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'"My walk matches my talk': An exploratory study of a moral rehabilitation program for incarcerated women."

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"My Walk Matches My Talk": An Exploratory Study of a Moral Rehabilitation Program for Incarcerated Women

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Abstract: While there have been numerous studies demonstrating the effectiveness of moral rehabilitation prison educational programs, few have focused on the effectiveness of these programs for incarcerated women. The current research is an exploratory study based upon eight participants' initial perceptions of a four-year bachelor's program in theology, taught through the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS). Our preliminary results are consistent with the previous literature about NOBTS students' histories of abuse and tragedy, straying from faith, negotiation of identity, and programming challenges the students face. These women's narratives provide an initial exploration into the ways in which the NOBTS program has impacted these women within the carceral setting.

Keywords: Women and incarceration; Moral rehabilitation; Prison education; Risk-needs-responsivity; Trauma and incarceration

Introduction

In the Summer of 2018, Burl Cain reached out to us to request a preliminary investigation of a pilot program at Whitworth Women's Facility in Hartwell, Georgia. The Prison Seminary Model is a four-year undergraduate program developed by former Warden Cain at Louisiana State Penitentiary, also known as Angola, in 1999. Since its inception, the Prison Seminary Model has taken root in 19 states. There is ample evidence that this program has been useful in decreasing institutional infractions, and recidivism upon the offender's release. Because this model has been effective at 20 institutions, Heartbound Ministries in Atlanta, Georgia, in partnership with now Mississippi Commissioner, Burl Cain, to institute it at two women's prisons as a pilot program whose students have agreed to participate in this exploratory case study. At the time of this exploratory investigation there were eight students enrolled in the program at Whitworth taught by faculty through New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary;

however, more students have recently enrolled in the program.

Literature Review

Carceral programming rooted in religiosity has been a source of contention since the inception of our modern penal system (Hallett, 2018). While some argue that seminary-based programming within our nation's jails and prisons is unconstitutional, others support these programs, arguing that they are a source of moral rehabilitation (Hallett, Hays, Johnson, Jang, & Duwe, 2017). In 1994, President Bill Clinton's Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (P.L. 103-322) placed an indefinite moratorium on Pell Grants for incarcerated individuals, leaving them without the opportunity to obtain higher education. Two years later, Clinton's Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) further solidified a neo-liberal agenda that neither benefited low-income

individuals, nor society, at large. The result of the Violent Crime Control Act and PRWORA had overarching implications for penal educational programming, access to educational resources, treatment-based programing, and subsequently, recidivism.

In most states, there was a drastic cut in treatment, educational, and skills training programs within prisons (Tewksbury, Erickson, & Taylor, 2005). During this time, prisons in America experienced budget cuts, with the majority of government funding being allocated to building more prisons and using more advanced technology to "get-tough on crime," as opposed to creating community-based programs, or supporting risk and needs-responsive programming for incarcerated people. In other words, incarcerated people's risks and needs were no longer being addressed within the carceral setting – something crucial to reducing behavioral infractions and recidivism (Bonta & Andrews, 2007)

Marginalized individuals who desire change in their lives, and have lacked access to resources to facilitate this change both outside of and within the carceral setting, may be more successful in facilitating their own rehabilitation through moral rehabilitation programming (Giordano et al., 2008). The Prison Seminary Model requires a private, accredited school to offer a four-year degree plan within state correctional facilities. Because the school is barred from receiving funding from the Department of Corrections, the curriculum is geared toward supporting "moral rehabilitation." Students of all faiths are welcome, but the course of study includes Biblical tenets; specifically, those of servanthood, social justice, forgiveness, loving others, and enhancing healthy communication skills. Students who successfully complete the four-year program are awarded a four-year bachelor's degree. The graduates – who, upon graduation, are referred to as "peer ministers" – serve in their peers' spiritual healing when requested, and are expected to handle that role as a responsible citizen of their community, both inside and outside prison walls upon release. In addition, peer ministers are encouraged to spend time in all units of the prison, something which has changed

the culture of the entire prison (Hallett et al., 2017). Those with life sentences are sometimes sent to other prisons to help facilitate the healing of others and hope through moral rehabilitation.

