

Punishment, Powerlessness and Partisanship: Early reflections on research with 'at risk' women

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Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour
Change PhD Seminar

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Overview

- Brief introduction to my PhD research
 - Research context
 - Research aim and questions
 - Methodology and methods
- Recruitment of participants
- Who are 'at risk' women?
- Initial experiences in the field
 - Punishment and powerlessness
 - Watching while being watched
 - Challenges and dilemmas
- Early reflections
- Questions

Introduction to my PhD

- Lived experiences and perceptions of women at the penal-welfare nexus
- 'At risk' of offending, engaged in gender-specific interventions at women's centres
- Perspectives of stakeholders who provide interventions / support
- Exploring concepts: 'carceral-assistential net' (Wacquant), 'carceral archipelago' (Foucault), social control (Garland) through the experiences of socially marginalised women using a feminist lens

Research context

- Social, economic and political transformation over the last half a century:
 - retrenching social safety net felt sharply by those on the margins of society “hitting the poorest places hardest” (Beatty and Fothergill, 2013)
 - risk and responsibility
 - shift from welfare to 'workfare'
 - increasing welfare conditionality - "secret penal system" (Webster, 2014)
 - enlarged criminal justice system - "warehousing" (Wacquant, 2010)
- Women, particularly those in receipt of social assistance, find themselves subject to high levels of surveillance, moral scrutiny and punishment, often along classed and raced lines (Bumiller, 2013).
- Recurrent care proceedings/child removals - 'forced adoption' (Harwin et al, 2016)
- Women make up significant proportions of those arrested (18%), receiving out of court disposals (23%), convicted (25%), under supervision in the community (15%) (MOJ, 2014).

Research context (continued)

- Community sentences are increasingly used for female offenders in the UK, yet research into their experiences of these kinds of disposals is limited (Malloch and McIvor, 2011; Gelsthorpe, 2011).
- A woman is twice as likely to be sentenced to prison by a magistrate for a first offence than a man (Prison Reform Trust, 2013). On leaving prison women are three times less likely to find work than men (Prison Reform Trust, 2015).
- Women are being imprisoned for longer periods of time with a significant increase in women being sentenced between 6-18 months for minor crimes (Bromley Briefings Prisons Factfile, 2014).
- Complex raft of interventions from various state agencies throughout the life course - not reflected in gender-blind sociological explanations of societal shifts.

Research aim and questions

Aim:

To explore the lived experiences and sense-making narratives of criminal-justice involved women and those 'at risk' of offending at the penal-welfare nexus.

Research questions:

- How is 'at risk' conceptualised and enacted?
- How do women labelled 'at risk' see themselves?
- What are the lived effects of welfare and criminal justice interventions?
- How do their lived experiences contrast with prevailing ideas on female offending and the receipt of out-of-work benefits in public opinion, policy and practice?
- To what extent do key workers resist or reinforce dominant narratives on female deviance and offending?

Methodology

- Feminist ontology and epistemology
- “Women’s own perspectives and experiences” is integral to feminist research (Presser, 2005)
- “Sustained empathetic inquiry” (Yanow, 2003)
- “Looking, seeing and knowing have become perilously intertwined...rendering our world as primarily a ‘seen’ phenomenon” (Jenks, 1995)
- ‘Reality’ is something socially experienced and interpreted rather than 'discovered'
- Knowledge production should be “studied, critiqued...made explicit” (Ackerly and True, 2010)

Research methods

- Qualitative longitudinal research (QLR)
 - Semi-structured repeat interviews with service users and frontline staff over several months
 - Participant observation at gatekeeper organisations
 - Visual research methods: Auto-photography:- service user participants will be asked to take photographs (absence of 'counter-images' to challenge 'carceral culture' / create 'just images') (Brown, 2014; Carrabine, 2012); and Photo-elicitation:- photographs will be inserted into research interviews, this "audiencing" of the photographs supports the development of rich data ('counter-narratives') for interpretation and analysis (Rose, 2012)
 - Walking methods (O'Neill and Hubbard, 2010)

Recruitment of participants

- Gatekeepers: Two women's centres, one domestic abuse survivors group, day centre for those experiencing homelessness and/or exclusion in two UK cities
- Voucher incentive
- Advertising with posters and flyers
- Groups and tea breaks
- Staff referral
- Snowball
- Target sample:
 - 15-20 'at risk' women, 12 women recruited (~20% attrition rate)
 - 6-9 stakeholders, 5 recruited

Who are 'at risk' women?

