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ARTICLE

Being Called to Account Understanding Adolescents' Narrative Identity Construction in Institutional Contexts

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ABSTRACT

With social workers' long tradition of involvement in probation, juvenile court, and the prison system, correctional institutions are a central institutional context in which social work practice occurs. Analyzing the experiences of young women residing in a correctional facility for youth, this study applies Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as a framework for understanding the role institutional contexts play in adolescents' narrative identity construction. Multiple open-ended interviews were conducted with seven young women who had participated in a specialized treatment program during their residence at a correctional training school in the Midwest area of the United States; the specialized treatment program concerned the young women's sexually abusive behaviors towards others. The process of collaborative meaning- and identity-making occurring between residents and staff at the institution can best be framed using Vygotsky's concepts of guided learning and the development of inner speech. Penuel and Wertsch's sociocultural theory of identity

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formation, which brings together the work of Vygotsky on social learning and Erikson on identity development, is used as a theoretical tool for framing the role that institution staff play in shaping the young women's identities.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, social workers have had a long tradition of involvement in the juvenile court, probation, and prison systems. The establishment of the first juvenile court system in Chicago resulted directly from the efforts of progressive era social reformers. These early reformers, members of the late 19th century Child Saving Movement sought to create a separate court system for minors, ostensibly to provide them with special, age-appropriate protections (Gumz, 2004; Platt, 1969). The current US juvenile probation system grew out of the practices of a 'well-to-do Boston shoe manufacturer and part-time social worker' (Gumz, 2004: 449) who took it upon himself in 1841 to work with the courts to prevent incarceration of those offenders he believed could be redeemed under his stewardship. The prison system has been one of the main institutional contexts in which social workers have practiced when working with individuals confined to institutions (Miller, 1995) and social workers were at the table when the National Conference of Charities and Corrections was founded in 1893 (Gumz, 2004; Platt, 1969).

Social workers' efforts with criminal offenders in the juvenile court, probation, and prison systems have been towards the end of supporting rehabilitation. As these systems began to shift in the mid-1970s away from rehabilitation towards more punitive approaches, social workers' roles in these systems have declined (Gumz, 2004). Yet these systems continue to impact large numbers of people in the United States, many of whom struggle with mental health and substance abuse issues (Lamb, Weinberger and Gross, 2004; Mumola, 1999). While neither the National Association of Social Workers nor the Bureau of Labor Statistics specifically track how many social workers are employed in corrections, social workers in corrections likely comprise some of the 137,300 social workers in the US with specializations in substance abuse or mental health (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). Holding a bachelor's degree in social work is one possible minimum educational requirement for being employed as a Probation Officer or Correctional Treatment Specialist in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

People under the age of 18 comprised a quarter of US residents in 2002. In that same year, juvenile courts handled upwards of 1.6 million delinquency cases (Snyder and Sickmund, 2006). Cases that were formally petitioned and concluded with adjudication of the minor resulted in 624,500 juveniles under the supervision of the juvenile correctional system in 2005 (Snyder and

Sickmund, 2006). While the majority of juvenile offenders are young men, young women's involvement in the juvenile justice system increased over the last three decades. A report summarizing statistics from 1989 to 1993 on juvenile female offenders found that the increase in arrests involving females was more than double the increase in arrests for males (Poe-Yamagata and Butts, 1996). In 2008 females accounted for 30 percent of all juvenile arrests (Puzzanchera, 2009). Specific to sexual offenses, female youth make up 1 percent to 3 percent of those arrested for forcible rape and 7 percent to 9 percent of those arrested for other juvenile sexual offenses (FBI, 1998–2004). A national report on victims of violent crimes perpetrated by juveniles, found that 8 percent of victims of sexual assault experienced assault by a female (McCurley and Snyder, 2004).

While most adjudicated juveniles receive probation as a disposition rather than out-of-home residential care, a census taken in 2008 indicated there were 81,000 juvenile offenders in out-of-home residential correctional placements on a given day (Sickmund, 2010). In census data for 2006, young women comprised 15 percent of juveniles in residential placement within the correctional system – a relatively stable number for at least the past decade (National Center for Juvenile Justice, 2010).

