

Rendering Invisible Punishments Visible: Using Institutional Ethnography in Feminist Criminology

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Abstract

As the pendulum swings away from mass incarceration, feminist criminologists must be alert to the ways in which forms of invisible punishment continue to oppress and marginalize crime-processed women. Institutional ethnography is a mode of inquiry that examines work processes and how they are coordinated, often through texts and discourses. Through illustrative examples from a sample of formerly incarcerated women in post-realignment California, we demonstrate institutional ethnography's importance as a feminist research tool that places the reentry work of crime-processed women in conversation with the invisible punishments imposed on them after and in lieu of incarceration.

Keywords

women's incarceration and reentry, carceral realignment, institutional ethnography

Introduction

As American penal polices increasingly rely on “alternatives to incarceration,” feminist criminologists must pay attention to less visible forms of punishment and the ways in which they marginalize and stigmatize individuals, contributing to the decay of families and communities. While these forms of punishment are subtler than incarceration—and on their face, less intrusive and destructive—they extend the

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time and spaces into which punishment can be carried out. We propose institutional ethnography (D. Smith, 1987, 1990, 2005) as an analytic framework to hold this new punishment regime accountable. We demonstrate the institutional ethnographic approach by placing the reentry work of crime-processed women in conversation with the invisible punishments¹ that the state imposes after and instead of incarceration. We show how institutional ideologies tend to recognize as legitimate some forms of work and not others (DeVault, 2006), thus hindering women's reintegration into their communities.

We build on the important contributions feminist criminologists have made in this vein by bridging their work with that of institutional ethnographers who have studied other aspects of women's work. Institutional ethnographers conceptualize work not just as actions done in exchange for a paycheck but rather as anything people need to do "to sustain themselves, their connections of mutual care and dependence, and the activities that nurture and educate a next generation" (DeVault, 2008, p. 5). Work activities are considered to be the basis of social life. As such, an institutional ethnography takes a specific lived experience and the work processes therein as entry point (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; DeVault, 2006). The techniques of institutional ethnography demonstrate work processes and how they are coordinated, often through texts and discourses (DeVault, 2006). This approach stems from Marx's analysis of political economy (D. Smith, 1987) and develops "the notion of class as a set of practices which organize relations among people" (Ng, 1996, p. 22). We argue that the application of this perspective is a feminist research imperative in our era of shifting penal policies.

In the inaugural volume of *Feminist Criminology*, Chesney-Lind (2006) suggested that feminist criminologists are now functioning within a "politics of backlash" in which crime policies are at the forefront of promoting systems of social control that systematically erase the rights of women and people of color. A further complication is that the *politics of backlash* is now in tension with a *politics of necessity*: Financially, we are now suffering from the hangover from our 30-year binge on imprisonment as our preferred form of punishment. As aftershocks of the recent economic crisis are felt across the country, many states have sought to reduce their prison populations with an eye toward reducing spending. Recent evidence suggests the punishment pendulum may be swinging away from mass incarceration, toward community supervision (probation and parole), other "alternatives to incarceration,"² and the revision of punitive policies such as mandatory minimum sentences for some drug crimes (N. Porter, 2013).

Nowhere has the financial necessity to end our addiction to mass incarceration been felt so severely as in California, which "realigned" its prison system in 2011 with the passage of Assembly Bill 109 (A.B. 109), the Criminal Justice Realignment Act. As a result of rampant prison overcrowding and unnecessary prisoner deaths, the Supreme Court determined that prisoners' lack of access to adequate health care violated the Eighth Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment. *Brown v. Plata* (2011), and the subsequent restructuring of California's criminal system, has shifted thousands of prisoners from state to county custody. Many of these prisoners now serve out their sentences in local jails, while some are released on community supervision under probation.

This shift in correctional policy points to a critical time for feminist scholarship. Chesney-Lind's (2002) observation that punitive arrest policies have led to the "emergence of vengeful equity" for girls and women holds true. Reverberations of this trend can be seen throughout the "crime-processing system."³ Although they still constitute a small percentage of the incarcerated population in the United States, adult women continue to be its fastest-growing segment (Mauer, 2013).⁴ Furthermore, although women only account for about 10% of all prisoners, they are more than 25% of individuals under noncustodial supervision (Haney, 2010, p. 15). From 1995 to 2006, the growth rate of women on probation or parole far outpaced that of men, increasing by an astounding 56% (Glaze & Bonczar, 2007; Morash, 2010, p. 3). More women than ever are now under some form of social control due to criminal involvement.

Simultaneously, drops in incarceration rates⁵ across the United States can partially be explained by the efforts of financially taxed states to find less expensive ways of punishing offenders. In several states, prisons are closing, and sentencing changes—particularly for drug offenses—mean that many individuals convicted of low-level offenses do not see a prison cell at all and rather serve out their sentences either in jail or in a growing nexus of "community corrections" programs (N. Porter, 2013). Critical social scientists (Haney, 2010; Miller & Rose, 2008) have conceptualized the boom of the community corrections industry as an example of "government at a distance."

Haney (2010) describes the decentralization of the social policy arm of the government as characterized by both vertical and horizontal distancing. Decisions about public programming have shifted vertically from the federal to the state and local levels, affecting both public funding and social service delivery. On a horizontal plane, increased decentralization at the local level means that state policy is increasingly carried out through "public-private partnerships." Non-profits, faith-based organizations, and other non-governmental entities now carry out what has traditionally been government work, through contracts and grants (Haney, 2010; see also S. Smith & Lipsky, 1993).

