
EVIE EVANS'S LIFE HISTORY: HER SOCIOLOGICAL SOJOURN FROM A LIFETIME OF CRIME TO A LIFE OF DIGNITY

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Introduction

Socially marginalized Black women are virtually unseen in America. For the most part they are rendered invisible. Under special circumstances, when they do come into view or attempt to be heard, they are often demonized, stigmatized, labeled as criminal, and subsequently imprisoned. Thus, they can legitimately be denied the truth of their experiences because they are marginal. The likelihood exists that large numbers of these women are imprisoned in their own hell long before and far beyond their prison sentences. A Black woman's entry into the criminal justice system is characterized by her struggles with poverty, illiteracy, substance abuse, mental illness, childhood sexual abuse, and an intricate web of life-threatening physical, psychological, racial, and social problems. Beneath these issues lies the painful reality that most, if not all of these women, are victims of early dislocation from family and school, the institutions of socialization that are expected to facilitate a rich and full participation in society. These alienated, uneducated, impoverished and misunderstood women usually seek refuge in the streets. Instead of finding love, compassion, and understanding, they find self-destructive ways to mask the pain of their meager existence including, but not limited to, drug abuse, sex work, self-mutilation, and other behaviors that constitute their pathways to crime and prison.

The disproportionate numbers of imprisoned Black women are only a manifestation of larger racial and social problems. Of the 139 million females in America, White females account for 71% and Black females account for 7% (Census Brief, 2000). Inversely, Black women comprise 48% of the female state prison population and White women comprise 33%. Black women have close to the same likelihood of serving time in prison as White men do – 3.6% compared to 4.4%, respectively (Bonczar & Beck, 1997). In a racialized judicial system, 62% of White women are granted probation compared to 27% of Black women (Greenfield & Snell, 1999).

Methodology

The literature is replete with research written about Black women whose life experiences include criminal histories, drug addiction, incarceration, and a profusion of serious social problems (Freedman, 1981; Moyer, 1984; Myers, 1993). Many of these investigations fail to do the obvious, and that is to relinquish to Black women what is rightfully theirs – their voices. As such, a conscious decision was made to situate

Black women at the center of analysis in this work. The life history approach provides a forum for Black women to recount their stories in their own voices, in their own space, and in their own time. Furthermore, this methodological approach is based on the desire to paint a holistic portrait of Evie Evans's life experiences. Her story becomes increasingly relevant as women with similar experiences share their realities of pain, despair, fear, and hopelessness. Although Evie Evans's life story is not a singular case, there is no attempt to generalize these findings to all populations of Black female offenders. The work is important in determining how the intersection of race, class, and gender create manifestations of oppression. The empirical investigation of one woman's life story enables me to examine the processes, interactions, historical moments, and structural forces that shaped her life in the 1950's, and that continue to shape her life, and the lives of her children and grandchildren.

Each event in Evie Evans's life, beginning with her birth during the Depression, provides information on the meaning and context of a lifetime of criminal behavior. The research is meant to explicate the racial, political, and social factors that contribute to the process of becoming a chronic female offender, and to the unusually large representation of Black women among the incarcerated.

The Efficacy of Qualitative Methodology

Several renowned scholars set the stage for the discussion of the efficacy of qualitative methodology, and the sociological significance of life history method. Patricia Hill Collins (1998) provides an edifying historical review of the racial and gendered utilization of qualitative methods. She maintains that, "the issues surrounding sociology and qualitative versus quantitative methodologies are about much more than which method is best suited for which research study." Black historian Tera W. Hunter (1997) utilizes qualitative methods in her investigation of Black females in the urban South working as domestics. This work serves as a starting point from which to contemplate the historical and sociological relevance of the impending migration of the 1940's, and the intersection of race, class, gender, and work.

A review of two sociological studies that focus on Black girls and women helps to establish additional support for the efficacy of the life history method, and the importance of allowing Black women to speak and to be heard. In her work with Black and White women at Rikers Island, Beth Richie (1996) chose the life history method because "it is particularly useful in gathering information about stigmatized, uncomfortable, or difficult circumstances in subjects' lives." Joyce Ladner (1971) in her groundbreaking work with Black adolescent girls utilized a life history method because it allowed her to see the girls as "resourceful, normal women who were simply trying to cope." Additionally, L. C. Dorsey (1994) makes a cogent argument for the use of qualitative methods in the examination of incarcerated women. He posits that, "quan-

tifiable data are essential, but the quest for the truth should not obscure the value of the open-ended commentary solicited from women who experience the sights, smells, and pain of paying their debt to society.”

Theoretical Perspectives

A single theoretical perspective is insufficient to illuminate Evie Evans’s life history. However, her life history lends itself to the life course perspective. As defined by Sampson and Laub (1992), two central concepts, trajectories and transitions, form the basis of the life course perspective. Trajectories are long-term patterns of behavior marked by life events and transitions. Transitions are specific life events (e.g. marriage, employment, imprisonment) embedded in trajectories and evolve over shorter time spans. The second perspective emerged from the data on how a Black woman negotiates and manages on a daily basis during her imprisonment. This is Goffman’s theoretical perspective of presentation of self. The perspective posits that, “the way in which the individual in ordinary situations presents herself and her activities to others, the ways in which she guides and controls impressions and the kinds of things she may and may not do while sustaining her performance” (Goffman, 1959).