Exposure to academic material, mentoring from professors, and skills sharpened by peers, is required to determine which students will stand out among the population as models of moral rehabilitation. Transformation of one's character, as evidenced by prosocial activity within the prison, integrity, and selfless servanthood, are the determining factors. The intention of the Prison Seminary Model is to utilize the graduates in various forms of peer ministry within the prison population. The peer ministers are uniquely equipped to speak to the emotional and spiritual needs of the prison population. Often, they have come from their own place of trauma, despair, and feelings of hopelessness. The peer minister's own story of overcoming these challenges, coupled with specific training to counsel others, makes them a powerful voice of healing in an environment marked by constant stressors.

This program has been implemented in 20 men's prisons in 19 states across America, and has yielded positive results in the form of decreased violence and disciplinary infractions within the prison, and a reduction in recidivism rates once these graduates are released back into the community (Hallett et al., 2017). These results suggest that this program may be effective for incarcerated women, as well.

The aim of this paper is to take a preliminary look into women's perceptions of the Prison Seminary Program at Whitworth Women's Facility. Since the women involved in the program have only completed their first year at the time the data were gathered, we do not seek to provide conclusive results, nor is it our intention to generalize our findings. Rather, this paper serves as an introduction to this newly-implemented program for incarcerated women. Over the next several years, we intend to evaluate the effectiveness of the Prison Seminary Program for women participants, as well as assess its indirect effects on other inmates. However, since we cannot simply "add women and stir"

(see Chesney-Lind, 1989) when it comes to understanding crime, criminality, or rehabilitation, we would be remiss not to address important gender-based differences in offending, and investigate ways in which this program may (or may not) address incarcerated women's unique risks and needs.

Methods and Methodology

Our primary source of data for this exploratory case study came from question-response forms that we sent participants from women participating in the Prison Seminary Model at Whitworth Prison. Our sample was purposive: Only incarcerated women enrolled in the program were allowed to participate. The first author met with and tutored participants several times prior to the global pandemic. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions within the Department of Corrections, we were unable to return to the prison, and had to collect our data via questionnaires. These questionnaires contained closed-ended, demographic questions, and open-ended questions that the women answered in writing. There are currently eight participants[1] in the program, ranging in age from 32-55 years. Interview questions[2] were sent to participants in January 2021, while written responses to our questions varied in length from one to four pages. The purpose of this methodology was to explore women's initial perceptions of the Prison Seminary Model after one year of classes.

The current case study required approval from both the Georgia Department of Corrections and our institution's Institutional Review Board. These approvals were granted in 2019. Participants were asked to explain how they perceived their environments, major events in their lives, their social interactions, conflict resolution strategies, their relationships - or lack thereof – with family, and themselves in relation to these experiences based upon their social positioning at various points in their lives. Consistent with feminist epistemologies, our questions allowed participants to address the issues

they felt were most important with respect to the Seminary Program. In other words, questions were developed to gain a better understanding of how gender informs knowledge and subjectivity. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality and were assigned a participant number in order to anonymize the data. After completing the transcripts, they were uploaded into qualitative analysis software (NVivo), which allowed for systematic yet flexible data organization, coding and analysis processes whereby each sentence was analyzed and assigned a descriptive label (Charmaz 2006; Glaser 1978).

