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SUBSTANCE USE AND ABUSE:
THE ROLE THAT DRUGS AND
ALCOHOL PLAY IN THE LIVES
OF CRIMINALIZED WOMEN

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Jane E. Barker AND D. Scharie Tavcer

It is fair to say that we all cope with the stresses in our lives in different ways. By definition, any behaviour a person uses to deal with a difficult situation, or a stressor, can be thought of as a coping strategy. These strategies are not always functional though, and many people adopt avoidant coping strategies in order to distance themselves from the problem without trying to deal with it (Skinner, Edge, Altman, and Sherwood, 2003). This in turn can lead to additional problems.

To decide whether someone's coping strategy is considered

functional or dysfunctional is a value judgment. A coping strategy used by an individual in one situation could be viewed as dysfunctional while that same strategy used by another person could be considered functional. However, for women in conflict with the law, there is an additional complication to navigate, that of systemic oversight, which convolutes their attempts to cope with the stressors they face. While in Canada the percentage of women living in low income is similar to the percentage of men, there are more women than men who are single-parenting children and living in low income. Reported sexual victimization as a child is three times higher among women than men. And if she is Indigenous, she is 2.7 times more likely to experience violent victimization than non-Indigenous women, and Indigenous women are over-represented within the prison system (Indigenous women represent approximately forty percent of the female prison population compared to five percent of the total female population in Canada) (Mahony, 2011).

The term *criminalization* refers to the process or processes by which individuals are transformed and labelled as criminals. Our society surveils, disciplines, manages, corrects, and punishes women, and many support strategies have been used to address the impact of imprisonment and the systemic abuses against poor and racialized women. Women in conflict with the law do so through multiple forces that come together and influence a woman's decision(s) to resist her experiences and violate the law. And in doing so, she is then labelled a "criminal" and further disciplined and punished, which in turn can result in continued coping with drugs and alcohol. A women's pathway into and out of crime cannot be understood without understanding the ways in which violence, race, class, and gender intersect to shape and guide that pathway.

For women who find themselves incarcerated for the first time, there is a lot to learn, a lot to get used to, and a lot to cope with. While criminalized women may use a variety of coping strategies in

their lives, for the purpose of this essay, we will limit our exploration to the area of substance abuse (alcohol and drugs). Using alcohol is socially acceptable (and using some drugs may be too) and may start out as functional (e.g., smoking, using prescription medication, having drinks after work, etc.). It can also be a way of responding to or resisting the victimization she experiences (marginalization, domestic abuse, poverty, etc.). All of this, then, can turn dysfunctional over time. For example, having a glass of wine or a beer as a means to relax after a difficult day may seem like a reasonable way to cope, but overtime, and without addressing the difficult or distressing experience, it can lead to excess use or abuse, or both. For many women who have come in conflict with the law, their use of drugs or alcohol is directly or indirectly related to their crimes, e.g., selling drugs to address poverty; stealing money to pay for drugs/alcohol. The fact that a large percentage of criminalized women have had problems associated with drugs or alcohol is well documented in the research literature. A recent study of incarcerated women serving federal sentences found that seventy-six percent met the criteria, using lifetime estimates, for an alcohol or substance use disorder (Derkzen, Barker, McMillan, and Stewart, 2017). Further, approximately forty to fifty percent of crimes committed by a Canadian sample of male and female offenders were attributed to drug and/or alcohol use or abuse (Pernanen, Cousineau, Brochu, and Sun, 2002).