Likewise, a growing prisoner reentry industry has developed as an extension of state social control. Critical scholars have argued that this only perpetuates the fundamental social and economic disparities that produced American mass incarceration in the first place (Wacquant, 2010). In line with this thinking, Beckett and Murakawa (2012) have theorized a "shadow carceral state" in which non-criminal institutions have become "hybridized" as annexed sites of punitive power. They caution against the widespread use of alternatives to incarceration, recalling Cohen's (1979) vision of "the punitive city," in which lines are blurred between rehabilitation and punishment and between freedom and confinement (see also Lynch, 2001).

Based on an inquiry grounded in institutional ethnography and conducted by the first author in post-realignment California, we examine the work women carry out in the course of reentering society from carceral settings. We describe the work of reentry as it has been discussed in the academic literature and as it has been carried out by the women whose experiences serve as the standpoint for this article. We then focus on a particularly fundamental task of prisoner reentry: finding a home. Exploring what this task means to the women carrying it out, we argue that there is a profound disjuncture

between the actual “work” formerly incarcerated women do to find a home and what the prevailing systems and discourses recognize as a legitimate part of this reentry work. We situate this work among the “ruling relations”⁶ involved in this process, such as the discourses and narratives that construct formerly incarcerated women in ways that impede not only their reentry work but also the work of the professionals enlisted to help them. We argue that these forms of ruling render a social setting in which invisible punishments are unchecked and unrecognized. We conclude with a discussion of the institutional ethnographic approach of mapping and its potential to inform policy and programming.

The Work of Reentry

The problematic⁷ guiding the research described here is the everyday experience of “women’s work” (D. Smith, 1987) in the prisoner reentry process. Although institutional ethnographers initially emphasized the types of work done by parents and caregivers (Griffith, 1995; D. Smith, 1987), many other forms of work have since been examined.⁸ Institutional ethnographers are concerned with work that paid employees undertake that is outside their formal job description, as well as “extra work taken up by those marked as ‘different’ to facilitate their inclusion in workplace and community, [and] the work that clients do to access social services” (DeVault, 2008, p. 6).

Formerly incarcerated people occupy a wide range of unrecognized work spaces. This unrecognized work is associated with societal expectations and assumptions based on race, gender, class, physical and mental ability, and criminal status, among other positionalities. Because they are marked as different by their criminal records, formerly incarcerated women must do additional work to be included in work and community settings. As poor women of color, and as women who disproportionately have serious health and mental health needs (Acoca, 1998; Covington & Bloom, 2006; Maeve, 1999; Owen & Bloom, 1995), formerly incarcerated women must navigate and access a wide range of social service and social control institutions in the course of the reentry process (Richie, 2001). This comes in addition to coping with the stigma of being a former prisoner (Schram, Koons-Witt, Williams, & McShane, 2006).

Bergseth, Jens, Bergeron-Vigesaa, and McDonald’s (2011) survey of community-based service providers who encounter formerly incarcerated women as a subset of their clientele points to the significance of these types of work. Providers noted that the women are overwhelmed at the prospect of simultaneously reestablishing multiple facets of life on the outside: employment, housing, sobriety, family relationships, and mental and physical health care. Managing these tasks, considered necessary to successfully transition from prison to community, proves extremely difficult for most women. The authors conclude that the reentry process is ill-conceived as mutually exclusive categories of need or as a list of tasks to do when one is released from incarceration. Rather, the demands placed on reentering women are interwoven with one another.

In the context of shifting carceral policy, institutional ethnography can add nuance to current conceptions of the burden that crime-processed women shoulder. As we

discuss in detail below, women must manage various forms of work within a regime of invisible punishments. Because of government decentralization and the mismatch of priorities of the various community supervision and social service organizations scrambling to meet the increased demand created by California's realignment (Petersilia & Snyder, 2013), formerly incarcerated women have a daunting slate of work tasks as they attempt to cope with the shortfalls of the new carceral system.

Method

In March of 2012, 6 months after California's realignment took effect, the first author began volunteering with a small, community-based reentry program that provides services for women coming home from prison or jail. Although situated in a large metropolitan region of California, the program was the only one of its kind for women in the area. The program's clients, social work interns, and staff served as the first author's "anchor group" (DeVault, 2008)⁹ in exploring the wider institutional context in which reentering women work.

Women were enrolled in the reentry program either by self-referral¹⁰ while still in prison or through parole or probation referral on release. Of the women who participated in this project ($N = 24$), two thirds were on or had recently completed parole ($n = 16$). The remainder were on "post-release community supervision," under county probation¹¹ ($n = 8$) as a result of realignment. Although it prides itself on its grassroots, community-based position, the reentry program is also part of the growing ranks of non-profits in the decentralized regime that derive a substantial portion of their operating budgets from government contracts, such as with county probation and state parole. Clients typically reside in one of the program's three "sober living homes"¹² for approximately 1 year, but may continue to receive services beyond this period. Women may reside there with their children, and during the study, several women took advantage of this in the process of regaining custody of their children.