- **'Amy'**, 18, in care as a child, lived in secure MBU in community (looked-after child process), while pregnant was sanctioned for joint claim FTA, appeal upheld
- **'Caitlin'**, 31, 1 conviction for child abuse / neglect, worked prior to conviction, sees child for 1 hour once every two weeks at contact centre, uses food bank
- **'Carly'**, 33, history of drug abuse, domestic abuse victimisation & persistent offending, 5 children removed from her care: youngest child is in care undergoing looked-after child process, sees child 3 times a week at contact centre
- **'Selena'**, 39, 3 children, 2 grandchildren, youngest child is in care, she sees him in contact centre for one hour every two weeks, has a CR, conflict with social services, poor mental health, harassed by ex partner
- **'Helen'**, 42, domestic abuse survivor, used to claim IS, now claims working tax credit, let down by courts in relation to her abuser and for custody of their child, feels failed by state agencies
- **'Camille'**, 43, poor mental health, history of drug and alcohol issues, has used food banks, has 2 children
- **'Gillian'**, 44, history of alcohol abuse & persistent offending, 1 child
- **'Jane'**, 48, in prison 3 times, 1 child who does not live with her, mental health problems including personality disorder, has used food banks
- **'Carol'**, 54, in care from 3 weeks old, history of domestic abuse victimisations, 3 children, 1 of whom was sexually abused by Carol's former partner/abuser
- **'Elsa'**, 54, abused as a child, alcohol misuse, homelessness, persistent, prolific offender, last term in prison was for 9 years, complex needs, vulnerable
- **'Lulu'**, 56, 1 conviction for DLA fraud, child sexual abuse survivor, does not claim benefits

Punishment and Powerlessness

- 'Carly', 33, experienced neglect and abuse as a child, ran away at 14, went into a children's home
- Started getting in trouble at 15 for drunk and disorderly behaviour and running away from children's home
- History of drug abuse, domestic violence
- Persistent offending including being in prison 7 times, attributes offending to drugs and influence of boyfriends
- 5 children: parental rights lost for 4 children, youngest child is currently in care undergoing looked-after child process, she sees her baby weekly at contact centre

Photo-elicitation with Carly



"The support is a big thing, [the drug service centre], here [women's centre], everybody who I'm working with, that's what helped me through it and [to] change, but 'Leon' made me change."

| Photo-elicitation with Carly

"I just weren't ready to change, but now I've got to an older age...I know I need to change...something clicked inside that said right I don't want to live that life anymore."

"When people know I'm doing well and they say, 'listen I'm proud of you', it makes me want to do it all the more."

"I want to be a mum now, I just want to settle down and live my life with 'Leon'."

"It's me past, and I know I've got a horrendous past, but people can change, but it's just giving me that chance to show that I've changed. But I'm just not being given that chance."

"I'll never stop being labelled because of my past. I wish I'd lived a good life and didn't do the things that I did, but I can't change that."

Punishment and Powerlessness

"I strongly believe that we must offer chances to change, that for those trying hard to turn themselves around, we should offer hope, that in a compassionate country, we should help those who've made mistakes to find their way back onto the right path."

David Cameron, 8 February 2016, Prison reform: Prime Minister's Speech, Policy Exchange

Watching while being watched

- 'Amy', 18 years old, lived in a secure Mother and Baby Unit (MBU) in the community when I recruited her
- Sent to MBU by courts/local authority social worker shortly after giving birth, 150 miles from home "shipped from the hospital"
- Self-contained flat with 24-hour CCTV and audio monitoring in all rooms
- At MBU while undergoing looked-after-child review - 12 week period
- Referred to women's centre for anger management course

