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Book Review: Women Doing Life: Gender, Punishment and the Struggle for Identity

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Lempert, L. B. *Women Doing Life: Gender, Punishment and the Struggle for Identity*. New York: New York University Press. (2016). \$27.00 (paperback), ISBN 9781479827053.

In *Women Doing Life: Gender, Punishment, and the Struggle for Identity*, Lora Bex Lempert provides an unflinching, and unwavering look into the lives of female lifers, an understudied and almost invisible part of the United States prison population. Lempert is a Professor at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, and has become a respected voice on the issues surrounding female lifers through her work as a cosponsor for the National Lifers of America chapter at a woman's correctional facility. In this study, Lempert utilizes a multipronged approach to analyze 72 women lifers in a women's correctional facility in the state of Michigan. Through focus groups, life course interviews, and two-week solicited diaries, Lempert is able to provide the reader with a groundbreaking look into the process of identity formation and survival tactics used by these incarcerated women to create meaningful lives in a mundane, repetitive, and dehumanizing environment.

Lempert presents powerful stories gathered from female inmates in an attempt to mend the societal dichotomy of "us" and "them" and re-humanize these women who may be lifers, but are also mothers, sisters, daughters, and friends. Through telling the pre-conviction story of one lifer, Lempert humanizes a population that has been deemed monstrous by those on the outside. Lempert paints a picture of life histories that include homelessness, poverty, mental illness, abandonment, addiction, physical and sexual abuses, histories that are not uncommon among the female prison population in the United States. Lempert's aim is not to excuse or justify these women's crimes by presenting these past injustices, but rather to erase the notion that victim and offender are mutually exclusive categories and to reiterate to society that, "one day, one hour, one irremediable act is not the sum total of a woman's personhood," (p.109).

Throughout the book, injustices suffered by these women serving life sentences are brought to light; injustices that have been allowed due to the invisibility of this population, not only from general society but also from meaningful programming within the institution. Female lifers are denied the right to services and programs which could help them to cultivate meaningful lives such as anger management, domestic violence counseling, assaultive offender programming, educational programming and substance abuse counseling, because they are never getting out and therefore, will never be useful or "socially relevant" again. These programs are reserved for women who will be returning to the "real world." The reader also experiences the perceptions among the study population that

some correctional officers lack respect and human empathy for the incarcerated population.

Chapters three and five are the most central to the text as this is where Lempert outlines what might be the most significant contribution of *Women Doing Life*, her six-stage typology of identity formation and self-actualization processes for life serving women. The six stages of this model include: becoming a prisoner, navigating the “mix”, acting at a choice point, establishing a counternarrative, developing an internal compass, and rebuilding social bonds. Women who go through these stages of identity formation during their time incarcerated are doing what Lempert refers to as “actively doing life.” Female lifers move through these steps in order to adapt to their new life in prison and to cope with the harsh reality of a life sentence. While female lifers are isolated from normal society, they simultaneously remain constantly in the public view of their fellow inmates, “in these paradoxical conditions, they engage in efforts to cultivate rich lives and meaningful relationships” (p.126). Lempert’s six stage typology outlines the steps taken by these women to acclimate to life in prison, navigate new relationships, and maintain a sense of self within the prison walls.

In the final chapter, Lempert outlines where the future of female corrections is headed and the role of this work in highlighting issues in female corrections which are often overshadowed by the vastness of their male counterpart. In an unprecedented fashion, Lempert showcases suggestions from the female lifers in her study on how to improve the lives of female offenders and the justice system itself. Lempert explains that these individuals have the most experience with the system at its ground floor. Some of these lifers’ suggestions for improvement include mechanisms to help mend the over population of prisons through sentencing reform, system modifications to prison life that could improve the lives of female lifers, and the termination of laws that limit the opportunities of those individuals who do reenter society.

Women Doing Life is an outstanding piece of work that unapologetically showcases an understudied group within our criminal justice system by mixing together the voice of feminist criminology, crime statistics, and powerful stories of self-reform, despair, injustice, courage, and hope. Criminologists, sociologists, gender scholars, and concerned citizens alike will benefit from a better understanding of the collateral consequences of lifetime imprisonment, how females navigate this sentence, and where we should go from here.