

APPENDIX

Methodological Tensions

Conducting research with socially marginalized women who have experienced gender-based violence is a challenging endeavor that requires extreme care and ethical considerations on the part of the researcher. Throughout this project, I struggled with issues of power, voice, and representation. I have written elsewhere about some of these challenges and how I attempted to resolve them, in part through the use of photo-elicitation interviewing (PEI).¹ In this brief methods appendix, I expand on some of those ideas and provide further details about how I conceived of this project, recruited participants, and related to participants, and how these issues impacted my analysis and overall findings.

INITIAL RESEARCH GOALS

I began this project as most eager PhD students do, with what I thought was a firm grasp of the literature and a clear theoretical framework. I suspected that criminalized women experienced similar kinds of interactions with the state across settings, whether the state took the form of a supposed helping organization (like Public Aid or a domestic violence shelter) or the form of a punitive organization (like a jail or prison). Heavily influenced by Lynne A. Haney's *Offending Women: Power, Punishment, and the Regulation of Desire* and Jill A. McCorkel's *Breaking Women: Gender, Race, and the New Politics of Imprisonment*, I conceptualized the carceral state as a decentralized network of public and private institutions and organizations that regulate socially marginalized women's lives through surveillance and service provision.² As such, I wanted to study the role of the state, in its myriad manifestations, in criminalized women's lives.

As a feminist scholar, I also wanted to decenter power in the research process by creating space for women to share what was most important to them, instead of simply respond to my inquiries based on my presumptions of what topics were most meaningful. Building upon the work of feminist sociologist Dorothy E. Smith, I strove to approach participants as research partners, rather than "objects of study," and develop an understanding of "the actualities of their everyday worlds."³ Additionally, I was keenly aware of how my social

position—particularly my identities as a White, cisgender, heterosexual, highly educated, middle-class woman—would create distance with participants. I worried about how to build rapport and ensure I truly heard what participants shared.⁴

To accomplish these goals, I turned to PEI with participant-generated images. This method entails having research participants take photographs related to the research topic. The photographs become the basis of an interview, during which participants select which photographs they want to discuss, in which order, and reflect on what they want to communicate with the images. As noted in chapter 1, PEI provides several benefits, especially when dealing with traumatic subject matter and working with socially marginalized groups.⁵ PEI can help ensure participants have an opportunity to discuss what is most important to them through their selection and discussion of photographs. PEI also can provide a more accessible way to reflect on painful experiences than can a conventional interview format. Lisa Frohmann’s use of PEI with domestic violence survivors was particularly influential. She found PEI to be empowering and healing for some participants who reported “gaining a better understanding of their lives.”⁶

At the outset of this project, I hoped PEI would provide these benefits and help clarify my conceptualization of *the state* for participants. I intended for participants to take photographs documenting where they saw and felt the influence of the state in their lives, such as meetings with parole officers or a job or housing application that led to a denial due to their background. I cringe as I type these words, because it is so apparent now how, at the beginning of this project, I was not truly ready to cede control and center participants’ voices. Quite frankly, I had a research agenda I was imposing on participants, despite all my talk of feminist research methods and decentering power in the research relationship. Luckily, as I discuss below, the women who participated in this project did not let me get away with imposing my agenda. I will forever be grateful for their patience with me and their perseverance to tell the stories they wanted to tell. PEI was critical, because it provided participants with a way to redirect my attention.

RECRUITMENT

To recruit participants, I worked with three nonprofit organizations that provide services to formerly incarcerated women. Two were recovery homes for women leaving prison: Growing Stronger and Starting Again. One was a nonresidential program: Women Helping Women. While both recovery homes were explicitly faith-based, sober living residences, they differed in notable ways. Growing Stronger was significantly better resourced, as it was part of a parent organization that ran multiple reentry programs, including educational and vocational programs and a recovery home for men. Starting Again was a much smaller operation, founded by an individual woman. Women Helping Women was a peer support and health education program for women who had been involved in the criminal legal system within the past year. The program offered workshops and trainings on topics such as HIV and STDs, sexual health, and healthy relationships.

Since my initial research focus was the role of the state in criminalized women’s lives, I thought Growing Stronger, Starting Again, and Women Helping Women provided a diverse set of organizations through which to begin recruitment. Because I was not focused on religion, for instance, I did not limit recruitment to faith-based organizations. Since I

was not focused on drug use and recovery, I did not limit recruitment to drug treatment programs or recovery homes. Between these three sites and referrals from interviewees, I hoped to hear a wide range of experiences.