Institutional ethnographers typically select cases for study based not on the potential for generalizability but rather on the richness of experiential accounts (Sévigny, 2012). After spending a few weeks observing the women at each of the homes, the first author purposively selected women for one-on-one interviews.¹³ Based on these interviews, she then selected a sub-sample for participant observation.¹⁴ The first author's level of involvement fell on the higher end of Spradley's (1980) continuum of researcher involvement and can be classified as active involvement. Functioning as a volunteer social worker advocate, she conducted observations while providing transportation for the program's clients to their various appointments, when necessary, advocating on clients' behalf^{15,16} and reporting back to the program's case manager regarding the outcome of these appointments for clients' case files.

Burawoy (1998) conceptualizes research not as an intrusion, the effects of which must be controlled for or minimized, but rather as an *intervention*, the effects of which reveal more to us about the institutions and personnel being interrogated. From his position within the institution that was the focus of his study, Burawoy (1998) accounted for his presence in the research context and produced "situational

knowledge of a specific social process” (p. 15).¹⁷ Following Burawoy, the first author tracked what she perceived to be the impact of her intervention as a White, female, former social worker and current doctoral student-researcher studying formerly incarcerated women, all but two of whom were women of color.

In line with Leverentz (2011), despite being positioned as a volunteer with the reentry program, the first author took care to distance herself from program staff while actively engaging with the women. This, along with long hours spent observing several of the women seeking services out in the community, allowed the first author to gain the trust of the women and to not be perceived as an authority figure. Many of the women came to rely on the first author in the crucial few months of reentry, as word quickly got out that she had a car and would gladly drive and accompany the women to their various appointments. Moreover, the topic of the first author’s research was immediately interesting to many of the women, who readily identified the gaps, disjunctures, and ironies explored here. Several women took active roles in the research without being asked, calling the first author when they had institutional appointments that they thought would be analytically interesting.

In interviews, the first author asked women to describe their daily lives by walking her through the tasks and activities of a typical day. She described these tasks as forms of work that women do to rebuild their lives post incarceration. Each of these activities was then explored further one by one. At the analysis phase, both authors examined interview transcripts to understand the various forms of work women undertook while navigating reentry—forms of work that we suspected would not be readily acknowledged as work by others. We then situated this work within the prevailing academic and popular discourses around poor, crime-processed women of color. We selected certain women’s experiences to illustrate the ruling relations of the reentry process and institutional ethnography’s analytic lens. The cases highlighted here are consistent with how other women described their experiences, but are not necessarily representative of the whole sample.¹⁸ In the next section, we demonstrate the invisible punishments associated with realignment as brought into focus through the lens of three key concepts from institutional ethnography: bifurcated consciousness, texts, and mapping.

Finding a Home: An Illustrative Example of Reentry Work in the Decentralized Regime

For the purpose of showing institutional ethnography’s usefulness, we consider here a crucial form of reentry work: obtaining housing. Discourses on housing and prisoner reentry tend to recognize housing for crime-processed people as important because it is a means through which to show compliance: Parole agents and probation officers must have an address for each of their supervisees to conduct visits and compliance checks. Having a permanent mailing address is viewed as an indication of stability and progression down the path to reintegration—transience signals that an individual is at risk of a return to incarceration (Petersilia, 2003).

Despite the fundamental and immediate importance of housing, its interconnectedness with other forms of reentry work—obtaining income, complying with community

supervision requirements, and reintegrating into family and community life—often hinders and delays women’s capacity to obtain permanent shelter. Each of these aspects of reentry work involves recognized and unrecognized forms of work. Recognized work is comprised of activities that correspond to official discourses. Unrecognized work typically falls into one of two categories: (a) tasks that are not officially recognized as work, such as many of the activities associated with mothering, or (b) practical activities that are necessary for a person’s well-being or even survival, but, because they don’t align with a dominant discourse, go unrecognized (D. Smith, 1987, 2005).

In addition to managing the challenges of unrecognized work, the reentry of formerly incarcerated women is rendered more difficult under California’s realignment. The everyday experiences of women doing reentry work in the context of shifting carceral policy reveal several barriers to achieving the basic task of finding a home. Managing these various challenges becomes yet another part of women’s reentry work. As we illustrate below, the demands and restrictions of multiple bureaucratic systems make it hard for women to secure shelter. In practical terms, it meant that the reentry program from which study participants were recruited served as a temporary home base while the women sought permanent housing.

Bifurcation of Consciousness in Women’s Reentry Work

Yasmine’s¹⁹ description of her first week post release (prior to finding the reentry program) reflects the conflicts that arise when only some forms of work are recognized by a ruling institution—in this case, by the multiple state agencies that women navigate when trying to secure a home. In the following passage, we hear²⁰ Yasmine’s dilemma between making a crucial first meeting with her parole agent and applying for the assistance she needs from the welfare office:

I got out of prison and I didn’t have anywhere to go. So I went and applied for [welfare]. I applied homeless, and they gave me a motel voucher. I stayed in a motel for a week, and I had an appointment to go see the [welfare] doctor. The same day my parole officer was supposed to come. She said she would come around 7 that morning and she never showed up, so when I went back to the [welfare] office, they told me that they were terminating my case and that they couldn’t get me another voucher. So then I had to go to my parole officer, because I couldn’t stay with my friend because she was on Section 8 and they kind of . . . [welfare] and Section 8 are kind of hooked up so I couldn’t stay there. So I went to her and I told her that I didn’t have a place to stay and she needed to find me somewhere to go. So she asked me did I want to go to a program? I told her no, but that’s somewhere to stay.