Out-of-home residential correctional placements are settings that exert a meaningful influence on adolescent identity construction at a period of time when identity formation is a highly salient developmental task (Erickson, 1968). Within the institutional context of a 'juvenile correctional facility', an internalization of a new way of seeing behaviors – as reflected in how one talks about them – is a central element of treatment. Since rehabilitation is discursively produced, such settings have a significant influence on adolescents' development of self-concept and sense of what is normative. Ethnographic work with young men has explored the ways in which residents in juvenile correctional facilities negotiate their identities in interaction with treatment discourses (Abrams and Hyun, 2009; Inderbitzen, 2007). Inderbitzen's (2007) work identified how correctional facility staff seek to normalize young men through resocializing them into an appropriate citizen identity. Abrams and Hyun (2009) mapped the process of identity transition incarcerated young men undergo when confronted with treatment discourses. They found that young men utilize the strategies of struggle, selective acceptance, manipulation, and negation to meet identity challenges treatment discourses present them. However, little work has been done to examine identity negotiations among young women in correctional programs.

The present study applies Penuel and Wertsch's (1995) sociocultural approach to identity formation to explore the experiences of young women in a juvenile correctional context. In a sociocultural approach, identity is seen as a dynamic enacted process or as a 'moment of rhetorical action' through which individuals persuade themselves and others about who they are (Penuel and Wertsch, 1995: 85). Given this thesis, Penuel and Wertsch (1995) emphasize

the need to focus attention on the settings in which forming identities are 'at stake' or are central activities. Correctional facilities for juveniles are clearly one such key setting.

A Sociocultural Theory of Narrative Identity Construction

In their development of a sociocultural approach to identity formation, Penuel and Wertsch (1995) bring together Erickson's work on adolescent identity development with Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) sociocultural theory of learning. Vygotsky's theory of guided learning explained how a child or novice learns how to do a task through a process of collaborative learning in which an adult or expert guides the child through it using language. Through this process, the child or 'novice' develops inner speech, which can be drawn upon in achieving the task. For example, a child learns how to swing a bat to hit a ball by repeating to herself, 'keep my eyes on the ball'. Vygotsky's theory of learning has been used to understand the role of language, in addition to processes such as modeling and reinforcement, in the learning of new behaviors. Having engaged in a dialogue with an adult or expert, the child or novice internalizes their instructive language as inner speech. Internalizing speech is a means by which other-regulation is transformed into self-regulation (Wertsch, 1979). Vygotsky's ideas have generated excitement for providing a means by which to conceptualize the transmission of sociocultural norms through language.

Penuel and Wertsch's conceptual work (1995), which has integrated Vygotsky's ideas with those of Erikson, offered a groundbreaking approach to scholarship on identity development. They emphasized four tenets of a sociocultural approach to researching identity formation. First, rather than focusing on identity as an internal state, they take 'mediated action' as the unit of analysis. Second, they ask researchers to focus on the settings in which forming identities are 'at stake' or central activities. Third, they expect that researchers should consider the ways in which dominant cultural representations can be seen as 'tools' (i.e. cultural and historical resources) for identity construction. Fourth, they suggest that identity development needs to be considered in regards to its rhetorical/persuasive purpose in areas of identity such as fidelity, ideology/values, and work. In sum, a sociocultural framework asks researchers to 'focus on specific questions about the mediational means or cultural tools that people employ to construct their identities in the course of different activities' (Penuel and Wertsch, 1995: 91).

While Penuel (1994) and Penuel and Davey (1999) have applied this work to research on the role of social organizations and agencies on the identity formation of youth. This study is the first known application of Penuel and Wertsch's sociocultural approach to identity formation as it occurs within the institutional context of youth corrections. Juvenile correctional settings are uniquely characterized by a tension

between their therapeutic/rehabilitative goals and their correctional/punitive nature (Abrams, Kim and Anderson-Nathe, 2005). In the context of corrections, staff's treatment efforts necessarily involve the exertion of both control and caring (Goodkind and Miller, 2006). From the perspective of the youth themselves, this study explores the process by which cultural meaning systems have been made available to residents in their interactions with the adult 'experts' (i.e. the correctional staff) in this particular setting.