To begin recruitment, I attended meetings at each site. I introduced myself as a PhD student who was conducting a research project on women's experiences with incarceration and reentry and was interested in learning about experiences that led to involvement with the criminal justice system, as well as experiences leaving that system. I noted I was focusing on the ways women receive help from different places and people before, during, and after incarceration, as well as the ways women are limited, restricted, and even harmed by various places and people before, during, and after incarceration. I explained participating would involve completing two to three one-on-one interviews with me and that all participants would have the option to include photography in their interviews. For the photography component, I would provide participants with a digital camera and memory card at the end of our first interview. They then would take photographs that communicated their experiences of incarceration and reentry for us to discuss during a second interview. If needed, we would meet for a third interview to discuss any important topics not yet covered. I noted participants would receive a \$20 gift card to a store of their choosing as compensation for each interview and keep their digital camera and memory card. The only criteria to participate were for participants to identify as women and to have had some involvement with the criminal legal system.

Almost every woman in attendance at all three initial recruitment meetings signed up to participate. I also handed out a recruitment flier and encouraged women to share it with anyone who might be interested. I started receiving phone calls from women who heard about the research project from other women or had seen the flier. All women who called me were living either at Growing Stronger or Starting Again. As I began conducting some interviews on-site at Growing Stronger and Starting Again, I came to be recognized as "the lady with the cameras." Frequently, new residents at the homes would approach me to express their interest in participating.

INTERVIEWS

Between December 2012 and July 2013, I conducted 99 interviews with 36 participants. I met 21 participants through Growing Stronger, 8 participants through Starting Again, and 7 participants through Women Helping Women.⁷ All 36 participants expressed an interest in completing a PEI, but only 32 participants ultimately did.⁸ Table 2 presents a summary of selected characteristics about research participants. I conducted interviews at a location of the participant's choosing, which often was the recovery home where they resided. Other locations included Women Helping Women's office, public libraries, McDonald's, participants' homes, and a public park.

Although I anticipated completing three interviews with each participant, I did not conceive of this project as a longitudinal study. The number of interviews was a practical choice to facilitate PEI and ensure adequate time to discuss the range of topics included in the study. Interviews with an individual participant typically took place over a span of two to four months. The first interview typically focused on women's experiences with criminalization, specifically arrest, prosecution, incarceration, and release, and experiences

TABLE 2. Selected Characteristics of Research Participants

Name ¹	Age	Race ²	Education	Employment	# of children	Approximate time since release at final interview ³	# of interviews
Amber	47	Black ⁺	not shared	none	4	not shared	2
Ann	47	Caucasian	less than high school	none	5	1 year, 1 month [^]	3
Ann Williams	44	Black	some high school	none	6	1 year	3
Brenda	55	Black	GED	part-time	6	3 years	3
Carmel	44	Black	high school diploma	none	0	1 year, 1 month [^]	3
Cathy Hill	52	White	some college	none	2	7 months [^]	3
Chicken Wing	55	Black	GED	part-time	4	8 months	3
Chunky	56	Black	some college	none	0	3 years	3
Corrine [*]	63	African American	master's degree	full-time	3	12 years	3
Darlene [*]	35	Black ⁺	high school diploma	none	1	17 months	2
Denise	45	Black	some high school	part-time	5	2 years, 3 months [^]	3
Ella [*]	46	African American	high school diploma	part-time	5	7 years	3
Faye	46	Black American	high school diploma	none	4	7 months	3 ^x
Ms. Fields	47	Black Afro American	some college	part-time	0	4 years [^]	3
Ida	49	African American	some high school	none	3	11 months	4
Iris [*]	49	White	bachelor's degree	full-time	2	4 years, 4 months [^]	2
Jean Grey	20	African American	some college	none	1	1 year, 3 months [^]	3
Julia	51	African American	some high school	none	3	8 months	3
The Lioness	49	African American	high school diploma	none	3	1 year	3
Lynn	33	Caucasian	high school diploma	none	2	1 year, 2 months	3 ^x

(Contd.)