In this passage, we hear several different work activities that Yasmine undertook. Because she has a physical disability, to receive assistance, she needed to keep an appointment to see the welfare office’s medical doctor to verify that she was unable to work and thus did not need to participate in the welfare-to-work program. These work tasks conflicted with the demands placed on her by her parole agent, who needed to

verify where Yasmine was living. Unfortunately, Yasmine's situation conflicted with the rules and restrictions associated with Section 8 housing, which precluded her from finding shelter with a friend. In this way, Yasmine's experience illustrates a peculiar—but quite common—mismatch of governmental priorities: On one hand, the state seemingly wants her to succeed on the outside or it would not have released her in the first place. Yet in this instance, the parole, public housing, and welfare systems seemed to work against one another, not only by placing competing demands on her time but also by limiting her housing options. It would make sense for her parole agent to want Yasmine to obtain welfare aid as this will facilitate her getting stable housing, yet verification of her whereabouts for community supervision purposes is prioritized over financial assistance. This resulted in Yasmine going to a drug program that provided neither a safe nor a stable place for her to get back on her feet:

YASMINE: So I ended up at the program. And at first I really didn't want to be there because I've done a program. You know, I wasn't on drugs before I went to prison and I don't have no intentions of getting high. But . . . I became chief admin . . . I passed [all the steps to getting passes to leave the program] by going to my meetings and stuff, but I left. I wanted to leave. I was going to stay but they were in the program getting high and I would come back home and they'd have pints of vodka, smoking crack and crystal, and then one girl be shooting up dope and the day she did, she died.

MW²¹: In the program?

YASMINE: In the program. And come to find out, the counselor was the one selling the drugs.

MW: No!

YASMINE: Yeah. So I was like, "I just want to leave." I just couldn't do it no more.

MW: And this was the program that your parole officer told you to go to?

YASMINE: That my parole officer sent me to.

Yasmine is not blind to her difficulties or the irrationality of the rules that impede her capacity to find a safe home. Her experience is illustrative of what D. Smith (1974) calls a *bifurcation of consciousness*: "a disjunction between how women find and experience the world from their place and the concepts and theoretical schemes available to think about it in" (pp. 7-9). Typically, when their experiences do not fit the culturally established types, women learn to subordinate their own experiences in favor of the definitions imposed by the ruling discourse (D. Smith, 1974).

In her discussion with Yasmine, the first author recognized considerable ambivalence (Merton & Barber, 1976) over how she should address her situation. Arguably, she does not fully give into a dominant discourse, which would ascribe the lack of a home as reflecting Yasmine's personal failings. There is an obvious mismatch between the prevailing discourse and what actually transpires in everyday life: As part of the "official" reentry narrative, formerly incarcerated women should rely on the help and support of others.²² Yet, Yasmine is barred from accepting housing from

her friend. When referred to the drug treatment program, the irony is that, through her experience, she identified another contradiction between discourse and lived reality: The drug program violates the fundamental edict of addiction discourse, which posits that addicts must remove themselves from a context of drug use to get clean (McKim, 2008). Thus, Yasmine learns that the demands and discourses associated with the various institutions that she is navigating are inconsistent and sometimes contradictory.

Connecting Women's Reentry Work to Ruling Relations

The process of institutional ethnographic research has been likened to “grabbing a ball of string, finding a thread, and then pulling it out” (DeVault & McCoy, 2006, p. 20). Here, Yasmine's experience is our starting point—an available end of thread that connects us to processes elsewhere that are not visible to Yasmine herself. Perhaps the most fundamental contradiction that Yasmine confronted is traceable to the invisible punishment that she was forced to endure due to the decentralization of carceral policy. Hybridized, community-based programs, such as the drug treatment program Yasmine first went to and the reentry program where the first author later met her, have increasingly formed the foundation of alternatives to incarceration as well as post-release programming (Haney, 2010). This trend is continuing under California's realignment (Petersilia & Snyder, 2013). Many of these programs take the form of sober living homes, which when properly administered have been shown to facilitate long-term abstinence from substances and to increase employment and income (Jason, Olson, Ferrari, & Lo Sasso, 2006).

While such programs serve a clear purpose, the lack of oversight described by Yasmine means that an unaware community supervision agent might place women seeking stable housing in drug treatment programs that are unsafe. Yasmine's experience was not unique among the women interviewed for this study; another woman, Dawn, described feeling unsafe at the sober living home she went to when she was first released—the owner of the home yelled at her and called her derogatory names. Dawn called her parole agent within 2 hr of her arrival and demanded that she be moved somewhere else. Later, she found out that the home's contract with parole had been severed. For both Yasmine and Dawn, the invisible punishment of being forced to live in an unsafe place is an unintended consequence of the “government at a distance” model of punishment.