METHOD

Research Design

This study analyzed data from 18 open-ended interviews with seven young women who participated in a specialized treatment program for sex offenders within a residential correctional facility for juveniles in the Midwest region of the United States. This program, with a pseudonym of 'Think it Over' was facilitated by bachelor's level correctional workers, one of whom was working toward her MSW degree. All of the study participants had engaged in harmful sexual behavior towards others, such as a peer or younger child. Prior to conducting this study, the researcher had engaged in six months of fieldwork at the site, serving both as an observer of the Think It Over program and as a co-facilitator for two of the twelve week Think It Over treatment phases. None of the young women interviewed for this study were participants in the treatment program during the time that the researcher was engaged in fieldwork.¹

Subject Recruitment and Data Collection Procedures

Of the 48 young women who had participated in the Think It Over program in its eight years of operation, a total of seven participants were recruited for this study. With the exception of one participant, Chandra,² who had raped a peer, all of the research participants' sexual abuse involved the molestation of younger children, many of whom were siblings. One participant, Irene, was assigned to the Think It Over program because she was considered *at risk* of engaging in harmful sexual behavior towards others.

Data collection took place over the course of 8.5 months. Of the seven young women interviewed, three were still in residence at the correctional facility during the time of interviewing. In total, 18 interview sessions were held with just over 28 hours of total interview time. The average interview time per participant was four hours. The author of this article conducted all interviews, which were audio-recorded and transcribed. Human subjects approval for this research was granted by the sponsoring University's Institutional Review Board.

The interviewees ranged in age from 16 to 26 years old and most were around age 10 or 11 when they started engaging in sexually abusive behavior.

Two of the seven young women had been adjudicated for their sexually abusive acts as their committing offense. The remainder had entered the correctional system for charges including incorrigibility/running away, assault, armed robbery, attempted murder, and double homicide. The seven participants included four Caucasians, two African Americans, and one person who identified as part Jewish and part Native-American. Two participants are now parents themselves; one participant is married with children while another participant is helping to parent her live-in boyfriend's child. Two of the seven identified themselves as lesbian.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis was an iterative, multi-step process that involved fieldnotes, in-text notes, and coding and compilation of the interview data by thematic categories. Fieldnotes were taken immediately following interviews, being spoken into an audio recorder and later transcribed and integrated into interview transcripts. Fieldnotes provided a description of the interview locale (e.g. a room in the correctional facility, the participant's apartment), a description of the interviewee (e.g. her physical appearance, comportment, and affect), and a recounting of any conversations that took place prior to or following the interview (e.g. with the respondent or with correctional facility staff). In addition to providing descriptive data, fieldnotes also served as a means for preliminary observations and analysis based on what 'snagged' in the researcher's mind from interviews. To set them aside from descriptive data, analytic observations from fieldnotes were integrated into transcripts via the use of bracketed in-text notes. In-text notes also incorporated in-the-moment analysis during transcription and were used as a means of memoing (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995; Glaser, 1978). Ideas of categories for thematic coding were generated from within case analysis and across-case comparisons. Coding for discursive processes generated two broad categories of 'telling' and 'relating to the label', each of which had subcategories.

Data presented in this article concern the broad thematic category of 'telling'. This concerned the way young women recounted being compelled to talk about their sexual offenses and what sorts of narratives were offered to them for doing so. As presented in the findings section, these reported experiences generated three subcategories: 'the imperative to create a cohesive narrative account', 'learning a talking orientation and a language around offending' and 'appropriate tellings/what is a workable narrative'.

FINDINGS

In the facility, the young women were expected to produce a coherent, explanatory narrative that would account for their sexually abusive behavior. Treatment entailed socialization into a 'talking orientation' and learning *how*

to talk about one's behavior and experiences using particular language. The young women had to develop their 'accounts' in interaction with the explanatory narratives proffered by staff. A primary explanatory account proffered to the young women was the notion of an 'abused-abuser hypothesis'. This process of collaborative meaning making between the young women and staff first came to my attention when I noticed some of my respondent's use of rote or canned³ speech with me during interviews. At times, a participant's narrative sounded as if she was parroting something she had heard from someone else. Other times, a participant directly referenced ways that correctional facility treatment staff⁴ had interpreted the young woman's past actions to her. Whether the young women I interviewed agreed with staff's views or not, it was a uniform experience to have had to wrestle with the way staff had framed their behavior and all spoke of this experience as one of great significance to them.

