

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Lempert, Lora B. *Women Doing Life: Gender, Punishment and the Struggle for Identity*. New York: New York University Press, 2016. 305 pp., \$27.00 paper (9781479827053)

Lora Lempert's *Women Doing Life* should be considered amongst the foremost masterpieces of feminist criminology. She skillfully describes how 72 women (five main research participants) come to terms with their imprisonment, develop individual meaning, and exercise agency while serving life without parole inside a Michigan prison. In keeping with studies related to female criminality (e.g. Maher, 1996) and ethnographic studies more generally, she places the women's experiences alongside larger scholarly debates of structure and agency, gender, race, and the carceral state.

Lempert borrows from existing literature (e.g. Owen 1998) to describe how institutional policies and prison staff *fundamentally* fail to consider how the triple jeopardy of intersectional inequalities (race, gender, and class) and difficult life hardships – including childhood trauma, mental illnesses, and addictions - contribute to female criminality. Indeed, people who commit violence are statistically overrepresented as being victims of immeasurable life traumas, including difficult histories of personal victimization. A large segment of the women in Lempert's research grew up in acute poverty, have suffered from extensive mental health issues, did not have the means to attend post-secondary education, could not secure steady employment, and were lifelong victims of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse from a procession of men in their lives.

Lempert's work is impressive for several reasons. Most notably, how she gained such comprehensive access including navigating the politics of research ethics boards and gaining research access from the prison system - to conduct research with female prisoners, undoubtedly one of the most oppressed and hard-to-reach populations in the United States. Additionally, Lempert employs a robust ethnographic methodology and used several data collection techniques, drawing from focus groups, life-course interviews, and from a group of women who provided her with two-week detailed diary entries; which allowed her to unmask the ongoing dialectical tensions between agency and structure.

Women Doing Life draws from and adds to feminist criminological literature in two meaningful ways. First, Lempert challenges the male-dominated carceral system that mainly strives to arrest and incarcerate men, predominately African-American men. In fact, the women's prison for Lempert's research site previously held violent men who were not deemed responsible for their crimes because of their significant mental health issues. Therefore, a large segment of the correctional staff in Lempert's study were solely trained to manage men who suffered from extensive mental health issues and were thus not properly equipped to work with the unique needs of women incarcerated for life. This also included women who had to come to terms with *inevitable fate* that they would die in prison - which lends credence to Patricia Carlen's (2002) famous statement that, 'Women are punished as if they are men'. Second, Lempert nurtured a more inclusive and less researcher-dominated environment. Indeed, it was the *women* serving life sentences who structured the topics the women discussed in the focus groups. The women spoke at length about themes that were important to them, such as navigating the reality of being imprisoned for life, especially for juvenile and younger women, and racial tensions and stereotypes between African-American and Caucasian women.

The chapters '*Actively doing life*' and '*eating the life sentence elephant*' represents the most important chapters in the book insofar as they detail how the women create personal meaning and how they rationalize and navigate their histories of victimization and criminality. Lempert describes how women must come to terms with how they will never leave the institution, how they must restructure their values in accordance with the prison inmate code and institutional rules, and with the inevitable collapse of their relationships with friends and family on the outside and develop new relationships with the other women on their units. Perhaps most importantly, Lempert highlights how the women must *create a counter-narrative* to destigmatize their master status(es) as murderer(s), criminal(s), and inmate(s) from the other women, the correctional officers, wider societal forces, and from themselves. *Joyce*, one of Lempert's research participants, exemplifies this perspective when she said, '*The woman I am today mourns the girl I was when I did this*'.

Joyce's statement highlights the women's ability to exercise agency and to resist the system. Lempert brilliantly criticizes how the prison system and wider society reduces the sums of the women's worth to one irremediable act, such as an impulsive decision to kill their male partners in the hopes of ending years of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse or their role as an accomplice to a murder. The women's resistant strategies are important to prison literature insofar as it places a metaphorical knife in the heart of structural-based arguments embedded in specific strands of penal

literature, such as Michel Foucault's (1977) claim that prisons represent a totalizing 'machinery of power' that seeks to constitute 'docile bodies'. Contrarily, while prisons are undoubtedly oppressive spaces defined by race, gender, and class inequality, and serve numerous normatively immoral socio-political ends, Lempert details how prisons do not surveil and control every individual action. On the contrary, prisoners are not *completely* devoid of agency given that the women make daily choices that are structured by correctional officers and institutional rules. These structures limit the women's daily choices and actions, but the women nonetheless exercise considerable agency on a daily basis. For instance, a subset of the women in her Lempert's site established an illegal drug trade, engaged in prohibited intimate relations with other women, and initiated violence against other female inmates and the staff.

Lempert's book provides a nuanced perspective to the lives, challenges, and agency of women imprisoned for life inside a Michigan prison. Her work is impressive and presents much-needed insights into the everyday lived experiences of female inmates. In keeping with her steadfast feminist goal of providing women a voice in her research, Lempert details the women's many policy recommendations in her concluding chapter. The women offered many recommendations for change, including their desire for more programming and educational opportunities, gender-specific training for officers that considers the effects of childhood emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, as well as a more accountable system for officers who commit sexual abuse and unwarranted physical assault against the women, more frequent and extended visits with their children, and reforms to mandatory minimum sentencing.

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