Despite increased reliance on sober living homes and similar programs, improving safety for the residents of such programs has not entered public discourse. Rather, during data collection for this project, an ordinance was under consideration with the local city council that would have eliminated most sober living programs altogether by prohibiting them in areas zoned for single-resident homes. The proposed ordinance, which was later rejected, was only the most recent instance of “Not In My Back Yard” (NIMBY) opposition to such programs (Heslin, Singzon, Aimiwu, Sheridan, & Hamilton, 2012). Simultaneously, the dominant discourse around realignment placed public safety at the forefront, with other interests at the margins.²³

As Jane, who is under A.B. 109 supervision, puts it, “Where are we going to go? The drug house down the street? . . . They don’t want us. It’s like they think we’re a menace to the neighborhoods. They want to put us downtown where all the drugs are.” In mentioning the “drug house down the street,” Jane hints at the already thin line between her and relapse: Drugs are available just down the street. Her words echo the sentiments of many women interviewed for this study: That the prevailing discourse of NIMBY means that they will be set up for failure and relapse into drug addiction.

Housing Work Done by Reentering Mothers

Mothering work has been shown to be both multi-faceted and institutionally coordinated by institutional ethnographers (Griffith & André-Bechely, 2008; D. Smith & Griffith, 1990) and feminist criminologists (Arditti & Few, 2006; Brown & Bloom, 2009). The difficulties associated with crime-processed women locating safe and stable housing link to another central aspect of reentry work: being able to care for children. For women who are mothers, having a home is viewed as an essential component of good motherhood (Connolly, 2000). This is particularly important because formerly incarcerated mothers are already perceived by society and themselves to be “maternally unorthodox”—they have broken both the law and gendered behavioral expectations (Brown & Bloom, 2009; McMahon, 1995, p. 264; Schur, 1983). Gabrielle’s experience clearly illustrates the tension between having a criminal record and becoming a mother. At the time the first author met her, Gabrielle had been out of prison and living at the reentry program for more than a year. She was a “lifer,” serving 16½ years for violent felonies before being released on parole. Despite the fact that she was expecting a child, Gabrielle was only able to obtain permanent housing once she had given birth:

They called me in and they had me do the process for the application for the Section 8. [The non-profit agency serving as intermediary for her application] ended up not submitting my application because the baby wasn’t born yet and they said because all my charges were felonies and they were all violent that they were afraid they were going to kick it back. So they were like, “wait ‘till the baby’s born, and then we’ll have more grounds to advocate on your behalf because now you do need housing because of your son.”

Gabrielle’s experience provides a glimpse into how needs are ranked and prioritized by the institutions that formerly incarcerated people must navigate. Although she was last involved in criminal behavior when she was 17 years old—almost 18 years ago at the time she was interviewed—because of her criminal history, Gabrielle is not considered a good candidate for housing until she has a child.²⁴ The intermediary agency, a non-profit organization that helps homeless individuals obtain housing, did not believe it could effectively advocate for Gabrielle until her son was born. Gabrielle later qualified—with no issue, and without the help of an intermediary²⁵—for a building-specific Section 8 voucher. Confused about her previous difficulty, Gabrielle remarked, “it’s been almost 17 years [since her last conviction] and so I guess it wasn’t

a problem because my application got approved.” It is unclear from our standpoint whether the invisible punishment associated with Gabrielle’s criminal history came from Section 8, or (more likely) from the intermediary, which may not have wanted to jeopardize its relationship with Section 8 by advocating for a “marked” applicant.

Jane’s invisible punishment is more transparent. Although the rent on the two-bedroom apartment that she would share with her husband and two young children was \$230, at the time the first author interviewed Jane, she was scrambling to come up with a \$1,345 security deposit and first month’s rent:

The way I figured it out is if I use all my cash aid this month, [my husband’s] cash aid, and the \$600 they’ll give me [one-time “homeless money” the county will give her for move-in costs], it’s not even gonna cover it. So I’m gonna have to go sell some of my WIC,²⁶ you know, to cover the rent . . . It’s a lot of money, especially for that to be the qualifications to get in there, to be homeless.

The irony of Jane’s situation is that, to provide a stable home for her children and to display compliance with her A.B. 109 requirements, she must engage in another form of criminal activity: selling her WIC benefits. This experience is fundamentally at odds with a prevailing discourse on mothering, which tasks women with privileging the safety and well-being of their children above all other concerns. Jane’s experience also contradicts the modern conception of what full rehabilitation involves: She needs to reject criminal thinking to fully reintegrate with society (Hannah-Moffat & Yule, 2011; McKim, 2008); yet, her circumstances force her to do exactly the opposite. Furthermore, Jane recognizes the mismatch between what she can reasonably be expected to afford for housing and what is being expected of her. She is determined to secure safe, permanent housing for her family and resolves to do “whatever it takes” to accomplish this goal, even if it means taking risks with potentially serious consequences.

Texts and Reentry Work

Institutional ethnographers frequently describe the ways in which institutional categories and ruling relations are “activated” in texts (Wilson & Pence, 2006). The institutional ethnographer looks at what texts make happen and how they coordinate social activities. Institutional ethnography places an emphasis on texts because they create a connection between what is specifically happening in local settings and the arrangements of the larger social world beyond. Through texts, we can focus on the specific activities of an institution and how these activities are coordinated both hierarchically and horizontally beyond a given institution. In the words of Smith (as interviewed in Widerberg, 2004), texts “create a juncture between the local and specific—books, papers for example, which are activated in local settings—and the extra-local and abstract. Texts hook you up beyond the local; they are not contained within the local setting” (p. 180). Texts abound in the reentry process, from housing applications to welfare eligibility forms and beyond. The following example illustrates these “text-work-text sequences” (D. Smith, 2005).

