

THE DEVELOPMENT OF COPING STRATEGIES IN FEMALE INMATES WITH LIFE SENTENCES

A Brief Summary of a Dissertation

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The number of women in prison is increasing, as is the number of women serving long-term sentences. From 2003 to 2004 the number of women serving time in prison nation-wide grew from 100,384 to 103,310, an increase of 2.9%, while the number of men serving time in prison only increased 2.0% (Harrison & Beck, 2005). However, even though the number of prisoners is increasing, the amount of programming for female inmates is not. Moreover, many of the existing programs such as those which help inmates cope with life in prison, have been designed for men, not women (Flanagan, 1995). Although there has been limited research on female inmates, there is no research specifically focusing on women serving life sentences. Currently, no research studies have focused on how female inmates cope and adapt to a life sentence or the development of programs or curriculum to aid in this coping process.

In this study, ten female inmates serving life sentences at the Ohio Reformatory for Women were interviewed. They were asked about the ways in which they cope with the stressors of prison life, how they came to term with their life sentences, and what types of programs would be most effective in helping female lifers adjust to their sentence. It was found that the inmates who used more coping strategies had a more positive self-concept which aided in their adjustment to prison. The interviewees overwhelmingly stated that they needed a program that was specific to the needs of female inmates serving life sentences. The majority of the female inmates thought that a mentoring program in which older inmates serving life sentences were paired with newly admitted inmates serving a life sentence would be the most helpful.

Several of the female inmates who were interviewed had specific ideas for development and implementation of a mentoring programs. They believed that staff members, specifically from the mental health department at the prison, should oversee the program. The inmates also suggested that current lifers should participate in training sessions before they are allowed to be mentors.

The interviewees commented that there might be some difficulties with a mentoring program. First, they stated that newly admitted inmates serving life sentences are classified as maximum security while the interviewees generally are classified as minimum security. Maximum-security inmates have restricted movement and may have difficulty attending programs. One female inmate suggested that the staff leaders of the mentoring program would have to work with the prison administration to coordinate times when mentors could visit mentees. Another potential problem is that prison administration may be fearful that the close relationship between the mentor and mentee may become devious and that the inmates may be up to no good, which could cause extra work for the prison staff. Although this may be true, mentors could facilitate adjustment and actively decrease problems with newly admitted inmates serving life sentences. Owen (1998) proposes that most female inmates serving ten years or more go through an adjustment phase or rebellious period prior to settling down to do their time. In fact, among the interviewees, the amount of disciplinary actions decreased sharply after the first five years in prison. Therefore, a mentoring program that would help newly admitted female inmates serving life sentences adjust to prison life faster may decrease the amount of disciplinary actions and extra work for the prison staff.

This study focused exclusively on female inmates serving life sentences, new stressors and coping strategies were identified which were not in the literature. This information can now be used to fully understand these inmates and their treatment needs. Some critics may wonder why there should be a program to help inmates with life sentences adjust to prison. They may wonder why should time, money, and energy be spent on inmates who have committed violent crimes and may never be released from prison. The answer to this question is dependent on the reader's philosophy of crime and punishment: rehabilitation, deterrence, or retribution. This researcher believes that rehabilitation should be the purpose of incarceration and therefore lifers deserve programming to aid in the adjustment to their new environment. Moreover, after they have adjusted to prison, lifers often set the norms and carry the culture of the prison. They are trusted by staff and often informally keep order within the prison. Therefore, it is beneficial to the prison administration to aid these inmates in their identity development so that they can move from acting out to being leaders in the prison population. Even though these women have committed violent crimes, after they have adjusted to prison they are often seen as model prisoners and leaders by prison staff and by other prisoners. They are often committed to service, inside and outside of the prison. With guidance and support from the prison administration, these women could aid other women prisoners and assist in the development of more effective prison and prevention programs.

-This is a brief summary of the doctoral dissertation completed by Sherri Roscher, for the partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of doctor of psychology at Wright State University School of Professional Psychology. For the full text of this research please see the completed dissertation listed in the references or contact the author at s.browning06@gmail.com.

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