The Imperative to Create a Coherent, Explanatory 'Account' to Treatment Staff

Upon arrival at the facility, the young women are called to account for their behavior that led to their incarceration. The first stage of treatment involves taking responsibility for one's committing offense. One participant, Dee, spoke directly about feeling pressured to come up with an explanation, stating 'they kept asking me why'. Dee explained that when she arrived at the facility, she was at a loss to be able to provide answers to staff who were pressing her for an explanation:

Dee: I tried to talk about it first stage – when I first got in or whatever – but they were asking me questions that I just didn't want to answer cause I didn't know the answers myself to 'em. I wanted time to figure all this stuff out before I actually talked about it. (D2: 5–6)

Dee was confronted by the treatment staff who required an account for her sexual abuse of her siblings. Dee's failure to provide answers was taken as an indication of unwillingness to be held accountable for her actions. Because of her perceived unwillingness to speak openly about her offenses and provide an explanation, Dee was not permitted to move beyond the first stage of treatment for almost a year. Yet for Dee, it was not merely a matter of not wanting to talk about it; she did not yet have a story to make sense of what she had done.

The pressure to create an account can be further illustrated using the case of Arianne. Although 'to this day' she has no memories of 'ever touching' her little sister (A1: 4), Arianne was able to produce an explanation for why she had sexually abused her sister. What she 'figured out' as her motive was to enact revenge against her mother for not preventing the attempted anal rape Arianne experienced at age three years:

Arianne: One of the things that I've been told can lead up to sexual abuse is being abused yourself and when I was three there was an attempted anal rape. And I've figured out that I did my sister for revenge against my mom for not being there to get me, to protect me from that abuser. (A2: 3)

This definitive depiction of her motives in abusing her sister was provided shortly after Arianne had reiterated that, 'my group leader already knows this, my mom knows it, everybody knows it . . . that I don't have any memory of molesting my little sister' (A2: 1). Of all the participants, Arianne's explanations sounded the most rote and rehearsed. This led me to see her explanations as ones she had felt compelled to develop in order to have *some* sort of story available.

Both Arianne and Dee were under a particular pressure to produce a coherent explanatory account because they had been adjudicated on criminal sexual conduct charges. Yet based upon the researcher's six months of fieldwork at the site prior to conducting interviews, it was clear that the treatment process for all young women entailed the development of a coherent narrative account in regards to their committing offenses.⁵ To achieve this goal of a coherent narrative, residents in the facility were socialized into a 'talking orientation' and taught 'how to talk' about their behavior and experiences. Treatment occurs via, first, opening up and talking and then through aligning one's language about one's behavior with that of the treatment discourse. The young women demonstrated that they had negotiated an understanding of their acts with staff. As seen from interview data in the following section, as much as the correctional facility attempted to differentiate a person's behavior from that of the person herself, treatment involved teaching the young women a body of language pertaining to *being* an offender.

Learning a Talking Orientation and a Language Around Offending

Since the treatment program required young women to speak openly about their offenses, a necessary step is socialization into a 'talking orientation'. The following quote from Dee, who was out of the facility for a year and a half at the time of the interview, indicates the success of this socialization. When I asked her whether she felt prepared to talk about her sexual offenses during one of our interviews, she replied, 'I would have talked about it regardless. It doesn't matter if it's today, tomorrow, or next year' (D2: 4). Dee here accepted the necessity of being open to talk about her past sexually abusive behavior and still subscribed to this with considerable distance in her time away from the facility.

