The Ex-Prisoner’s Dilemma
Critical Issues in Crime and Society

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For the women of the Mercy Home
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Shorty D was a thirty-eight-year-old African American mother of two. Her younger son was five and living with her mother; the other was nineteen and at a work release center. As a child, Shorty D was involved with school and extracurricular activities. She described her childhood as a good one and herself as having “had dreams” of a career. She was close with her father, who “was an alcoholic, but he wasn’t an abusive alcoholic. You know, he was the type that would take a drink and give you all his money.” In her teen years, she felt unloved by her mother. “I know the reasons why I felt like that today. My mother had six kids and some of her kids were going to jail and all that, so she focused on the ones that needed some help more so than the ones that was all right. You know, she had to give up a little more time to help the ones that needed the help, but, see, I didn’t look at it like that. I used to look at it like, they always in trouble, why are they getting all the attention? When do I get a pat on the back?” She was “thrown” when she got pregnant with her older son when she was nineteen. She said that having a baby “played a part in me getting caught up, too, you know.”

Shorty D had recently been released from prison after serving sixteen months. This was her only time in prison, though she had been arrested several times before, had spent short stints in jail, and had been on intensive probation. From prison, she went to the Mercy Home, a voluntary halfway house for women returning from prison. She first learned of the Mercy Home from her sister Lauren, who had stayed there several years earlier. All of Shorty D’s law enforcement and criminal justice system involvement stemmed from drug use and selling. Prior to her incarceration, she had been “using drugs every day all day.” Still, she did not begin using drugs until after the birth of her first child. “My mother never did drugs, you know what I’m saying? None of that, right. Everything I did, I did by choice. You know, when people say that it’s somebody that—it’s in a family? Drugs were never in my family. Matter of fact, I was in my twenties, early twenties, when I started getting high. I didn’t know what cocaine looked like, you know, until I got on the street and hang, started hanging with the wrong crowd. You know, which my mama, you know, didn’t approve of... You don’t even look at the time you wasted or how many years that went by, you know.” Of Shorty D’s five siblings, three had histories of drug use. One brother was in and out of the penitentiary. Another brother
continued to use drugs, though “he’s the type of person that get high once a month. You know, he don’t be out there every day all day.”

A few months after her release, she “gave up for a few days” and relapsed. Although she was ashamed of this, “it’s all about if you fall you ain’t gotta stay down. . . . I refused to let my pride and my guilt keep me out there, 'cause see that’s what had me in my addiction.” She spoke to her case manager at the single-room-occupancy (SRO) building where she was living at the time, and went into treatment. A few months after this, she said, “To be totally honest, I got high one time . . . it wasn’t like I can really blame it on anything. I just got high for that day, but you know, it messed my nose up, my throat was all messed up, you know, so every time I make a decision that ain’t right, you know what I’m saying, I always get disappointed out of it.” This time, she talked to her sponsor. Over the course of her first year out of prison, she participated in two job-training programs, and was looking for work at the end.

Shorty D’s sister, Lauren, was forty years old and had stayed at the Mercy Home about seven years prior. She had served three prison sentences, one jail sentence, and was arrested “numerous” times from age seventeen until her early thirties. Like Shorty D, she described her childhood as a good one. Her childhood neighborhood was close knit. “You know that saying where they say it take a neighborhood to raise a child? It puts you in a mind of that. Everybody knew everybody’s mom and dad. Growing up over there was ideal. It was ideal. It’s what happened after you grew up that became the problem.”

Lauren: If I was at school, the girls I hung out with would smoke marijuana in the bathroom. Or on our lunch break, you smoke marijuana. Class, we smoking marijuana. When I got outta school, I hung out with another group of people. They smoked marijuana. You know, even when I was, when I used to go hang out in, all their friends in that house, you know, they smoke marijuana. Granted, you know, we did the things that you normally do. Like, you go to the dance classes, you take tennis lessons and you learn how to play chess. We weren’t being deprived, you know, the extracurricular activities and stuff, and you know, didn’t go, you know, to different events and all of that. You wasn’t deprived, you just were on drugs.

