are very few older female ex-prisoners, and many of them are dif-ficult to locate, interviews were conducted instead with five individuals who work with this group of women. The participants were recruited through referrals from, and requests to, non-governmental organizations, including the Elizabeth Fry Society of Ottawa, the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, and Lifestyle Enrichment for Senior Adults (LESA), a non-profit group offering addictions counselling to adults aged fifty-five and older. Based on variations in their own backgrounds and in their clientele, these professionals discussed the experiences of women who grew old in prison, those who were criminalized throughout their lives, and those who were in conflict with the law for the first time, this last category covering the majority of older individuals in conflict

with the law (see Uzoaba 1998). In the transcripts of these interviews, references to women's friends, families, and social networks were coded as "social capital," while participants' discussions of problems and challenges in the social environment beyond their control were coded as "areas for social change."

4. PRESSURE TO CONFORM

While communities may be markers of freedom and sites of support for (re)integrating ex-prisoners, they are also sites of surveillance, control, and "risk" (see Garland 2001; Silverstein 2001; and Brody and Lovrich 2002). After prison, new and unstructured community environments can create fear and anxiety. Risk discourses highlight increasing social desires for safety, encouraging individuals to modify their activities and behaviour to prevent potential victimization (see Rose 1999; and Garland 2001). Indeed, (re)integrating women, now further from the correctional gaze, employ surveillance and risk management to structure their lives.

One interviewee, Mary, indicated that older women are particularly susceptible to these discourses, absorbing them and subsequently curtailing their activities in response. In Ottawa, most community programmes and services are based in the downtown core, exposing older women to locations and situations that they consider dangerous:

> I think that there's more fear from elderly women, especially in [downtown Ottawa, of] going out alone. You don't know, uh, you know, if somebody's going to mug you or rob you, uh, so I think that fear is magnified in the elderly population. Not just criminalized elderly women, but elderly women in general. So I think that's a factor that comes into play when you're looking at getting out in the community and becoming engaged in activities and programmes.

Tania, another interviewee, also explored this idea, highlighting how fear bars women from seeking help:

> I know a lot of senior women are saying, "I don't want to go on OC Transpo [Ottawa–Carleton Regional Transit]. There's a lot of crime, there's a lot of violence, and I don't want to subject myself to that," especially in terms of theft, and thinking that, you know, "I'm at the Rideau Centre, someone might try to mug me."

Tania and Mary's comments highlight a transition in the social representations of older women and in their perceptions of themselves. They are transformed from being frightening prisoners (itself an exaggeration of any risk they may pose) to being frightened women who experience heightened concerns about their personal safety after their releases (see Robinson 2003; Wahidin 2004; and Maidment 2006). This fear can expand to extraordinary proportions for older women living in apartment buildings, as Tania points out with reference to the television channel that allows residents to watch security-camera footage of an apartment building's lobby:

> It's amazing how many of them will just put on that Channel 63 that they have programmed in their apartment, and sit there and watch it all day for fear of who's coming and going from the building.

These examples highlight how neoliberal discourses of risk affect older women's lives even after prison, as they discard regular routines in favour of isolation and a perceived sense of safety.

Older women also internalize social and cultural discourses, which similarly contribute to the self-regulation of their behaviour. These women face extreme stress and strain when they cannot or do not live up to the perceived expectations of elders, and are cast as "mad, sad or bad" (Codd 1998, 187). This "failure" and the resulting shame can lead women to limit their social networks. For example, another interviewee, Kim, described the fear associated with revealing one's criminal history: "one of the women just recently was saying, 'How am I going to tell my grandchildren that I was in prison?'" Kim indicated that the woman felt shame and feared rejection, despite having a supportive family. Tania also illustrated women's fears of being "found out" by their neighbours and communities: "There's always that concern of, 'Am I being talked

about? Am I wanted?'" While many ex-prisoners grapple with acceptance from others, older women's social scripts often demand higher levels of conformity than those of younger prisoners (see Wahidin 2004; and Mandell 2005). Older women internalize harmful social discourses, limiting their lives and activities for fear of being "found out" and rejected (see Maidment 2006).