The young women also equated willingness to talk openly about one's behavior with taking responsibility. Some even viewed the capacity to talk openly as a demonstration of their rehabilitation. I saw this in how respondents

reacted to the research process itself. Some participants seemed to see my request for an interview with them as a test of themselves. As Dee stated, 'I actually think the more I talk about it, the more it's already put behind me. 'Cause here I am; it's out in the open! I'm talking about it' (D3: 42). Even though this was a participant who was not entirely comfortable during interviews, sometimes pulling her hood up over her head, she seemed proud of herself that she had been willing to participate in the interview and saw her willingness to talk as evidence that she had moved beyond her harmful sexual behavior.

Eight years post exit from the facility, Elaine's reaction to the interview still illustrated the norms she had left behind and to which she was no longer accustomed. She was no longer used to focusing on the past in her current life circumstances, which stood in contrast to the expectations of the facility:

Elaine: We don't talk like this in AA [Alcoholics Anonymous]. I mean, once in a while, we'll get into childhood stuff. But we're more solution focused. We're not problem focused. So we don't talk about the things that were wrong or the things that were hurtful so much as how we are living now and how things are better.

...

So it's very different, to talk like this. Um. And it's always kind of stressful 'cause I feel like there's just so many ways of telling. And I just wanna be honest and make sure that I was. And I think I was. (E1: 28)

Having a point of comparison to her current experiences in Alcoholics Anonymous, Elaine found this research interview more akin to her experience in the correctional facility, when she was required to open up about her past. In this narrative, Elaine introduces the idea that there are 'many ways of telling' and was the only participant to raise the issue of being honest in one's account. Her position about narratives and truth, which seemed more complex than what I heard from other study participants, may reflect that she is eight years removed from the institution.

In addition to socialization into a 'talking orientation', residents are also taught particular *ways* of talking. For example, they are taught to demonstrate responsibility vis-a-vis the language they use to talk about their behaviors. In addition, the young women learn to separate people's behaviors from the person him or herself so as not to define other people (or themselves) by their acts. To help lessen the negative power of stigmas, staff attempts to help young women learn that they can be critical of a person's behaviors without condemning them as a person. Teaching the young women to separate a person from his or her harmful acts is seen as a way to help them move away from a deterministic view of themselves and others. Fellow group participants are not 'sex offenders', they are 'people who have engaged in harmful sexual behavior'.

Separating behavior from the person and avoiding labeling were considered particularly important in regards to young women who had engaged in harmful sexual behavior. Based on the assumption that young women who had been sexually abusive experience a high degree of shame, the Think it Over staff made a concerted effort to counteract this stigma. This was a success with Beth:

Beth: At first I was reluctant [to take responsibility] but then I was open to it. My favorite saying is – well one that I came up with is – ‘What you done is just that: What you’ve done, not who you are.’ If you go up to [building on correctional grounds] you’ll see that [on a sign] up in the Think It Over room! (proudly) (B1: 23–24)

While Beth lays claim to creating the saying ‘What you’ve done is just that: What you’ve done, not who you are’, the staff previously verbalized this same sentiment. At various points during the interviews, Beth repeated a variation of this phrase, stating, ‘that’s just what I’ve done, not who I am’, as though it were a mantra. In our final interview, Beth wrote her phrase down and gave it to me, offering to sign it. She said that this phrase made her feel good not only because she was the one to make it up, but also because ‘it’s the truth’. (B3: 48)

Although the Think it Over staff made a concerted effort to avoid labeling the young women, this was not necessarily the case for all of them. That some staff labeled the young women by their behavior became evident when Arianne was explaining to me how she would evaluate a potential new friend:

Arianne: I was like, ‘What would you do if I was a sex offender? Would you still be my friend or not?’ I find things out that way quite often. I turn certainty into curiosity.

Interviewer: The way you phrased that is really interesting. ‘What would you do if you found out I was a sex offender?’ So, it gave me the sense like you either *are* or you *aren’t* a sex offender. And you *are* for the *rest of your life* or you *aren’t* for the *rest of your life*. Is that the way you look at it?

Arianne: No. Staff *here* label us as sex offenders: the ones that have sexual offenses. We are not to be labeled. That is what we have **done**. That is not who we are. (pause) The staff wanna label us as sex offenders, it’s like . . . (laughs, as though saying what can you do about it). (A4: 26–27)

This exchange shows the mixed messages the young women have received from staff. On the one hand, Arianne has learned from some staff that they are not to be labeled by what they have done. On the other hand, she has experienced staff labeling them in exactly such a way.