Watching while being watched

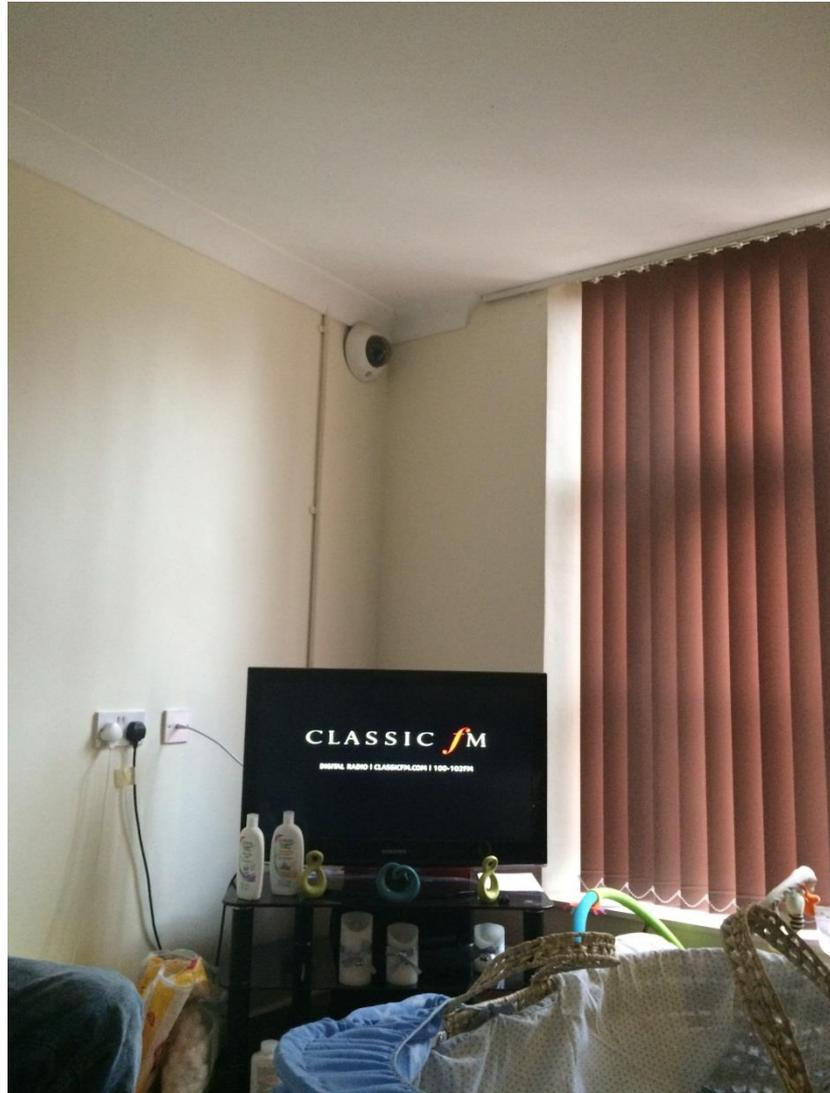


Photo-elicitation with Amy



"I'm not staying here. No way."

"Shh!...[Amy nods to surveillance unit]...not allowed to be friends with them...You're not allowed to associate with anyone."

Photo-elicitation with Amy



On her psychologist sessions: "I'd rather not as they go too in-depth, they tell you things you don't even know".

Photo-elicitation with Amy



"See the green fence outside, all you need is a bit of barbed wire above that."

Challenges and dilemmas

- Conducting research under visual and audio surveillance – implications for confidentiality; paranoia?; participants mistrustful of audio recorder during interview, closed up, "like a police interview"
- Boundaries, partisanship and bias – role as researcher to a more supportive role, being 'on their side' - "friendship" (Kirsch, 2005)
- Participant complicity – taking photos of what they think I want to see / relationship - rapport
- Quality of photographs – under/over-exposure, user error, accepting found/existing photos, training to use camera
- Researcher/participant inequality – vast difference in socio-economic status, exploitation, guilt
- Researcher wellbeing - feelings of powerlessness to change things, collection of traumatic narratives

Early reflections

- Individualisation of risk → little/no recognition of oppressive social circumstances/practices that impact this marginalised group - vulnerabilities re-framed as risks, victims (failed, ignored, blamed) constructed as risky
- State/institutional neglect → welfare failure - raft of state agencies interventions throughout life course still led to CJS intervention/benefit dependency
- 'Gendered pathways' to crime → Multiple victimisations, exploitation, history of state 'care', poor mental health, substance/alcohol misuse
- Parental rights → recurrent cases of multiple children taken into care - well-established processes for placing children in care, little in place to support return of child. A highly traumatic punishment, little/no aftercare
- Maturation → behaviour change associated with lifestyle fatigue/age plus supportive, intensive interventions (timing is key) - stakeholders as agents of support and hope
- Stigma as punishment → future 'choices' constrained by their past (agency/structure), trapped

Thank you for listening

Any questions?

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