Crime-processed women are not alone in facing the constraints inherent in official texts that are “activated” in the work of reentry. Institutional ethnography has proven to be a powerful analytic lens through which to examine the work that professionals do (Campbell, 2008; de Montigny, 1995; Diamond, 1992). Here, we draw from an illustrative example of the textually mediated work carried out by frontline staff at community-based programs.²⁷ Marina is a former social worker at the reentry program and currently serves on its board of directors while working at a similar program in a neighboring city. In her own words, we hear how Marina’s work with formerly incarcerated women is shaped by the texts she must use in helping women apply for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI)²⁸ so that they can eventually find permanent housing:

M: If you are a person who has a disability and you have had medical care that documents the disability over time, it’s a lot easier to get benefits than if you are somebody who has been homeless or got it in prison . . . Part of the problem seems to be that when the disability evaluator evaluates the disability, if you said to them, “this person is schizophrenic,” they would disregard that, because that’s a diagnosis. You would have to say something like: “she came in the office and was looking at the wall and talking to it, like she was hearing something.”

MW: To describe the symptoms and not the diagnosis?

M: Right. Almost all clinicians use the shorthand of “damaged rotator cuff” not “they couldn’t reach . . .”

MW: “They couldn’t move their shoulder,” yeah.

M: (Laughs). Right. So . . . I try to get a history from them. A lot of the residents are very poor historians. A lot of them have had very little medical care. So I try to fill it out. There’s a section on the back for comments. I try to write a lot of comments. “She looked at the wall and heard it, seemed to hear it talking back to her.”

MW: Now, do you get records, their health records from prison?

M: No. There’s a big C file that comes, and it tells all about their crime, but the only thing it says is whether they were—in a prison you’re either CCCMS, or EOP, you know those categories?

CCCMS means you’re out in the yard. Something Case Management Services. And EOP means you’re more restricted in your housing, you’re seriously mentally ill. It means, something Outpatient Program. So we know if they’ve been that. If they were in one of those programs in prison, then they’re required as a condition of parole to go to the parolee outpatient clinic (POC). But if you admit that you have a mental illness when you’re in the institution, you’re restricted in a number of ways. So they try to not take their medication. So they may come out to us, clearly mentally ill, but not hooked up with POC, not taking medication, and not having a record that they’re mentally ill.

Smith’s (2005) concept of the “text-reader conversation” (pp. 104-105), illustrated through Marina’s words, helps us to understand how the act of reading and interacting

with a text (here, filling out a disability application) activates the text by bringing its message—and its ruling relations—to the local setting. Marina observes that homeless and formerly incarcerated women are at a disadvantage in qualifying for disability benefits, and that this makes her work much more difficult. She needs to learn how to fill out the texts involved in getting her clients the resources they need. Indeed, she later described her efforts to improve her “form-filling-out” skills by taking trainings on how to complete the SSI/SSDI applications.

By writing “a lot of comments,” Marina tries to triage what she perceives to be the text’s deficit: That it does not ask enough questions or does not ask the right questions. Ironically, Marina also indicates that when filling out these forms, she needs to learn how to document women’s actual experiences and not the abstracted ideological categories of diagnoses. This goes against Marina’s professional training as a clinical social worker. Thus, she recognizes the disjuncture between the official discourses of her work and the reality through which institutional rules and regulations are lived out.

Perhaps most importantly, Marina’s experience highlights a crucial deficit in the texts that follow a woman from prison to her post-release program, thus preventing the timely receipt of needed benefits. Women who are homeless and/or who have been incarcerated are “poor historians”—they may not remember their diagnoses, prescriptions, or other important information, or they may have had little or poor medical care in the past. Because it is commonly understood that women labeled mentally ill in prison have additional restrictions placed on them, women under-report their mental health statuses. This leaves workers like Marina to try to put together a puzzle with several missing pieces. Therefore, a key task of an institutional ethnographer is to identify these work processes and to map how they link up to (or are complicated by) work being done elsewhere. We turn to this task in our concluding section.

Conclusion: Toward a Map of Reentry Work

Predicting the best and worst outcomes of California’s realignment, Petersilia and Snyder (2013) write,

Investing in rehabilitation for lower-level offenders will reduce their recidivism, and over time, reduce the pressure on California to build more prisons, which takes money away from the education and work programs that might have helped offenders in the first place. (p. 267)

Feminist criminologists must play a lead role in ensuring that Petersilia and Snyder’s best-case scenario comes true. California’s restructuring has national implications for the future of our approach to punishment. More immediately, based on what we know about the nature of their criminal involvement, women will be overrepresented in the crime-processed population affected by California’s realignment (Owen & Mobley, 2012). We must hold these shifting policies accountable through our research, with women’s concerns at the forefront. As we have shown here, institutional ethnography provides a way of doing this.