Around age eighteen, she began using her drug of choice, heroin. She chose to go to the Mercy Home after a prison drug treatment counselor suggested that she try something different upon her release. “I think the message he gave, now that I’m able to comprehend a little bit better, is that you need to change your thinking about places and people, you know. It was just a way for me to think about the way I think about things.”
When she first left the Mercy Home, she lived in a single-room-occupancy building for approximately a year. She then moved in with a boyfriend, before moving in with her mother. Eventually she moved to her current apartment, where she lived with her daughter and baby grandson. She was working as a drug counselor while in school to complete her CADC (certified addiction drug counselor) license and a third associate’s degree, this one in addiction studies. She also helped care for her nephew, Shorty D’s younger son.

Lauren: I had my nephew for a while, because his mom was still in her addiction. I ended up with him because at the time I lived on the third floor, my mom lived on the first floor. When she had the baby I was living with my mom and then I moved on the third floor. And we knew we were going to have him. We just knew it. The day she [Shorty D] told her [our mother] she was pregnant, it was like you know you’re going to have this baby when it comes. I guess we just took on the responsibility because we knew we had a baby coming. There’s no getting around it. So we had to prepare ourselves. He was with me and my mom for, well he’s still with my mom, but with us both together until he was four. That’s when I moved.

Lauren said, “My relationship with my mom, it took her—I was living with her, it took her three years just to say that she was proud of me. Then I knew our relationship was mended. It took her a long time. And I was out of the joint for a while before that even came about.” While Lauren and Shorty D both felt as children they did not get enough attention from their mother and had been closer to their fathers, both were now close with their mother.

Tammy was an African American woman in her early thirties. She was one of the few women at the Mercy Home who had no history of drug use; she decided to go there because “I have been gone for a while.” Tammy first entered prison when she was nineteen; her only criminal justice system involvement was a first-degree murder conviction, for which she served fourteen years. She was shy and nervous when she was first released, and appreciated the security of being at the Mercy Home, though she would have preferred it to be more structured. She said, “I thought a lot of people would judge me. And a lot of people here understand and they’re caring people. So I feel at home. I feel comfortable and relaxed and nonviolent and I haven’t felt that way in a long time.” She wanted to work on an assembly line while she went to college; instead she got a job as a facilitator for mentally ill clients at a day program. She enjoyed working with the clients, to her surprise, and stayed at that job for about a year. She then quit because “it was stressful with the coworkers, the atmosphere.” She also completed her first semester of college.

She was initially hesitant to talk about the events that led to her incarceration, but eventually began opening up about them.
Tammy: Well, I could just tell you just briefly how it probably came about. When I was young, about ten years old, up to my incarceration time, nineteen, my mother came up missing. And that’s how I took it—that she came up missing. Later on, I found out she was murdered, from events that happened, and it made me realize that she just didn’t leave, but she was murdered. I tried to go to the police and explain to them the things that I seen and heard, and my family members was talking about her and actually seeing her being abused. Later on, I couldn’t get the help that I wanted or needed, so I took the law into my own hands. That’s what led up to that.

This continued to be a source of strain among her siblings and other family members, and she struggled to establish relationships with them. Both she and her older sister Kristen talked about a divide between the three older siblings, who had clearer memories of their mother, and the three younger siblings. She had contact with two of her siblings: Kristen and a younger brother.

At the Mercy Home, she was particularly close with Danielle, who took on a maternal or sisterly role with her. Tammy described Danielle: “She’s close to my mother’s age, so I respect her and she, you know, give me advice. She like to go shopping with me, and, you know, I feel close to her.” Tammy and Danielle moved to the same SRO building, and they remained close. Over time, Tammy said she maintained contact with her fellow Mercy Home residents, but “they’re not doing too good, you know, because of the drug abuse, and I haven’t used drugs. . . . Most of them have fell off, but they, this place here will get you help instead of kicking you out. If you relapse, they will get you help, send you to a rehabilitation center . . . they really do believe in helping the women here.” She knew of three women who had relapsed and then went back into treatment, and had heard rumors about a few others.

Tammy: At first, I was unable to tell if someone’s using drugs. Now that my close friends have, yes, I can tell now. One that’s very close to me, I can tell, because she stopped doing the things, you know, we used to hang out a lot and so we don’t hang out that much. And I can tell by the mood swings, the reddish eyes, and forgetfulness and irritation, and asking me to loan her large sums of money. And then they weren’t going to work, every other day, they was missing, and I was like, what’s wrong? You like to work. “I’m tired, or doing other things,” to the point where she just quit. And that was a big sign. . . . I never approached her about it, but I knew something was happening. She finally told me after she went to a counselor here to get treatment, said she needed help. So, she finally told me.