Another reason to differentiate between a person and his or her behavior is that it makes the language of choice more readily available. The young women are directed to use language that demonstrates they are taking responsibility for their behaviors. They are challenged on their use of passive voice and taught to use active voice instead, being directed to use language reflecting choice in how they acted. The following excerpt shows one participant's struggle to use active voice and language of choice when describing her crime:

Chandra: So I went back to [name of mentor]'s house and I was hanging out. And then I ran back into my old friends – who had picked me up the first time – who I was hanging out with in ninth grade. And I ran back into them and I chose to-/I ended up robbing my mentor. And I stole her car. (C1: 8)

You can see here that while Chandra attributes her acts to falling back in with a bad crowd, she was also careful to state that she “chose to” rob her mentor. The oddity of this phrasing – saying, “I chose to rob my mentor” – was what made me take notice. Although she then reverts to a passive way of talking about it – saying, “I ended up robbing my mentor” – her language demonstrates ways the residents are taught to attend to their language in how to talk about their offenses.

Appropriate Tellings/What is Considered a Workable Narrative Line

Following socialization into a talking orientation and with a particular vocabulary and discourse around offending, the staff also taught the residents certain ‘appropriate’ narratives to explain their offending behavior. A central way the young women were guided to make sense of their behavior was through the explanatory narrative of the ‘abused-abuser hypothesis’. In other words, the young women were directed to see previous sexual victimization as instrumental in the development of their sexually harmful behavior. One way in which this explanatory narrative was communicated was through the Think It Over’s foundational assumptions. The program included young women whose sexually harmful behavior was directed ‘towards themselves’⁶ as well as young women whose sexual behavior was directed ‘towards others’. Positing previous sexual victimization as the common root, the developers of Think It Over saw those who directed their harmful sexual behavior towards themselves as ‘acting in’ while those who directed their harmful sexual behavior towards others as ‘acting out’. In conceptualizing prior sexual victimization as playing a common role in the development of harmful sexual behavior, the program developers privileged an abused-abuser etiology of the problem.

Irene was placed in Think It Over solely for the perception that she was 'at risk' of sexual offending due to her past victimization experiences. She found these assumptions particularly problematic:

Irene: There was another girl in our group who was seriously abused as a kid. And when she got older she abused her little sister. She ended up going to the program because of that. They thought I was gonna do something like that. They wanted to prevent me from – when I get older – so I don't do that to my kids and stuff like that.

...

They think that when you're offended that you're gonna offend somebody else. That's the way they think because they've never been through it. And it's really not like that. (I1: 12–13)

Irene, who is now a mother, was considered at risk of potentially sexually abusing her own children because of her particular sexual victimization history. Irene's mother had brought her to drug houses and prostituted her for money when Irene was about seven years old.

In addition to participants' awareness of the Think It Over foundational assumptions, young women were also directly presented with the abused-abuser hypothesis as a potential explanatory account for their harmful sexual behavior. Two of the research respondents, Chandra and Arianne, spoke of staff communicating this message directly to them. A staff person told Chandra, who raped an acquaintance, that 'you do unto others what's been done to you' (C1: 18), referencing two past incidents in which Chandra herself had been the victim of rape. Arianne also recounted how she learned the abused-abuser hypothesis. After telling me details of her acts with her victims, she provided the following response to my question about what she thinks is important for me to know about what she had done:

Arianne: That, I mean ... (sighs). I just found something out recently. That with basically 100 percent of the girls [who sexually offend], there's always been molestation or rape somewhere in there. In their lives. And that's why they turned around and did it to others. But the funny thing that I found out was those guys [men who sexually offend], they do it more for power. Like not all of them have been raped or molested or anything during their life but, they turn around and do it to others anyway, for power and stuff. And I found that odd, but. With girls, that was new, what I found out about girls. (A1: 36–37)

Here Arianne not only brings up the concept of having learned that those who are sexually abusive have been abused themselves, she also introduces the

concept that this effect is differentiated by gender. What Arianne learned from staff is that all young women who sexually offend have a history of having been sexually abused themselves, whereas young men who sexually offend 'do it more for power'.