Institutional ethnographers endeavor to reveal how people's activities are connected with ruling relations beyond their immediate experience. The institutional ethnographer's task is to discover these various relations and trace them out so that people can see how their lives and activities operate in concert with those of others (Grahame, 1998). As DeVault (2006) notes, "The approach is meant to offer the kind of 'map' that could help those working politically to see what they are up against and where they might want to apply pressure" (p. 295). Such mapping has been used, with powerful results, by researcher-activist Ellen Pence and her colleagues. Pence's work began by mapping the various work processes and texts involved in handling domestic violence cases (Pence, 2001). This map informed a coordinated intervention model (popularly known as the "Duluth Model"; Pence & McMahon, 1997) as well as safety and accountability audits designed to be used by a wide range of direct service practitioners to understand how their work is organized and coordinated (Praxis International Website, 2013).

This technique can be used to show connections between reentry work processes: The work that women do and how this links up to (or is complicated by) the work that others do elsewhere. It is beyond the scope of this article to map out the entire reentry process. To illustrate our point, we return to the women's experiences that formed the basis for this article. Home doesn't just mean shelter; it means a stable and safe place that is symbolic of full reintegration into society. Permanent housing serves as a foundation for getting a job, medical and mental health care, keeping up with community supervision demands, and reconnecting with family (O'Brien, 2001; Petersilia, 2003). Yet as our data show, the work that formerly incarcerated women do to find housing is conditioned by a wide range of state restrictions. Many of these restrictions are deliberate, as the rich literature on the collateral consequences of incarceration has documented (see, for example, Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002).

Others, however, are unintentional. We argue that such unintentional restrictions can be mitigated and that institutional ethnography offers a way to figure out how to do so. The work of the women who participated in this project frequently included managing the ways in which the demands placed on them by one institution may compete with the demands of another. Each institution seldom made allowances for the work that women needed to do elsewhere. In Yasmine's case, for example, we can reasonably assume that her parole agent did not intend for her to miss her appointment at the welfare office and thus have her case be terminated. Her parole agent also certainly did not intend to send Yasmine to a program in which drugs were being used.²⁹ Instead, it is an overarching lack of awareness and coordination of the work that others are doing elsewhere that makes Yasmine's situation especially difficult. For Marina, trying to piece together the puzzle of a formerly incarcerated woman's medical history is especially frustrating because the texts she needs to fill in missing information either do not exist or did not follow the woman from prison to the outside.

An institutional ethnographic inquiry into this process brings into view the "conceptual practices of power" (D. Smith, 1990) that systematically position homeless and crime-processed women at the back of the line for needed resources and services. As we have shown here, a map of formerly incarcerated people's reentry work, placed

in conversation with the work that others do elsewhere, must be a feminist research priority in this current era of punishment hybridization and carceral realignment.

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Notes

1. The term "invisible punishment" was first used by Mauer and Chesney-Lind (2002) and Travis (2002) to richly describe the collateral consequences of incarceration. The invisibility of the effects of incarceration has been noted by other scholars as well: Western and Pettit (2010) refer to the "invisible inequality" created by the concentrated and segregated nature of incarceration. Belknap's *The Invisible Woman: Gender, Crime, and Justice* (2007) powerfully describes the often invisible situations of women and girls in the crime-processing system. Here, we use the term specifically to highlight the ways in which, due to the economic and political consequences of mass incarceration, correctional policy in some jurisdictions is shifting away from incarceration to more diffuse (and therefore invisible) punishments in community settings.
2. Broadly defined, alternatives to incarceration typically include drug courts, mental health courts, victim-offender mediation (restorative justice), boot camps, halfway houses (also known as community correction centers or residential reentry centers), electronic monitoring/house arrest, community service, fines, and restitution (R. Porter, 2010).
3. Following Belknap (2007) and Potter (2006), wherever possible, we aim to avoid perpetuating the misnomer of the "criminal justice system." As Potter (2006) notes, "[j]ustice (original emphasis) implies that victims and offenders are treated justly and equally within the 'criminal justice system,' however, this is not always true, particularly with African American women" (footnote, pp. 120-121).
4. Feminist criminologists appear to be in agreement that there are two main explanations for this trend: That the "war on drugs" has been a war on women (Bush-Baskette, 1998), and that women's distinctive needs and experiences place them at particular risk of involvement with the crime-processing system (Covington & Bloom, 2006; Owen & Bloom, 1995).
5. It is well understood that the United States has the highest documented incarceration rate in the world and that people of color continue to be disproportionately represented in the crime-processing system (Mauer, 2013). However, the first decade of the 21st century has

seen a deceleration in the rate at which Americans are incarcerated: In 2010, there was a decline in U.S. prison populations for the first time since 1972 (Carson & Golinelli, 2013). This shift marks the reversal of a 30-year-long trend toward rapidly increasing rates of incarceration. While racial and ethnic disparities in incarceration persist, these patterns also seem to be changing (Carson & Golinelli, 2013; Mauer, 2013).