Tammy was wary and hurt by the experiences she had with the women who relapsed. She had begun to depend on Danielle to learn how to be a free
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adult. After her friends relapsed, she began doing more things on her own and continued to struggle with establishing a satisfying social life. Over time, she developed a closer friendship with Sunshine, another of the women from the Mercy Home who did not have a history of addiction. While Tammy never used drugs, she did occasionally attend Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous groups and also helped start an Emotions Anonymous group at the SRO.

These vignettes introduce just three of the women who are the core of this study, and represent some of the range in their experiences. Shorty D and Lauren are, in many ways, illustrative of the experiences of many women who are in prison in the contemporary United States. They have extensive histories of drug addiction, and much of their offending and criminal justice system involvement is tied to this drug use. These addictions affect many areas of their lives, from their ability to parent effectively to their relationships with other family members, friends, and communities. Their attempts to stop offending and using drugs in the future are also strongly implicated in these relationships and in their social context. Tammy represents an important counterpoint—a reminder that not all prisoners and not all female offenders have histories of addiction and some also must contend with the impact of long periods of incarceration. Tammy was in prison at a time she might have been completing her college education, establishing a career, adult friendships, and romantic partnerships, starting a family, and other common adult transitions. All three of the women were learning what it meant to have this history of offending and incarceration, and how to reestablish their lives and their relationships on the other side of that history.

Research Approach

The Ex-Prisoner’s Dilemma is based on repeated qualitative interviews with women who returned from prison to the Mercy Home and members of their social networks. In the book, I analyze the narratives the women use to describe and define their lives as they reenter society and attempt to desist from offending and drug use. I went to the Mercy Home twice to formally recruit current residents to the study. I also mailed letters to all former residents for whom the Mercy Home had addresses and invited them to participate. Some of these women had only recently moved out of the Mercy Home, while others had lived there years earlier. The goal was to interview all women four times over the course of a year. Through these interviews, I tracked the women’s progress and changes to their lives and perspectives. I also incorporated questions about emergent themes and issues. In all, I interviewed forty-nine women, who were evenly divided between current and former Mercy Home residents at the time we met. Of these, I interviewed thirty-three women four
times, and the remainder between one and three times. The combination of current and former residents and multiple interviews over time allowed me to hear about a wide range of experiences with reentry and desistance as an ongoing process that evolves over the women’s life course.

In the first interview, I asked the women to identify family, friends, romantic partners, or coworkers they would be comfortable with my interviewing. The goal of these interviews was to better understand the women’s social context and relationships. Through this approach, I interviewed twenty-six people who were referred by fifteen women. While I draw on these interviews through the manuscript, they are particularly central to the analysis in chapters 4 and 5, which focus on family dynamics and relationships with romantic partners and friends. In addition to formal “network” interviews, the women were interconnected with one another and talked about one another.

In the pages that follow, I detail how women coming out of prison negotiate competing messages of who they are, who they should be, and how they should live their lives. They receive often-conflicting messages from prison staff, halfway house and drug treatment program staff, family members, romantic partners, friends, and acquaintances about how to be a “good” ex-offender, recovering drug user, mother, daughter, sister, romantic partner, and productive member of society. Many of these are incompatible with one another, and the women must learn to redefine themselves in light of these multiple and competing messages. The goal here is to understand not only what their narratives or stories are but also where they come from and how they are used.

Narratives that people construct provide an explanation of past behavior and a guide to future behavior (Gubrium and Holstein 1998; Laub and Sampson 2003; Maruna 2001; McAdams 2006). These narratives are strongly shaped by social and structural positions, relationships, and the various messages they receive about their roles in life. As Dan McAdams argues, “Narrative identities are stories we live by. We make them and remake them, we tell them and revise them not so much to arrive at an accurate record of the past as to create a coherent self that moves us forward in life with energy and purpose. Our stories are partly determined by the real circumstances of our lives—by family, class, gender, culture, and the historical moment into which we’re thrown. But we also make choices, narrative choices” (2006, 98–99). The women’s interpretations of their lives and their relationships represent a cognitive schema through which women account for who they are and the choices they have made. These narratives shape and are shaped by the women’s interactions with individuals and institutions; as such, they tell us not only about the women but also about how contemporary U.S. society constructs gender, female criminality, and prisoner reentry.
In looking at the women’s experiences before and after their incarcerations, I draw most heavily on the life course and symbolic interactionist perspectives (Berger and Luckman 1966; Elder 1998; Goffman 1963; Laub and Sampson 2003; Mead 1934). Specifically, from life course approaches, I recognize that these women’s lives are embedded in and shaped by the historical and physical context, the timing of life events matters, lives are interdependent, and human agency plays a key role in constructing one’s life (Elder 1998; Laub and Sampson 2003). In addition, I use the premises of symbolic interactionism, as laid out by Herbert Blumer: people act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them, these meanings come from social interaction and are handled and modified through an interpretive process, and the complex interlinkages of acts are dynamic, not static (1969, 50). In other words, the women’s lives are socially contextualized and they actively construct a sense of their lives through their interactions with other individuals and institutions.