TABLE 2. (Continued)

Name ¹	Age	Race ²	Education	Employment	# of children	Approximate time since release at final interview ³	# of interviews
Mae	not shared	Black ⁺	some college	full-time	4	17 years, 6 months	2
Maryann	not shared	Black ⁺	less than high school	none	3	2 months	1 ^x
Moon	40	African American	some high school	none	3	3 months	3
New Life	30	Black	some college	none	2	4 months	3
Nyla [*]	42	Black ⁺	not shared	part-time	6	6 months	3
Olivia [*]	49	Afro American	GED	none	1	6 years	3
Ranisha [*]	34	Black ⁺	not shared	not shared	3	4 months	2
Red	41	Puerto Rican	some high school	none	3	5 months	3
Rose	48	Black American	less than high school	none	0	1 year, 2 months	3
Sarah [*]	46	Latin, Native American	less than high school	none	4	2 months	3
Sharon	44	African American	less than high school	part-time	1	7 months	3
Stacey Williams	41	African American	high school diploma	full-time	6	3 months	3
Susan [*]	59	Black ⁺	bachelor's degree	none	0	9 months [^]	1 ^x
Tinybig	51	Afro Native American Indian	some college	full-time	3	4 months	4
Veronica [*]	48	Black ⁺	not shared	not shared	not shared	not shared	1
Xenia	41	Puerto Rican	some high school	none	8	4 months	3

¹All names are pseudonyms. Most participants chose their own pseudonym.

²Race is listed as participants described it.

³Most participants were released from an Illinois state prison.

^{*}The author provided the pseudonym.

[^]The participant did not identify their race, and the author identified race based on information gleaned throughout interviews.

^oThe participant was most recently released from a county jail.

^xThe participant did not complete a photo-elicitation interview.

postrelease. I used a semistructured, in-depth approach and prioritized building rapport and pursuing noteworthy “markers” women referenced.⁹

At the end of the first interview, I asked participants if they were willing to meet with me again and if they were interested in including photographs in the next interview. I shared a photo instruction sheet I had prepared for the project and reviewed it with each participant. The sheet identified “the state” as a focus of my research and provided a working definition of the state as agencies, institutions, and people that do things like set laws and policies, enforce laws, put policies in place, monitor people’s behavior, and provide social services. It also included a list of examples of “the state” (such as police, parole officers, Public Aid, and Child Protective Services) in an attempt to make the idea of “the state” more clear. I recognized a tension in my research design, in that by being too directive I could undercut the ability for PEI to decenter power and allow for participants to drive the next interview. In an effort to correct that tension, I included a list of additional questions and prompts on the photo instruction sheet, including the instruction to take photos of what was important to them and what they wanted to show me.

Second interviews typically took place about a month after the first interview to provide participants time to take photographs. Prior to the scheduled second interview, I met with participants to transfer their photographs from their memory cards to my laptop. I then printed two sets of photographs, which I brought to the second interview. One set was for the participant, and one set was for me. At the beginning of the second interview, I provided participants with their photographs and asked them to look through them and select about 10 to 15 photographs they wanted to discuss. For the entirety of the PEI, participants selected a photograph and reflected on what it meant to them. I asked follow-up questions before we moved on to the next photograph. Sometimes participants talked about photographs one by one. Other times, participants grouped photographs and discussed what each set showed. At the end of the PEI, I typically asked participants what all the photographs taken together communicated. Participants signed a photo release form, which provided me with ownership of the photographs, and we discussed which photographs I could include in presentations and publications. Most participants agreed to participate in a third interview, during which I asked follow-up questions that remained from the first two interviews and introduced remaining topics we had not yet covered.

ANALYSIS

Each interview lasted about one and a half to two hours and was audio recorded. Four undergraduate research assistants and I transcribed the interviews. I completed open coding of the transcripts, identifying “any and all ideas, themes, or issues . . . no matter how varied and disparate.”¹⁰ Initial codes centered on religion, recovery from drug use, interpersonal violence, state violence (such as police officers’ and correctional officers’ abuse, the overall jail and prison environment, and coercive court processes), relationships with children, employment, housing, moral judgment, and markers of rehabilitation. Personal transformation was the strongest initial theme that emerged, particularly the ways women contrasted their past and current identities. As I conducted more focused coding, I identified additional markers of rehabilitation, specifically appearance and romantic relationships,

and noted the importance of friendships and community. Through memoing, I identified and clarified linkages among these categories and began to assess how the markers of rehabilitation were raced and gendered, as well as how they connected to faith and recovery discourses.