While neoliberal rationalities and discourses attempt to turn criminalized individuals into responsible, self-governing citizens (see Hannah-Moffat 2000; Silverstein 2001; and Maidment 2006), the people subjected to these tactics are rarely able to fully conform. Indeed, the criminalized are expected to continually improve and voluntarily submit to "experts" for advice, despite their often troubled relationships with such experts (see Cohen 1985; Rimke 2000; and Maidment 2006). When conformity breaks down and women come into conflict with the law, they are pressured to isolate themselves, to remove themselves socially and physically from their communities. Another interviewee, André, indicated that in extreme situations neighbours may use harassment instead of ostracism to punish transgressions from social norms:

> In a seniors' building, uh, what you see on the schoolground for bullying, it's ten times worse in a seniors' building, because for them it's recess, and noon hour is twenty-four/seven. And I had a client where, you know, her doorknob was greased, they were placing dead birds and animals in front of her door, they even, somehow or another, got into the mailbox and opened her mail. And she would be constantly bullied by her peers, because of the justice system, because the police were knocking on her door, because, you know, she had the parole officer coming . . . That's hard. And she lived in that environment. And it's subsidized, and it's not really easy, it's really difficult, to get subsidized housing, but even if she would ask for a transfer, would it be different from that building to another building? Probably not.

Here, neighbours' surveillance, judgement, and punishment have replaced the state's penal regimes to control an individual who is seen as non-conforming, and they have meted out a punishment that is indefinite and much harsher. As a result, some older women limit their

social interactions in order to protect themselves from potential negative reactions from other members of the community.

5. PUSHING BACK: SOCIAL CHANGE

Like all ex-prisoners, older women must attempt to integrate into communities that pressure them to conform to social norms. Many women submit to these pressures, live up to their "low risk" labels, and neither reoffend nor return to prison, yet they also limit their social interactions and fail to integrate into community life. As the interviewees noted, these experiences may harm older women's lives and relationships, exacerbating the punishment delivered by the justice system. Instead of expecting older women to meet social norms, the interviewees problematized women's interactions with neoliberal discourses that assume that prison is an ideal punishment, and that everyone has equal opportunities to make independent choices and succeed (see Rose 1999; Hannah-Moffat and Shaw 2000; and Rimke 2000). They indicated that social changes are needed to limit the damage caused by neoliberal discourses and rationalities.

To counter women's marginal positions, they need to be able to live comfortably in the community, with access to programmes and services as well as basic financial security (see Holtfreter, Reisig, and Morash 2004). All five interviewees indicated that older women leave prison only to enter extreme poverty, which limits the possibilities for (re)integration. According to Mary:

> CSC [Correctional Service Canada] grants an allowance of four dollars and ten cents per day to all women and men on parole, but I don't think that the needs for the elderly women and the younger women are the same, and cost the same. So, when you're elderly and you have to—you have to be more careful about your diet, you may need vitamin supplements, you may need, you know—this is being very stereotypical, but Depends [incontinence diapers]—you may need—you need things that are different than from when you're younger, and tend to be more expensive, and I think that, um, CSC might have to take a look at compensating specialized populations for their needs.

Contemporary discourses on ageing draw on neoliberal ideas of self-responsibilization and autonomy, indicating that "healthy ageing" is a product of individual choices and effort (see Rowe and Kahn 1997). These discourses turn ageing into a "technology of the self," meaning that one must work on oneself to achieve a positive and successful old age (see Foucault 1988). By prescribing activities necessary for healthy ageing, these discourses make "health" a moral state, pathologizing and devaluing older marginalized and criminalized women who cannot conform to these ideals (see Reeve 2002; Holstein and Minkler 2003; and Calasanti, Slevin, and King 2006). However, by restricting women's financial means the state also limits their ability to make choices, reducing the possibility of ageing successfully. Similarly, researchers have noted that a lack of community resources disproportionately harms the disadvantaged, resulting in further marginalization (see Comack 1996; Richie 2001; Chunn and Gavigan 2006; and Maidment 2006). The five interviewees highlighted the lack of accessible and appropriate programmes and services for older women, and recommended increasing their quantity and relevance to ensure these women's ability to function in the community. Tania, for example, argued that the state should

> offer more programmes and services, go on site, make it, um, you know make it mandatory that every nursing home or every senior building has community-based resources . . . and, obviously, more mental-health-related services for them, or health care services. I just think that the list goes on and on.

The interviewees pointed out that, if self-responsibilization is expected, it must also be enabled and facilitated through adequate living allowances and much-needed services.

While the interviewees identified policy changes that could help older female ex-prisoners, they also noted the need for ideological changes. Contemporary society encourages autonomy, but also conformity, subjecting people who are unable or unwilling to make "wise" choices to correction and monitoring (see Pratt 1999; and Brody and Lovrich 2002). In addition to questioning the practice of criminalizing older women as a whole, the interviewees stressed what they saw as the need to educate the public regarding the needs of women, older adults,

and individuals in conflict with the law to better serve older women and facilitate their integration into communities. The interviewees noted how discourses of self-governance have desensitized people to older women's needs and realities. For example, André warned that ignorance limits society's understanding and acceptance of different others:

> We need to educate our society, get them to understand what, you know, mental health, addictions, is all about. I mean, there are some older women that, I'm sure, they get stuck in the justice system that have no mental health and addiction problems, but I think there are probably few of them.