While a qualitative approach was appropriate for this research as our aim was to better understand this population's perceptions of the program, there were limitations related to our sample and the method of choice. First, because the sample was purposive, it is important to consider a selection effect. In other words, our sample was limited to women who participated in programming in the institution, which suggests that the sample might be characteristic of individuals who are already motivated to participate in higher education, and more specifically, a program rooted in religious principles. For example, in their examination of participants in moral-rehabilitative prison programs, Camp et al. (2006) argued that their participants scored higher on scales that assessed 'motivation to change.' Similarly, they found that women with higher levels of religious participation in prison were more likely to participate in a moral rehabilitative program. Second, Giordano et al. (2008) found that variations in their adolescent participants' life circumstances (e.g., level of entrenchment in deviant social networks) have implications on whether participation in moral rehabilitative programs lead to a decrease in substance abuse, association with antisocial peers, and criminal behavior. While the purpose of case studies is not to generalize findings to the larger social environment (i.e., incarcerated women who are not involved in the seminary program, and incarcerated men who are

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1 There were originally eleven participants; however, one student was removed from the program and transferred to a different prison for assaulting a fellow seminary student, and two others

were transferred to transitional housing and have since been released.

2 See Appendix I for a list of interview questions.

involved in the program), our sample size is small, and participants' backgrounds, social networks, crimes, and sentences may not be representative of those of other incarcerated men or women.

Findings

From our data, we were able to identify four major themes: "Tragedy, loss, abuse, and neglect mark much of my childhood and teenage years;" "I got sidetracked;" "love and sisterhood;" and "facing the challenges."

"Tragedy, loss, abuse and neglect mark much of my childhood and teenage years"

Childhood emotional, physical, and sexual victimization, and neglect are correlated with mental health challenges, specifically depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder among a majority of incarcerated women. These factors are further correlated with drug/alcohol abuse. Second, factors such as feeling badly about oneself, feeling hopeless, and lack of self-efficacy are correlated with dysfunctional relationships in adolescence and adulthood (Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009). These women tend to experience a reduction in human capital, or supportive, pro-social networks such as family and friends, often leading to continued offending because of the lack of support. For example, Participant 8 suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of the tragedy, trauma, and abuse she has sustained in her life: "A few tragic things has happened in my life. My great-grandparents being stab to death. During my teenage years, my firstborn child died in my arms hours after his birth, and from then on, I was in and out of abusive relationships."

Salisbury & Van Voorhis (2009) argue that "women's childhood traumas were related to major mental health problems, especially depression and anxiety, as well as addictive behaviors. Indeed, it appears that childhood abuse cannot be ignored in facilitating women's criminal behavior" (p. 555). Participant 12, who suffers from borderline personality disorder and PTSD described a past that was rife with physical, sexual, and emotional abuse:

"I had a tumultuous childhood. I was abandoned by my mother and barely knew my father. I also experienced sexual abuse from the age of four to twelve years old. I didn't have any stability because I was bounced around from one relative to another."

Similarly, Participant 10 endured significant abuse in her home; the trauma from which led her down a path of substance abuse, and ultimately to prison.

"Tragedy, loss, abuse and neglect mark much of my childhood and teenage years. As a result, I became responsible for my siblings and even my parent at times. What happened at home stayed at home and was not discussed at home or outside the home. The adult influences that shaped my childhood were prone to alcohol and drug use and abuse frequently. My father (adopted) died when I was 8 years old, and my childhood was pretty much buried with him. My grandfather was murdered when I was 12, and my brother, who was only 11 months younger than me, committed suicide at 16 years old. My mother had a lot of anger and grief that she never dealt with – only tried to cover with drugs and alcohol."

The offense pathways of the women in our study are consistent with the numerous antecedents correlated with women's offense pathways identified in previous criminological literature (see Daly, 1992; Bloom & Covington, 2008; Bloom, Own, & Covington, 2003; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001). For example, all eight women in our study experienced both physical and emotional abuse, and seven of the eight experienced sexual abuse. Interestingly, most participants in our study indicated a pathway not previously identified: Losing faith in God as a "push" that led them down the path of substance abuse and illicit behavior.

"I got sidetracked": Straying from faith

During the interviews, and in their written responses, participants all reported a history of at least some interaction with faith-based institutions. While some of

the women described losing their faith as a result of the trauma they sustained, others reported that they maintained their faith throughout their tumultuous lives, but acknowledged they were not living the tenets of a "moral" life. For example, Participant 8stated, "prior to entering prison, I gotten side tracked. I was pulled away from God by my ex-boyfriend; abused, poisoned, and drugged, and more. This is what led me to my incarceration." Indeed, research has consistently demonstrated a strong relationship between criminal behavior and association with antisocial individuals (Sutherland, 1939). This relationship is strengthened when a person is invested in and committed to their relationships with others who hold crime-supportive beliefs (Hirschi, 1969).