6. According to Frampton, Kinsman, Thompson, and Tilleczek (2006), “[r]uling relations demonstrate the connections between the different institutional relations organizing and regulating society” (p. 37). Institutional ethnographers describe ruling relations as mediated through a wide variety of texts—print, film, television, and so on—and by various governmental, corporate, professional, and academic groups. The ruling relations generated by these groups enable a sort of social organization that “generates specialized systems of concepts, theories, categories, [and] technical languages” (D. Smith, 1996, p. 47).
7. As Campbell and Gregor (2004) note, “Institutional ethnographers treat people’s lived experiences of the everyday world as the problematic of an investigation” (p. 46).
8. See, for examples, de Montigny, 1995; DeVault, 2008; Diamond, 1992; Ng, 1996; Pence, 2001; and Smith, 2006.
9. DeVault (2008) discusses the importance in institutional ethnography of having an “anchor group,” or touchstone, whose perspectives and experiences provide a standpoint for the research. As the researcher branches out and explores the processes occurring within the larger institutional context, he or she keeps in mind the effect of institutional actions on the anchor group.
10. The executive director of the reentry program is herself a formerly incarcerated woman. Many of the women interviewed for this study stated that they heard about the program through word-of-mouth or through mention of the program and the director in the popular media. Women found the director’s openness about her own experiences to be both comforting and inspiring, and many cited this as an impetus for enrolling in the program.
11. Although none of the A.B. 109-affected women interviewed understood this distinction (and in fact many thought that they were actually on parole), individuals released as a result of A.B. 109 are commonly referred to as “Post-Release Supervised Persons” (PSPs). PSPs are those individuals who have been transferred from state to county custody as a result of California’s realignment (A.B. 109).
12. Sober living homes are typically small facilities with a home-like setting that serve as transitional housing between either incarceration or a substance abuse treatment facility and permanent housing. Residents of a sober living program must maintain their sobriety and often are expected to regularly participate in Twelve-Step meetings (Heslin, Singzon, Aimuwu, Sheridan, & Hamilton, 2012).
13. Interviews were semi-structured and ranged in length from 45 to 90 min. Each woman was formally interviewed only once, wherever a quiet, private place could be found. Some interviews took place at the reentry program, in women’s bedrooms, or out in the backyard, while others took place at a nearby coffee shop. Informal follow-up interviews occurred during field observations. Formal interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed; informal interviews were documented in field notes.
14. Women were selected for observation based on the forms of reentry work in which they were currently engaged.
15. Institutional Review Board approval was in place. All informed consent procedures were strictly followed. The first author introduced herself to each woman as a doctoral student-researcher who also had two degrees and substantial work experience in social work. She

- obtained their consent to observe their experiences but also stated that she was willing and able to assist them in navigating any system, should they need or want help.
16. These were activities for which, as an under-resourced, community-based agency, the reentry program typically could not expend staff, thus often leaving the women to carry out this work on their own. During the academic school year, bachelor's-level social work interns would help with this, although they could not provide clients transportation to appointments—a major aspect of reentry work—because of school liability concerns.
 17. According to Burawoy (1998), his extended case method is compatible with Smith's (1998) "sociology of women" in that both begin by exposing the inadequacies of abstract, decontextualized social science (p. 6).
 18. Dorothy Smith (2005) tackles the issue of generalizability in institutional ethnographic research in this way: "Institutional ethnography addresses explicitly the character of institutions in contemporary society: that they are themselves forms of social organization that generalize and universalize across multiple local settings" (p. 42). In other words, the focus in institutional ethnography is not on individual experience but rather on how local settings connect up to other settings elsewhere. It is how these settings are socially organized that is the focus of institutional ethnographic inquiry.
 19. To protect the identities of the women interviewed for this project, pseudonyms were assigned prior to analysis and are maintained here.
 20. Quotes have been edited for readability.
 21. These initials indicate the first author, who conducted all interviews.
 22. Indeed, an important vein of the women's reentry literature has examined the importance of social and familial support, as well as potential pitfalls. See, for example, Richie (2001) and Leverentz (2006, 2011).
 23. Much of the initial concern for public safety stemmed from a misunderstanding of what realignment actually does: Many people believed that dangerous prisoners who were not fully rehabilitated were being "released early." In reality, only individuals convicted of non-violent, non-serious, and non-sexual offenses are considered, and they are shifted from state to local custody and not necessarily released. Those who are released are remanded to local "Post-Release Community Supervision" (county probation) programs instead of to state parole (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation [CDCR], 2012; Krisberg & Taylor-Nicholson, 2011; Spencer & Petersilia, 2013). For an example of such concern, see the *Los Angeles Times*' coverage of realignment (for example, Mehta, 2013).
 24. Based on research the first author did at the time of her interview with Gabrielle, there was no apparent reason for the intermediary agency to tell her that she would have been denied, given that her violent felony convictions were almost 20 years ago and that she had no drug convictions (Legal Action Center [LAC], 2013).
 25. The reentry program found the opportunity and helped Gabrielle apply.
 26. WIC stands for Women, Infants, and Children, and is a federal program that provides "supplemental nutrition" for low-income women with children up to age 5 (United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services Website, 2013).
 27. Future publications from this study will examine this work in greater depth, in addition to the work done within state institutions such as welfare, parole, and probation.
 28. To qualify for Supplemental Security Income (SSI), "a disabled or blind adult or child must meet all of the following categories: have limited income; have limited resources; be a U.S. citizen or national . . . and live in the United States." (Social Security Administration Website, 2013). Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), however, is a benefit paid

only to those who have worked long enough to have fully paid into Social Security. Thus, the vast majority of women encountered both by Marina and the first author were seeking benefits through SSI.

29. It is important to note here that empirical evidence indicates that community supervision officers who connect women to state-sponsored resources and services substantially reduce their female clients' odds of recidivism (Holtfreter, Reisig, & Morash, 2004; Morash, 2010).

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