Neoliberal discourses idealize youth and affluence, attempting to homogenize populations through consumption. As a result, social understandings of, and tolerance for, differences are replaced by harsh judgements that deepen social rifts and reinforce inequalities, often causing disproportionate harm to women (see Adams 1997; Abu-Laban and McDaniel 2005; and Maidment 2006).

While one might expect other members of communities to lack understanding, service providers' ignorance of differences in individual abilities and needs is more shocking, especially as they are often touted as "experts" with specialized knowledge of their clients' needs (see Cohen 1985). Indeed, service providers are often armed with knowledge of older women's low risks and high needs (see Uzoaba 1998; Aday 2003; and Wahidin 2004), so one might assume that they would be eager to facilitate their (re)integration. However, Kim noted that this is not the case. She discussed ignorant professionals, sharing the story of an older woman whose workers proposed unfeasible reintegration plans:

> One woman . . . [was] just being hopping mad one day because the issue—she was told by . . . her primary, who was the age of, as she says, the age of her youngest daughter, [twenty-five] and she was telling her, "You should think about going back to school." And you know, this woman was forty-nine at the time, and she said, you know, "That's all, like, great, how am I gonna pay for it? And then what do you want me to do once I go back to school? Like, who's gonna hire me when I'm finished?" She would have

had to upgrade her high school, then go to university. . . . By the
time she finished she would have been minimally fifty-five, more
likely closer to sixty. You know, the reality is, who is going to hire
you then?

Kim connects professionals' ignorance with older women's limited
prospects for (re)integration. Older women face the cumulative effects
of gender- and age-related discrimination in employment and educa-
tion, limiting their options for self-sufficiency and (re)integration in
their communities.

Tania also examined the intersecting nature of older women's
needs, many of which are misunderstood by care providers. When asked
how to better serve older women, she noted a need for education on
age and cultural issues, as well as the intersecting hardships affecting
older women:

I think it's to have a better understanding of what types of issues
face these particular women, in terms of isolation being number
one, and understanding commitment back to family, you know,
and if they go and steal, and they're trying to support their family,
that there's another thing that needs to go with that, besides just
prevention around theft.

Some older women are harmed by ageist labels that presume
incapacities. Others suffer when their age, social circumstances, and
individual abilities to self-govern and integrate are not realistically con-
sidered (see Maidment 2006; and Grenier and Hanley 2007).

Neoliberal discourses affect all aspects of women's lives after
prison. They are subject to surveillance regimes, risk discourses, social
ostracism, and a correctional system that responsibilizes them for their
own (re)integration. André connected these discourses, and asserted
that people in general should be made more aware and understanding
of intersecting challenges, including poverty, criminalization, margin-
alization, addictions, and mental illness, to create positive outcomes. In
particular, he referred to two provincial social assistance programmes,
the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works
(OW), as well as the Canada Pension Plan (CPP) and the Community

Care Access Centre (CCAC), a health and independent living support network, but the point he made applies more broadly:

> I think that's kind of a bigger-picture, kind of a systematic, societal, cultural thing. I think if we understand more, in our society, I think we'd be able to serve them better, you know, and that means our ODSP and OW and maybe CPP or whoever's connecting with them with their pension would judge them less, their doctors and nurses might judge them less, their CCAC workers might judge them less, you know, their peers in their senior buildings might judge them less.

CONCLUSION

Neoliberal discourses construct individuals as autonomous citizens who are responsible for their own care, control, and well-being. This construction enforces conformity, largely ignoring individuals who are unwilling or unable to meet these standards, and hiding social inequalities. Older criminalized women face intersecting challenges, which are exacerbated by the neoliberal discourses that responsibilize them for circumstances that are often beyond their control. If they fail to act in "acceptable" ways, and do not submit to social expectations and norms, they face marginalization and ostracism, and are further criminalized, despite the minimal risk they pose. These pressures come not just from society, but also from the service providers who are supposed to support and assist them. A broad rethinking of social expectations, and a critical examination of neoliberal tactics and rationalities, are needed to enable older criminalized women to live "normal" lives with acceptance, adequate resources, appropriate services, and basic dignity.

NOTE

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