> "I grew up in the church. My grandfather was a pastor but I ran from it after I was of consent age. Once I married I turned back to my religious roots and was a faithful attendee of church services, but then my husband and I were not grounded on the foundation of love that included God in our marriage, so once something bad/hurtful happened (ex. Divorce), I fled again from god" (P2).

Notably, research has also shown that strong bonds to prosocial institutions such as Church and school work as a protective factor against (re)offending (Maruna, 2001). For example, Participant 13 stated:

> Faith is living in a way that aligns your actions with what you claim to believe. Example: I am a Christian. Christ said our love for him is seen through our love for each other. Therefore, when I extend love to others, I am living in faith. I would also add that faith means living in accordance with all you believe, not just the part you agree with or are comfortable with.

In addition to a curriculum that stresses moral rehabilitation, these women are taught pedagogical practices grounded in standpoint hermeneutical rhetoric, whereby they are taught to engage in a dialogical approach. This approach encourages participants to reflect upon and critique their own discomfort with certain ideas, and address the dialectic between their personal feelings, and material being taught.

"Love and Sisterhood":
It is crucial that the criminal justice and mental health systems employ evidence-based research to inform best practices. For example, treatment that focuses on dynamic risk factors as well as protective factors (factors that decrease the likelihood of reoffending) is important in order to effectively address the offender's criminogenic needs (Heffernan & Ward, 2019). Research has consistently shown that important protective factors for female offenders include having close relationships with prosocial family and friends (see Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003; Wright et al., 2012).

> Mostly, [this program] has given me a sense of security, family, and belonging that wouldn't have been possible otherwise. The program has also given me a purpose in God's plan that is much bigger than anything I could've imagined for myself...I read the Bible using the techniques learned in hermeneutics in order to better understand what I read. I've...become a member of [a] family. Both my sisters in class, and our professors, make up that family. I've learned that we must allow people to see who we are in order for them to understand the work God has done in us. That helps me overcome my anxiety of letting people close" (P2).

Aside from the benefits they have gained through Bible study, and the rigorous academic requirements, these women reported an appreciation for the sisterhood and comradery they have gained. Women tend to be more relational than men (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003; DeBell, 2001; Harner, 2004), and incarcerated women's future outcomes have been shown to significantly improve when they are in a supportive, nurturing, and non-threatening environment (Wright et al., 2012).

> "The amount of emphasis placed on Bible study and application has been really impactful. More than anything, I feel that the love and sisterhood with others in the group

have changed my life. I have been shown such love and I have been held accountable for my attitude about myself and others" (P12).

In addition to building nurturing, prosocial relationships with the other women in the program, the participants reported that helping others in the prison has led to an increase in self-efficacy, and a positive shift in identity. For example, Participant 8 stated, "within the institutional setting for me personally, I've made a great impact on a lot of women here. Led them to God and to believe in Him. Upon release, since I've made an impact on women in prison, I know I will be able to do the same outside." Participant 14 echoed this sentiment when she stated, "this experience has changed my life and I would love to become a part of the movement in any aspect upon my release. I want to show women everywhere (jails, rehabs, transitional centers, prisons) that Christ in us changes everything."

"Facing the challenges:" Needs and Setbacks
As with any program, the Prison Seminary Program comes with challenges that have the potential to hinder long-term benefits. Participants expressed their concerns, most of which had to do with lack of support from prison staff, and lack of resources needed to rigorously engage with their class material; all of which has been found to be an ongoing problem in rehabilitative programs in correctional settings (Esperian, 2010). Participant 11 reported feeling frustrated that students in the Seminary Program were not housed in the same unit. She, and others, argued that this would be beneficial so that they could study the material together and exchange ideas.