**Structural and Contextual Factors Influencing Female Offending**

The experiences of and reactions to women who offend or who are incarcerated are shaped by their role as women. Women who engage in offending are often looked upon as “doubly deviant,” violating both gender and legal norms (Heimer and De Coster 1999; Owen 1998; Sterk 1999). In addition, the streets are one place in which gendered power relations play out (Miller 1995; 2008). For example, women in the drug economy most often remain in subordinate or peripheral positions and often acquire access to roles through their relationships with men (Fagan 1994; Maher and Hudson 2007; Miller 1995). However, while substantial research demonstrates their continued subordination, many women who are engaged in street life believe in their independence and efficacy within a street culture (Maher and Daly 1996; Maher and Hudson 2007; Miller 1995; Steffensmeier 1983; Stewart, Schreck, and Simons 2006). For women reentering the community after incarceration, race, gender, and power dynamics continue to shape the negotiation of neighborhood life (Huebner, DeJong, and Cobbina 2010; O’Brien 2007). When female prisoners return to the community, they, like men, return primarily to disadvantaged neighborhoods. The added stigma of being a female offender may make it more difficult to feel accepted and to access resources. As Beth Richie argues, “the sense of being marginalized within the context of a disenfranchised community has a profound impact on the ability of the women to successfully reintegrate into it” (2001, 383).

Many female prisoners have experienced victimization and trauma, often at the hands of family members (Chesney-Lind 2002; Gaarder and Belknap
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They are much more likely to have been physically or sexually abused by family members or intimates as children and as adults than male prisoners (Harlow 1999; McDaniels-Wilson and Belknap 2008). Abusiveness and violence is often related to additional problems and disruptions in the home. Both male and female prisoners reporting abuse were more likely to also report that their parent(s) abused drugs or alcohol or had been incarcerated; similarly, those who had been abused reported higher illegal drug and alcohol use themselves (Harlow 1999). While the relationship between abuse and substance use is true for both male and female prisoners, these findings are more pronounced for women (Harlow 1999; Makarios 2007). The relationship between a dysfunctional or violent home life and later offending also is gendered. In some cases, involvement with the criminal justice system is a direct result of childhood victimization, as in the case of a runaway who flees an abusive home environment (Chesney-Lind 2002). In other cases, the connection may be more indirect. Girls often are more closely supervised and encouraged to spend more time in the home and with family than boys, so the behavior of relatives may be particularly important to their development, including their initiation into drug use and criminal activity (Blee and Tickamyer 1995; Bottcher 2001; M. Brown 2006; Covington 1985; Kane 2000). Because relationship goals are often more important for many girls and women than boys and men, problems in family relationships have a greater impact on them (Covington 1985). Given their high rates of abuse by family members, adult relationships with families of origin may be particularly fraught for female offenders, prisoners, and former prisoners, though they often rely on family members to care for their children while incarcerated (Hagan and Coleman 2001; Swann and Sheran Sylvester 2006). In addition, girls and women are socialized to see themselves as caregivers and often remain loyal to their parents and other relatives, even when those relatives were abusive, neglectful, or criminally involved (Gilfus 1992; O’Brien 2001).

The impact of structural disadvantage on criminal offending is particularly true for African American women (Hill and Crawford 1990). Crime, drug use, and violence are widespread in the neighborhoods from which female prisoners are drawn and to which they return. These neighborhoods also tend to have high rates of economic disadvantage and to be communities of color. Like men, women in these neighborhoods are affected by structural conditions that shape the nature and extent of their offending (Anderson 1999; Baskin and Sommers 1998; Hill and Crawford 1990; O’Brien 2007; Reckdenwald and Parker 2008; Simpson 1991; Sterk 1999). Rates of female offending and recidivism are related to the financial instability of women, especially single mothers in poor urban areas (Holtfreter, Reisig, and Morash...