Evie Evans’s Life History Synopsis

Evie Evans is an attractive 65-year old African American woman with short silver hair and brown eyes that sparkle behind gold-rimmed glasses. The lifetime vestiges of drug addiction and numerous incarcerations are virtually invisible. She was born on January 8, 1937, the middle child of nine during the Depression. Her mother’s husband was a 27-year old laborer from Alabama serving time in a state prison. Her mother was a 26-year old housewife from South Carolina who became pregnant by another man, Evie’s biological father, while her husband was serving time. Evie’s mother took her to live with her paternal grandparents. Evie never returned to live with her mother and siblings even though they lived in close proximity in the same neighborhood.

At the age of 12, she was sent to a detention home for truancy and fighting. In 1952, at the age of 14, she was sentenced to serve a year in a state facility for girls. Evie recalled, “thus began my life in institutions for the next 45 years.” At the age of 16, she was already labeled a status offender and heroin addict. Evie Evans was beginning a 20-year prison sentence for drug violations while middle-class African Americans were preparing for their fight for equality. Rosa Parks was insisting that she was too tired to relinquish her seat to a White on a southern bus. Evie Evans was insisting that her shackles were too tight as she stepped on a prison transport bus.

Most of Evie Evans’s adult life was spent as a heroin addict. In 1989 at age 52, she was

introduced to crack cocaine by her youngest daughter. In October of 1990, at the age of 53, she was admitted to a women's reformatory for the sixth time. At the age of 59, she was released from prison and encouraged to go on with her life. Evie Evans had been incarcerated six times across the span of five decades. Now, she was confronted with the biggest challenge of her life. What steps would she take to begin the tedious process of reentry?

A Black Family

Much has been written about impoverished Black families in America (Franklin, 1997; Ladner, 1971; Stack, 1974; Staples, 1973). However, there is a negligible amount of literature that situates the voices of these families at the center of analysis. This investigation of a poor Black family in the 1950's is not meant to be a generalization of all Black families. However, it is an illustration of the political, social, and economic contexts in which this family lived and managed to survive. This research includes an examination of the family networks employed by this one family in their effort to maintain a sense of belonging in the racist, segregated world in which they lived. It examines the impoverished and vulnerable existence of a single mother with nine children fathered by two men. The investigation of the family includes the role of grandmothers in maintaining the integrity of the family system. Additionally, the investigation includes a look at the impact of recurrent imprisonment on the overall well-being of an impoverished family.

Substance Abuse

The chapter on substance abuse focuses on how drug policy, as a political and racial process, is intricately bound to race, class, and gender. Whether a woman is arrested for drug possession depends on her structural location, which is determined by her race and class. The outcome of a drug addict's contact with the criminal justice system depends upon her structural location. In this research, it was found that substance abuse and addiction adversely affected the entire family system across the life course. Moreover, the use of alcohol and drugs were an intricate part of the early childhood socialization process. According to official death certificates, a significant number of Evie's family members died prematurely from alcohol-related diseases.

Black Women and Prison

Evie Evans was incarcerated six times across the span of five decades, which illuminates the imprisonment of Black women within an historical context. Moreover, it provides clarification and verification of the differences in the political ideologies across the span of fifty years, which ultimately affected the overall treatment of Black women in prison. The way Evie and other Black women served their time and their

reentry into the community is largely determined by the political ideology employed by a particular historical moment, punishment or rehabilitation. In the 1950's, Evie Evans served time in a segregated prison where Black and White women could not live, eat, or work together. Much has been written about Black female prisoners and the racial division of labor (Butler, 1997; Davis, 1999; Fisher, 1971; Moyer, 1985). This racial division of labor lasted until 1958 when the reformatory was desegregated upon the arrival of White female reformers from New York.

Conclusion and Future Research

The study yielded a rich harvest of ideas for future research. As more and more Black women are incarcerated, it becomes even more necessary to examine Black women and prison, and the turning points in their lives where intervention will be most beneficial. Also, an empirical examination of the structural factors that may result in Black women desisting from crime is needed. A better understanding of Black women's pathways to crime will enable us to create innovative prevention programs. Additionally, an exploratory study with the adult children of former female offenders will go a long way in expanding our ability to create effective prevention programs for adolescent girls who are stigmatized and alienated as a result of their mothers' imprisonment. Effective cutting edge prevention programs are crucial in the effort to decrease the number of young Black girls in the juvenile justice system. Without effective intervention these young girls often find their way to an adult female prison facility. It is imperative that we find effective ways to prevent adolescent girls from locating pathways to crime. Moreover, we must create viable mechanisms that will facilitate the reunification of incarcerated women with their families and communities.

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