> "I feel like it would be beneficial for staff and administration to be more supportive of a time and place for us to do Bible study in the dorm, even if this is after a year of classes, or if the Chaplain or someone could have audited a study possibly. I know everyone in the program has not and doesn't do bible study in the dorm. However, this is something I have been consistent with from the beginning, and it is something I feel is important to be about the body of Christ in the dorm."

While their professors have been helpful and supportive, and worked with them to teach them how to engage with the material, these women do not always have the opportunity to continue their engagement with the material after class. Allowing students in the program to live in the same unit, would not only make it more feasible to work together, but would also provide an opportunity for them to spend more time engaging with the Chaplain, as a group.

Similarly, Participant 13 expressed her disappointment that participants were spread out in different housing units.

> "Some challenges that I've experienced while being in the program... comprehension of the material. Sometimes we have assignments that may call for further research and our sources are limited. Sometimes all the students would have to share the resources which would promote a stressful environment when someone needed a source that another student was using."

Participant 15 raised similar concerns as her peers in the program. She stated,

> "Well, first of all, the staff here doesn't really care. They act like they do, but they don't. They can't wait for us to be finished and gone and have said just as much. We should have been put in one dorm to grow stronger; not separated, at least while learning in school. The staff needs to let us be able to have studies, but they won't let us. They make it impossible. We should be in a dorm that enables us to use a computer to work, and not depend on study hall time that we hardly even get. I know it was due to no director, so I pray since we have a new one that things change"

Limited resources and time to study together leads to setbacks for these participants, as they may be unable to complete their work on time, or cannot get the help they need if they are having trouble comprehending the material. Participants stated that when they have tried to address this with prison staff and administration, their requests have largely been

ignored. This, they report, is frustrating because it reinforces an "inmate" identity – one which these women are working hard to recreate. In addition, this response reinforces the idea that these women, who have already been marginalized, are powerless to exert change, or improve themselves. Finally, it also decreases the likelihood of their rehabilitative needs being met.

Discussion and Conclusion

While there is a plethora of scholarly research about the relationship between moral rehabilitative programming, treatment needs, and specifically its effectiveness in men's correctional institutions, we were asked to conduct a preliminary investigation into the effectiveness of the Prison Seminary Model at Whitworth Women's Facility in Hartwell, Georgia. While moral rehabilitative programming does not outweigh the importance of implementing a risk-needs-responsivity model for incarcerated people, the Prison Seminary Program does address various criminogenic needs such as low educational attainment, antisocial associates, impulsivity, and antisocial cognitions (Giordano et al., 2008; Hallett et al, 2017). Furthermore, this program addresses women-specific needs outlined by scholars and practitioners alike (see Bloom, 2003; Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004; Owen, Bloom, & Covington, 2003; Van Voorhis et al., 2008).

Incarcerated women comprise seven percent of the current prison population (Prison Policy Initiative, 2020). These women are not only less likely to engage in criminal behavior, but tend to follow different pathways leading to their offending (Belknap, 2007; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009). Incarcerated women are disproportionately likely to be involved in non-violent crimes than incarcerated men (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988), yet between the 1980s and now, their incarceration growth rate has doubled that of men (Prison Policy Institute, 2020). Further, despite the significant differences in overall offending and offending patterns, the rate of female incarceration has increased by 755% since the mid-80s – a much higher rate than that of their male counterparts – and suggests

the need to address this through rehabilitation (Sentencing Project, 2020).

Men and women tend to have unique pathways to offending for myriad reasons. First, biosocial criminologists (e.g., Walsh & Vaske, 2015) have noted distinct evolutionary and biological factors of offending among men and women. Second, disparate methods of child socialization have an impact on psychosocial experiences such as attachment (Del Giudice, 2019) and mental health which, in part, explains why men and women tend to have different ways of coping with adverse life experiences (Kelly, Tyrka, Price, & Carpenter, 2008). Finally, socialization leads to differences in behavioral expectations (Aneshensel & Gore, 1991; Hagen & Foster, 2009; Rosenfield, 1999), something West and Zimmerman referred to as "doing gender" (1987). These biological, psychological, and social influences are all important to consider to understand gender-specific pathways to and patterns of offending, and develop effective and responsive resources to meet their risks and needs.