PEI deeply informed my analysis. As noted above, there was an inherent tension in my research design between my investment in the theoretical research questions I brought to this project and my desire to center participants' voices. PEI helped resolve that tension by pushing me to truly hear what women were telling me. At the outset of this project, I was not interested in recovery from drug use or mothering. Given the wealth of scholarship on these topics, I incorrectly presumed there was not much to add. The women who participated in this project would not let me ignore these issues, however. Through photographs and reflections, they pointed my attention to the centrality of drug use and recovery and how women's narratives of personal transformation, including becoming the mothers they wanted to be, revolved around the distinction between using and being in recovery. If I truly was committed to my feminist research aims, I needed to let go of my focus on the state, at least during my initial analysis. Without the photographs and the rich reflections women shared about them, I might not have truly heard them. I might have displaced their focus with my own.

My analysis also was informed by the time I spent at recruitment sites and informally talking with women and staff. While this project was not an ethnography and I did not conduct participant observation, I was not able to turn off my critical eye or pretend not to be impacted by the many hours I spent with criminalized women outside of our formal interviews. Since I completed many of the interviews at Growing Stronger and Starting Again, I spent a considerable amount of time at both homes. While waiting for participants to arrive and after interviews, I often hung out and chatted with whoever was present. I also accepted all invitations participants or staff extended to events, including a charity walk, a Mother's Day celebration, a family day event, and an adult high school graduation ceremony. As I recount in chapter 4, when Ella invited me to accompany her to her hearing to have her record sealed, I jumped at the opportunity. It was not planned that I would speak on her behalf; that development happened spontaneously in court. Rather, Ella wanted to share the experience with me as part of helping me understand the full picture of her life and the full story of criminalization. That desire to help me understand seemed to undergird every invitation I received. As I spent more time with the women, in interviews and informally, I think they saw my commitment to this project. Given how few spaces exist for them to truly be heard, I think they welcomed the opportunity to share their stories, with the hope that it would create some understanding in the world and maybe even some change.

The number of interviews I conducted with women also helped us build rapport, as did the PEI component. I suspect I looked and acted like many of the volunteers and service providers with whom participants routinely interacted. Women participated in numerous support groups, 12-Step meetings, and individual sessions where they frequently had to tell their stories. I think the use of PEI helped disrupt this routine, as women were pushed to think in different ways about how to represent their lives. As such, I do think we achieved a deeper level of exchange in our interviews than we would have without the photographs.

VOICE AND POSITIONALITY

As I wrote and revised my analysis, I struggled greatly about my role in this project and how much my voice should be included.¹¹ Frequently, I have wondered what right I have to write about these women's lives. Who am I to critique discourses that in many cases have served women well? What does it mean that women trusted me with their stories, and (how) should I present them?

Again, PEI helped me work through these questions. As I carried out this project, I recognized one of PEI's main benefits is how it can support the coconstruction of knowledge by creating space for both participants' and researchers' voices. As I gained a deeper understanding of the violence and discrimination criminalized women experienced, I also gained a deeper appreciation of women's ability to claim joy and dignity in their lives, while creating a positive sense of self. I realized my initial focus on the state had been disempowering and incomplete. Women challenged my biases and preconceived notions about the state's totalizing power and influence. They focused my attention on their agency. As I note in the concluding chapter, I increasingly felt it should not be as hard as it is for women to chart a path out of prison, especially when they expressed the determination and will to do so. I became dissatisfied with the limiting nature of discourses women encountered in jail, prison, recovery homes, and reentry programs about their identities and lives. The more I got to know these women, the more I wanted for them. Ultimately, I realized there were many dimensions to their stories, and it was my responsibility, as a researcher, to include as many dimensions as possible to tell the most comprehensive story. Rather than silence my critique, I grew to recognize its value. I came to see how all of us who participated in this project, the women and me, had a critical piece to contribute to the knowledge we together constructed about what it means for criminalized women to fight for freedom and dignity in a society that largely does not care about them.