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

In this facility, the abused-abuser hypothesis was implicitly and explicitly made available to the residents as an acceptable explanatory narrative for their harmful sexual behavior, particularly given their gender. The findings also demonstrate how treatment is a process of socialization into a 'talking orientation' in which one's openness to talking is considered evidence of positive engagement in treatment. Residents learn a new vocabulary that communicates particular conceptual ways of understanding one's behavior and past experiences. Sexually abusive behavior is framed as harmful sexual behavior towards others that reflects an 'acting out' of prior sexual victimization. Staff's presentation of the abused-abuser hypothesis provides the means by which sexually abusive young women can demonstrate their treatment success via the discursive production of an acceptable explanatory narrative. For all the attempts to avoid labeling, respondents demonstrated various degrees of alignment with being a sex offender and having internalized – or at least becoming conversant in – the language of an identity.

Using Vygotsky's ideas about dialogic learning processes, the process of collaborative meaning-making transpiring between staff and the young women can be seen as a form of guided learning through which the young women develop inner speech and, ultimately, identity. In the excerpt below, one participant gives an excellent example of the development of inner speech:

- Dee: I wasn't in a hurry to get out [of correctional facility] or anything, because it was a secure place for me to stay at.
- Interviewer: Yeah. You feel pretty insecure with your mom?
- Dee: Um-hum. It was like a safe place for me to stay at. Our group leader even said so at the same-/at that time. That the reason why **she** didn't exactly-/why **I** didn't want to get out of there or whatever is because it was a secure safe place. (D3: 24, emphasis added)

This excerpt shows the way that Dee has accepted as her own idea the staff person's idea that Dee's stagnation in treatment had to do with a desire not to leave the facility. She has made this staff person's narrative – in which Dee actually refers to herself in third person – into her own, first person narrative.

Another example of an internalization of speech was Beth's mantra, 'that's just what I did, not who I am'. Beth's creation of an actual, physical sign saying, 'What you've done it just that: What you've done, not who you are' that now hangs on the wall of the treatment room demonstrates her sense of ownership. While she believes herself the author of this concept, it is actually a concept that she learned from the treatment staff.

As the young women wrestled in interviews with whether or not they were a 'sex offender', the young women's experiences in the institution were quite clearly very formative in developing their identity at a particularly critical juncture in their lives. At a point of transitioning into adulthood, these young women were developing a sense of themselves that they will likely carry into their adult lives. In some respects, the correctional interventions reified a sex offender identity in a way that could lead to hopelessness about one's unalterable 'nature'. At the same time, naming one's abusive acts seemed to play a critical role in attending to and changing one's behavior. This suggests the need for more deliberate consideration of the potential positive and negative effects of correctional interventions on sexually abusive young women's and young men's sense of self.

As a setting in which identity formation is central, this correctional facility clearly played a powerful role in the development of residents' sense of self. Although in no way an intentional use of narrative therapy as traditionally formulated, correctional interventions exerted their influence on recipients through a linguistic process of development of inner speech and inner self-representation. This study's findings about discursive processes suggest the power of treatment interventions in constructing recipients' identity construction in ways that may be simultaneously helpful and harmful.

An important limitation of this study is that it did not include interviews with treatment staff directly about their views and interventions. The study's conclusions rely on the young women's perceptions of what staff had offered them as explanatory accounts. While this filtered information illuminates the young women's experiences of staff narratives, an important area of future research would be to study treatment providers' attributions and assumptions concerning sexual offenders as well as the multiple processes by which they communicate these understandings to the youth under their care/control. More direct ethnographic exploration of correctional facility staff, along the lines of work conducted by Inderbitzen (2006), would be helpful.

