

The psychological assessment of women in prison

Considerable discussion has been devoted to the sexism and scientific error of generalizing and applying to female offenders the research literature, assessment instruments and therapeutic programs developed for male offenders.⁽²⁾

It has been more difficult to solve this problem in the field of corrections (compared with other disciplines) because of the comparatively small number of women in prison - only 7% of provincially sentenced and 2% of federally sentenced offenders are women.⁽³⁾ Because of these small numbers, relatively little research information on female offenders has been available.

In Canada, correctional planning and programs have attempted to address the problem. For example, *Creating Choices: The Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women*⁽⁴⁾ is having a major effect. In addition, there is now more literature available on programs and therapy for women in prison - a recent literature review had 394 references.⁽⁵⁾

Yet, despite this increase in information, there is still relatively little discussion or development of appropriate assessment methods and instruments for use with female inmates. Progress in this area has been limited to a general call for more appropriate tools and methodology⁽⁶⁾ *and the very occasional example of an assessment instrument used with incarcerated women.*⁽⁷⁾ Psychological assessments The psychological assessments completed at U the Prison for Women in Kingston have, in practice, been based on a file review, an assessment interview, and psychometric testing using instruments validated and "normed" on community samples of women (rather than men).

Areas typically assessed by these instruments include those generally identified as relevant to women's offences: interpersonal and relationship issues, aggression, assertiveness skills, depression, alcohol and substance abuse, post-traumatic and dissociative problems, and symptoms of sexual abuse or assault.

However, this process and some of these instruments are still traditional in approach. This is a problem because they focus primarily on identifying problem areas and place the psychologist or professional in the role of expert on the life experiences of another individual.

As a result, the process is often viewed negatively by the women it is supposed to help. In addition, this approach contradicts a basic tenet of feminist therapy - equalizing power between the assessor or therapist and the client.⁽⁸⁾ Current approach At the Prison for Women, two psychological reports are normally written for most women: an intake needs assessment and a National Parole Board report. These reports have somewhat different functions.

The intake assessment should, ideally, provide women with some personal insight and should be useful to anyone who works with that individual, either therapeutically or from a case-management perspective.

The assessment should, therefore, be written to provide background information on the inmate, as well as to create some understanding of her current concerns and of the personal and social context surrounding her offence.

Although approximately 88% of women want to work with a counsellor,⁹ many will experience a lengthy waiting period between the intake assessments and the start of therapy. It is important, therefore, to view the intake assessments as a form of short-term intervention that can be useful in and of itself.

Parole Board assessments, on the other hand, address the needs of the woman related to her risk of reoffending once she is released into the community. Skills and Needs Inventory In an effort to shift the focus of assessment from simply problem identification toward a more holistic model of women's strengths and needs, the "Skills and Needs Inventory" was developed (an example of this inventory is included here). Its use is currently being piloted.

Table 1

<p>Please answer the following questions on blank paper. This is your opportunity to explain in your own words what your strengths and skills are, as well as what things you may want to help with.</p>
<p>If you have a prior criminal history, please answer questions 1-7. Otherwise, answer questions 4-7 only.</p>
<p>1) Describe one or two times in your life in which you did not offend for a period of one year (e.g. when, where)</p>
<p>2) During these one (or more) year periods, describe what was happening with</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● relationships (spouse, partner, children, parents) ● work/school ● money ● substance abuse (drugs, alcohol, prescription drugs)
<p>3) How did you feel about yourself (positive and negative) during these times in which you were not experiencing legal problems?</p>
<p>4) List the ways in which you have coped (positive and negative) in the past with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● conflict with others ● substance use (drugs, alcohol, prescription drugs) ● money ● work/money ● depression ● anger ● family ● racism (if applicable)
<p>5) List three things you like about yourself.</p>
<p>6) List three things you feel you need to work on or need help with</p>
<p>7) List the ways you feel you can best manage to avoid reoffending. What help would you like to accomplish this?</p>

The inventory is a series of questions related to coping strategies (positive and negative) used while in and out of conflict with the law. It asks women to describe their needs and strengths and the type of help they would like to receive. The inventory can be completed by an interviewer when a woman has a low level of literacy.