I am not sure I satisfactorily resolved the inherent tension in my research design. Perhaps it was not possible to resolve. My imperfect resolution, however, was to embrace the coconstruction of knowledge, despite its messiness. As such, throughout parts of this book, I have included my own voice, while striving to center participants' voices. While some readers may critique this choice as egotistical, I view it as being honest and transparent. I also view it as a feminist practice. I am not pretending I was not moved by the stories women shared with me. I am writing from a place of deep care as much as from a place of rigorous theory. I felt a responsibility to connect women's personal transformation narratives to the larger ideological discourses that hold individuals responsible for systemic inequality and blame individuals when they stumble. To not do so would present an incomplete picture of criminalized women's experiences and exacerbate the individualizing, dehumanizing impact of those discourses. I only hope I have not drowned out the women's voices in the process of developing that critique.

LIMITATIONS

There are multiple noteworthy limitations to my research methods. Even though interviews generated an extensive amount of data, there is a limit to only meeting with participants a few times over a relatively short time span. Some women's lives changed significantly in just the one or two months that passed between our interviews, including developments like resuming drug use, losing housing, and being rearrested. Over the span of months or

years, women's lives certainly changed in even more significant ways. Since I did not stay in contact with most participants, I cannot be certain their positive identity transformations were not interrupted by negative developments, such as reincarceration or an abusive relationship. Conversely, I do not know if some women went on to overcome the sense of never being recovered or rehabilitated that felt so strong to me throughout our interviews. As such, these interviews provided a snapshot of women's lives and identity work.

Retention and recruitment introduced additional limitations. I lost contact with seven women over the course of this project. Some might have lost interest, but it also is possible that negative developments and hardships prevented their ongoing participation. In those cases, not including those parts of women's stories and their impact on women's identity work is a significant omission. Similarly, all participants were connected, at least temporarily, to a social service program. Thus, I did not include women who were most disconnected from services and therefore likely most disadvantaged. Formerly incarcerated women who were not engaged with services might not have spoken as positively about identity transformation as did the women who participated in this project. Furthermore, disconnected women might not have been as well versed in the 12-Step logic. Although I recruited from a mix of residential and nonresidential programs and a mix of faith-based and non-faith-based programs, most of the women who participated in this project came from Growing Stronger or Starting Again, two faith-based recovery homes. Had I recruited from a wider range of programs or more word-of-mouth referrals, the prevalence of faith-based and recovery discourses might not have been as strong.

The biggest limitation of my study was not actualizing one of the most important benefits PEI provides—working with participants in groups. Scholars have developed several exciting advocacy projects that grew out of using PEI in group settings, where participants worked together to decide what topics they wanted to address, shared photographs with one another, and developed a collective analysis that often turned into a public education project or exhibit.¹² The public nature of such work supported personal empowerment and social change, as people who were directly impacted by a social issue raised awareness about the harms that issue caused. It also fostered community.

Because some of the women who participated in this study were on parole, I was not able to receive Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to meet with participants in groups. The “prisoner advocate” on the IRB noted that a condition of parole is that people on parole are not able to co-mingle. Thus, participating in groups for this project potentially could make participants vulnerable to a violation of parole charge. As I have written elsewhere, this prohibition reinforced the state's individualizing impact on socially marginalized people.¹³ Keeping people separated, by design, thwarts critique and community. Not surprisingly, critique and community are exactly what is needed to end the personal and social harm criminalization causes.

LANGUAGE

One of the central arguments throughout this book is language matters. As such, I am intentional with the language I use to describe women, their lives, and the systems that impact them. I use the term *criminal legal system* rather than *criminal justice system*, since the criminal legal system in the United States has not been designed to achieve justice; rather, it administers legal codes and punishment. Similarly, I have come to view the terms *reentry*

and *reintegration* as inaccurate, since most incarcerated people were not fully integrated into society prior to incarceration, due to historic and present day patterns of discrimination that exclude people from full social membership. Additionally, the stigma and discrimination that follow people long after release from prison relegate them to a marginal place in society. Thus, I use terms like *postincarceration*.

I strive to use people-first language and avoid labels that reduce people to an individual characteristic, action, or event. Labels like *criminal*, *addict*, *victim*, and *prisoner* are dehumanizing.¹⁴ I use the phrase *criminalized woman* to center women's humanity and acknowledge criminalization is a process that happens to women. Similarly, *substance abuse* is a medical term that connotes varied theories, presumptions, and moral judgments. I prefer the more neutral term *drug use*.