A second area of concern in this study has to do with how 'candid' participants were with the researcher. In fact, experiences in the interview process led to a shift in the researcher's expectations about what the nature of the findings could be. The original goal of this research study was to explore what domains or narratives young women would draw upon to explain their acts. Yet the experience of hearing parroted treatment speech, led the researcher to shift

from a naive belief that she could access unmediated narratives to the realization that she was hearing co-constructed narratives. In addition, collecting data via interviewing is itself an inherently co-constructive process (Reissman, 1993). It became clear during the data collection process that some of the participants who were still incarcerated were seeing the researcher, as an outsider to the institution, as a representative of the public at large. Some sought to speak through the researcher to address the public at large about their status as female sexual offenders. Thus, some of the information that was shared with the researcher reflects some of these young women's attempts at positive identity management.

CONCLUSIONS

Vygotsky introduced the concept of the 'zone of proximal development' to reflect the ways in which children are able to advance developmentally through guided interactions with others at a higher level of capacity. He wrote about how children are able to develop scientific, or theoretical, concepts through this process of discursive instruction. Inasmuch as cognitive development in adolescence is characterized as involving the attainment of formal operational reasoning (Inhelder and Piaget, 1958) – a cognitive maturation considered foundational to higher level thinking involved in comprehension and moral judgment – one could think of the zone of proximal development in adolescence as one that is particularly primed for guidance in regard to the development of scientific concepts. Vygotsky focuses on children's attainment of higher mental functioning as developed through social interaction with a more advanced environment (Wertsch, 1979).

In the 'training school', as this facility was called, treatment staff directly sought to be experts to whom these young women could turn for guidance in co-constructing an understanding of themselves and their offenses. The mediated, rote language used in the interviews alerted me to the presence of a treatment discourse which the young women drew upon as 'inner speech' to explain or account for their actions. This process reflected a teaching of 'scientific' or 'theoretical' concepts. In being taught about how to understand the cause of one's actions, the young women were being taught hypotheses about etiology (as well as culpability). The role of sexual victimization in the development of offending behavior – the abused-abuser hypothesis – and the idea of sexual abuse as motivated by power were two scientific concepts staff accessed and then communicated to residents under the care of their expertise.

The theoretical concepts the young women learned not only had a strong influence on their understanding of their past behaviors, they also had a strong impact on their views of self. In their sociocultural theory of identity formation, Penuel and Wertsch (1995) wrote that the researchers need to consider the ways in which dominant cultural representations can be seen as 'tools' (i.e. cultural

and historical resources) for identity construction. Clearly the dominant cultural representation used as a tool for identity construction in this instance was a gendered application of the abused-abuser hypothesis, namely the ideology that females abuse due to past victimization while males abuse for power. The gendered ideology that was communicated was that women – even women who are perpetrators – are ultimately victims.

Status as a ‘female sexual offender’ clearly has significant implications for these young women’s identity and anticipated future self and future relationships. Penuel and Wertsch’s (1995) integration of the work of Vygotsky and Erikson into a sociocultural framework for identity formation is highly relevant to understanding the impact of this institutional context on residents’ identity development. The correctional context in which the research subjects ‘participated’ was a setting in which the persuasive communication of identity was a central activity. Dominant gendered cultural representation served as a means by which the young women could square the seeming disconnect between being ‘female’ and being ‘a sexual offender’. As Penuel and Wertsch (1995) lay out in their sociocultural theory of identity formation, the focus on understanding identity formation in settings involves understanding ‘the mediation means or cultural tools’ used by people to enact their identities. Their theory has great application for understanding – and for critically evaluating – the role treatment professionals play in the construction of identities, particularly via the impact treatment discourses have within institutional contexts specifically tasked with the rehabilitation of adolescent offenders.

NOTES:

1. Since the researcher participated in the provision of treatment during fieldwork, this was to avoid any potential conflicts between the research role and the clinical role.
2. All participants have been given pseudonyms.
3. Acknowledgements to George Rosenwald for this terminology.
4. Treatment staff means general treatment staff as well as the staff who facilitated the Think It Over program.
5. In addition to doing this in their general treatment program for their committing offense, those in the specialized treatment program of Think It Over also had to do this specifically for their sexually abusive behavior.
6. These behaviors included such things as extensive promiscuity, risky sexual behaviors, prostitution and erotic dancing.

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