Most police-reported drug crimes (two out of every three) are related to cannabis, with cannabis possession accounting for more than half (Cotter, Greenland, and Karam, 2015). As is the case with other crimes, more men are charged with drug-related crimes than are women. In 2013, only eighteen percent of those charged with drug-related offences were female, and in 2016, only fourteen percent were female (Mahony, 2011). A larger proportion of women (twenty-nine percent) were charged with the import or

export of drugs in 2013 than were charged with possession (seventeen percent) (Cotter et al., 2015). For women who are involved in the drug trade, they are found in low ranking, high-risk positions that often involve smuggling or transporting illicit substances (Cotter et al., 2015), a role that is likely heavily influenced by poverty and/or coping with their traumatic experiences. Incarcerated women with substance-abuse problems appear to have more social and psychological needs than those who don't abuse substances. These women tend to hold more antisocial attitudes and associate with people who share similar attitudes. They also have more employment problems, marital/family problems in addition to the substance abuse (Dowden and Blanchette, 1999). Additionally, they may experience more mental-health issues, are separated from their children, and have self-esteem and self-concept problems. Because of the number of life areas where substance-abusing women appear to experience challenges, it is very possible that their substance use might have served as resistance to or a coping mechanism for these other areas of life. Alternatively, the relationship could be multi-directional: substance abuse may serve as a coping strategy *and* be a source of stress for these other life areas, *or* substance abuse serves as a resistance strategy to gain power and control over the abuse *and* becomes a source of stress for other life areas.

Most criminalized women have themselves made a link between their criminal behaviour and their use/abuse of alcohol or drugs. Victimization in childhood, e.g., sexual, physical and/or emotional abuse, or as an adult, e.g., intimate partner violence and/or sexual assault, have all been identified as factors relating to women's involvement in substance use and other illegal behaviours, including crime. In an attempt to dull the pain associated with prior victimization, women may choose to use substances as a way of self-medicating, or as a way of increasing their perception of power or control, i.e., resistance to the abuse. Criminalized women

may be no different from many others in society who choose to self-medicate to deal with stress, a coping strategy that may be considered functional; however, when the consequences of a criminalized woman abusing drugs or alcohol are evaluated, their behaviour may be viewed as considerably more dysfunctional given their situation, experiences, and challenges.

The Correctional Service of Canada has recognized that a high level of substance abuse problems exists for women offenders who are incarcerated federally, and that many incarcerated women are survivors of past trauma (Furlong and Grant, 2006). In an evaluation of an intensive therapeutic substance-abuse treatment program, the researchers found that the majority of women who participated indicated they had used substances as a way to cope with their traumatic experiences. After program completion, the women showed significant improvements in their ability to cope. In this same evaluation, the majority (ninety-one percent) of the women reported they were under the influence of drugs or alcohol when they committed their offence(s). And of those who had used drugs, almost three-quarters of the women believed their crime was directly related to their involvement with drugs, and nearly half of those who had used alcohol came to a similar conclusion.

If a criminalized woman decides to use substances for coping with a stressor(s) in her life, then she may face some disastrous consequences. If she is caught using substance while incarcerated she will be disciplined, managed, corrected, and punished in some manner: she may receive institutional charges, her security classification may be reviewed and increased, and she may be transferred to a more secure living unit or even another correctional facility. Once released from prison, if the conditions of her parole state that she must not use drugs or alcohol and she is caught violating that condition (through a positive urinalysis test), she risks having her parole suspended or revoked, which results in her returning

to prison. And if she has children, they may return as wards of the state and into foster care. These consequences are serious and have long-lasting effects for her and her children, all as a result of a behaviour that many others in society engage in daily.

Once cannabis use is legal in Canada, women on parole will likely be faced with the same inequitable predicament as they now face with respect to alcohol. Although possessing and consuming cannabis (less than thirty grams or four plants) will be legal, as is alcohol, if their parole condition stipulates abstinence but they test positive for it, they could be sent back into custody. Even though cannabis possession and consumption will no longer be considered illegal for Canadians (under specific conditions), the ramifications of using cannabis for those on parole may be more serious.

We all must cope with life's stressors, and women who are criminalized are no different from anyone else in this regard. Some turn to strategies that have worked for them in the past, but become ultimately problematic for both now and in the long-term. Drinking and drug use have been identified as common coping strategies be they positive or negative, functional or dysfunctional, good or bad. But whichever coping strategy a woman in conflict with the law chooses, the role of alcohol or substance use and abuse in their criminalization is complex.

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