In addition to addressing offenders' risks and needs, both qualitative and quantitative research demonstrate that clinicians and criminal justice officials should focus attention on building, or promoting, prosocial relationships within the carceral setting, as a responsivity measure – a process in which all prison staff must be involved (Wright et al., 2012). Fostering healthy relationships inside prison positively reinforces incarcerated women to learn and practice pro-social skills while incarcerated, and post-release. As such, prison staff should begin considering, creating, and implementing post-release treatment plans *prior* to release in order to ensure that women who receive this type of programming are being supported.

Since our initial interviews, ten new participants enrolled in the program at Whitworth. Further, another women's facility – Central Mississippi Correctional Facility – implemented this program in January, 2021. While this study is in its initial stages, it does yield important preliminary findings for the implementation of the Prison Seminary Program for incarcerated

women. Moving forward, records of prison-wide disciplinary reports (DRs), implementation of yearly risk-needs assessment for participants, and post-release follow up, will be important indicators of change, and measure of whether the responsivity principle (Bonta & Andrews, 2007) is being met through moral rehabilitation education for incarcerated women.

While there is a requirement that participants have no disciplinary reports prior to enrollment, the institution has seen an overall reduction in DRs among incarcerated women in the institution. Whether this is an indication the participants have an impact on other inmates and the culture of the prison, or that DRs have simply decreased in general, will be an important variable to address in future research. Thus, future research should include both qualitative and quantitative data obtained from current students, and new students at Whitworth and Central Mississippi Correctional Facility. Mississippi Commissioner Cain emphasizes both the academic and rehabilitative aspects of this program, and previous research has consistently demonstrated this through prison-wide reductions in the number of DRs issued, and a decrease in recidivism. Should our research yield similar, significant results, this program could add another dimension of responsibility practices utilized for women within the carceral setting.

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Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

Part I
1)   How old are you?
2)   How long is your sentence? How much time have you already served?
3)   I have experienced:
      a.   Sexual abuse   Y/N
      b.   Physical abuse   Y/N
      c.   Emotional abuse   Y/N
4)   I have been diagnosed with a mental health condition at some point in my life   Y/N
Please feel free to elaborate/describe here:
5)   I have struggled with substance use at some point in my life   Y/N Please feel free to elaborate/describe
here:
6)   I was religious/spiritual prior to my incarceration   Y/N
7)   The highest level of education I completed was:
8)   I identify as:
      a.   Race/ethnicity:
      b.   Sexuality:
      c.   Gender:

Part II:
1)   Please take a moment to reflect on your life experiences and describe your childhood and teenage years
2)   How would you describe yourself prior to entering prison?
3)   What does "religion" or "faith" mean to you? What does it look like in practice?
4)   What challenges do you think women in this program face with respect to: comprehension of the material?
Attitudes, behavior, or general ways of thinking? Life skills?
5)   How might, or does this program make a difference in the lives of the women who participate in it?
a.   Within the institutional setting?
b.   Upon release?
6)   What are some meaningful components of the program that you have learned, and have put into practice in
your daily life? Please provide 2-3 examples
7)   How can you use the skills you have learned once you are released?
8)   How has participation in the program, and learning and practicing the principles impacted your personal
relationships...
a.   With other women in the prison?
b.   With correctional officers and staff?
c.   With family?
9)   What factors, if any, have contributed to behavioral, emotional, and spiritual changes for you since you began
the program?
10)   How would you describe yourself (i.e., personality, behaviors, feelings, etc.) since beginning the program?
11)   Your responses are very important in terms of making positive changes in incarcerated women's lives. If you
were to talk to a policy-maker about this program, what would you tell them? (e.g., what works/ what changes should
be made). Feel free to write a direct response that includes your thoughts, feelings, opinions, etc.
12)   Is there anything else that we did not ask, that you would like to share?