This approach provides women with a greater opportunity for direct input into the assessment report by allowing them to use their own words. It also recognizes their expertise on their own experience. Sections of the woman's writing can be incorporated into the report, quoted directly or appended in full along with the psychologist's report.

Because the assessment addresses coping strategies, it is perceived as constructive and is therefore likely to be more useful to the women themselves. This approach contrasts with one in which women are provided with a summary of the traumas they have survived and their resulting personal problems. The inventory can provide the more rounded picture many women expect from a psychological assessment.

Further, when traditional assessments are made of women in prison - several of whom have experienced many personal traumas along with economic, social, gender and racial discrimination - over-identification of individual problem areas too easily becomes the focus.⁽¹⁰⁾

Many authors¹¹ warn psychologists and other workers involved with incarcerated women to be aware of the biases present in the traditional model of "pathologizing" or evaluating women in prison as deviant, abnormal or mentally ill¹² because their behaviour has violated gender-role norms.

It is vital, therefore, that the assessment address links between social, cultural and economic factors and the individual woman's life experience.

For example, self-destructive and self-limiting behaviours are often present in survivors of extensive abuse, and these are better looked at as coping strategies and are best understood within this larger, background context.¹³

The Skills and Needs Inventory allows for a description of such coping strategies, along with other adaptive strategies. This can help the women and correctional and therapeutic staff focus on strengthening the women's adaptive skills to reduce the use of self-destructive strategies. Discussion So far, feedback on the Skills and Needs Inventory and its method has been extremely positive, and psychologists have benefited from a wealth of material that might not have been gleaned from assessment interviews.

It may be that the opportunity to privately sit, think and write about oneself results in richer, more detailed and more insightful information than would be possible from just an interview.

As well, the perceived need of many women to defend themselves from attack, criticism or abuse is heightened by many of the processes they encounter in the criminal justice system. With this method, the experience is more under the woman's control, arouses less anxiety, and therefore may produce more useful and relevant information.

In fact, writing about one's life experiences and background has been widely used as therapeutic treatment for survivors of abuse⁽¹⁴⁾ and as a therapeutic program for incarcerated women.⁽¹⁵⁾

The use of a woman's own words and recognition of her as the expert on herself are also widely accepted in feminist and participatory research⁽¹⁶⁾ - specifically for battered women⁽¹⁷⁾ and women in prison⁽¹⁸⁾ - and generally inform feminist theory and practice.⁽¹⁹⁾

It is our hope that this general approach and this philosophy will be applicable to assessment procedures as well. The benefits of using the woman's own words to inform counsellors, case-management officers, parole officers and National Parole Board decision makers will have to be examined as the practice becomes more frequent. The method may also be useful to those involved in other assessment roles with women in conflict with the law.

The Skills and Needs Inventory will likely undergo revision when more feedback is available. As well, the use of the inventory or similar methods does not preclude the use of more standard instruments and traditional methodology.

In fact, to conform to the widely accepted standards and procedures for psychological assessments, we will still require psychometric scales and instruments with norms and validity data for women, verification and review of file information, and the psychologist's clinical assessment.

It is also anticipated that as we obtain more knowledge of female offenders, assessment tools will change to reflect new developments. In the meantime, the Skills and Needs Inventory gives clinicians at the Prison for Women a tool to further understand women in prison, while at the same time giving those women an opportunity to voice their self-knowledge.

This brings us closer to matching the assessment process with the prevailing tenets of feminist therapy and with the spirit of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women.

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- (4)Creating Choices: Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women.
- (5)Kendall, Literature Review of Therapeutic Services for Women in Prison.
- (6)Currie, Developing Tools for the Study of the Female Offender: A Review of the Literature.
- (7)L. Lightfoot and L. Lambert, *Substance Abuse Treatment Needs of Federally Sentenced Women - Technical Report 1* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1991).
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- (18)Currie, Developing Tools for the Study of the Female Offender: A Review of the Literature. See also Kendall, Program Evaluation of the Therapeutic Services at Prison for Women. And see Kendall, Literature Review of Therapeutic Services for Women in Prison. And see Creating Choices: Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women. And see Heney, Report on Self-injurious Behaviour in the Kingston Prison for Women. And see S. Pollack, *Opening the Window on a Very Dark Day: A*

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