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THE ROLE OF THE FEMALE MENTAL HEALTH  
PROFESSIONAL IN A MALE CORRECTIONAL SETTING

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There are increasing numbers of women psychologists and other professionals working within predominately male correctional settings. One finds, however, nothing in the literature on how they are viewed by the system or what it is like to be a woman working within this traditionally male dominated sphere. The dearth of written material on the subject became apparent in a search through the National Clearinghouse of Mental Health and the Criminal Justice Reference Service. The Psychological Abstracts, Social Science Citation Index and the Criminology Index also have no references that shed any light on this issue. There is one particularly good article by a woman psychologist (Williams, 1974) who was working within a correctional setting. The article deals with defining the role of a correctional psychologist, but no attempt is made by the author to explore how her gender did or did not affect her functioning.

To what can the lack of written material on this issue be due? Three interpretations seem probable. One explanation is that there is essentially no difference in the use of male or female professionals in male correctional settings - a professional is a professional, regardless of gender. Another reason would seem to be that the few women who are working in the system are still so busy exploring the impact of their presence and defining for themselves the role they are to play, that they do not have time for research and writing. A third alternative is that there is repeated denial, on the part of both male and female professionals, that a person's sexual identity modifies interpersonal relations in any setting. This is noted by one woman psychiatrist (Roeske, 1976). She found that throughout medical school her supervisors denied that being a woman had any significant effect on one's functioning with patients or male colleagues. Her experiences, however, have found that viewpoint to be less than totally accurate. This same kind of denial may also be operating among professionals in the correctional area.

Of the three explanations tendered, the latter two appear the most significant. Being a woman in a male correctional setting is an important aspect of one's functioning that has not been adequately explored. This paper represents an initial effort by one woman to share with others some perceptions of what working within a correctional setting is like. It is intended as an overview of my experiences, rather than an exhaustive treatment of the subject, and its purpose is to briefly

identify areas in need of further inquiry.

From September, 1974 through August, 1976, I was coordinator of forensic services at Midtown Community Mental Health Center in Indianapolis, Indiana. One of the responsibilities of the person in this position was to provide mental health services to the Marion County Jail. This involved spending three to four mornings a week in the penal facility where inmates awaiting trial in the Marion County Criminal and Municipal Courts were held. The population was predominately male and over 50% Black. There were also some female inmates who were housed in a separate area. The male sections were staffed by male deputy sheriffs, serving as guards; the female area was staffed by women deputies.

During the first few months, the majority of my time was spent in providing inmates with crisis oriented treatment and referral services. It soon became apparent that the emphasis placed on this service by jail officials was far beyond the system's capability to provide any ameliorative services. Thus, as time went by and I became more accepted by the jail staff, less time was spent on direct inmate treatment and more on affecting changes within the system. Since there were also several male mental health professionals who provided services to the inmates, I had the opportunity to observe the deputies' and inmates' reactions to these male consultants.

#### The Reactions of the Guards

From my first day at the jail, it was apparent that, to most of the male deputies, I was first of all a woman and secondly a consultant. Indirect references to my sex and appearance were common. It was my belief that this would cease as time went by, but it never disappeared entirely. A combination of factors seem responsible for this attitude:

- 1) Most of the deputies held a very traditional view of the place and role of a woman, and the emergence of women into professional positions was not yet a reality for them. They had difficulty relating to a female as someone with authority and some expertise to offer them in understanding human behavior. This can be attributed partly to the limited exposure most of them had with women in other than clerical, kitchen or homemaking capacities. The experience of viewing a female as an "expert" or even as an equal was new for many of the guards.
- 2) The masculine atmosphere of the jail seemed to breed a situation in which the deputies needed to act out and assert their manliness, especially in the presence of other guards and inmates. Within this setting, there was a premium placed on toughness and

"acting like a man," and sexually colored comments were socially acceptable. This can be viewed as primarily a group phenomenon because, in one to one encounters with the guards, the sexual overtones were much less frequent than when others were observing.

- 3) I was about the same age as the majority of the deputies (late twenties) and, thus, there was no age barrier to male-female interaction.

Although these factors were particular to my situation, I believe that the first two points can be applied to other correctional settings.

The guards' perceptions of me, primarily as a woman, had a direct effect on my functioning. The usual resistances of the deputies against mental health professionals in general were considerably less prominent with me than with my male colleagues. This was apparent in such ways as how much more promptly the guards brought inmates for their appointments with me than with the male consultants, and in the "availability" of office space for prisoner interviews. Office space was usually available for my use while many of the male consultants had to conduct their interviews at the tables set up for lawyers.

On the other hand, the deputies' need to react to me as a woman often made affecting changes within the system more difficult. They were comfortable with my role with the inmates, but less so with my role in relation to them and as a change agent in the system. Several significant changes were instituted, but it often required my being more assertive than was necessary by male consultants attempting to make similar changes. This is a problem that emerges for most women professionals in any traditionally male dominated area. Roeske (1976) sees it as an issue that every female professional must struggle with. It is particularly true in corrections where women have customarily been employed only for the more menial duties. (At Marion County, women were employed as guards in the female area but seemed to be viewed by the male deputies as less than equal. They had little say over how the unit was run and answered to a male superior.)

#### The Effect on the Inmates

Perhaps the most important issue to be raised when discussing the use of women in male correctional settings is the effect on the inmates. One paper by a woman psychologist (Goldman, 1974) addresses this issue. She found that in the all male population of a maximum security prison, being a female had a very definite effect on the therapeutic process.

Most of the male inmates she tested and did therapy with had many unresolved problems in relation to women. Their relationships with females had been very sexualized and every woman was used to test out their maleness. Goldman found that working with a female therapist acted as a stimulant to those unresolved feelings. It opened up for them the possibility of a meaningful human encounter with a woman, apart from the need to play a sexual role. Roeske (1976), like Goldman, sees a female therapist as being particularly helpful in treating males who have a distorted mother-child relationship.

My experiences with male inmates at the Marion County Jail add further support to the viewpoint of these two authors. Problems with female figures was an outstanding factor in much of the inmate pathology. On many occasions, my being a woman seemed to be a positive factor in prisoners being able to transfer and deal with their feelings toward women more readily. Considering the short term nature of much of the treatment in correctional facilities, this is an important plus.

#### Dangerousness

One issue that always arises in relation to women working within correctional settings is the concern of their being in danger of bodily harm from the male inmates. This was very much in the minds of the deputies at Marion County when I first arrived, and they showed particular concern for my safety. The prisoner interviews were held in a small office and the guards would frequently recommend that the door be left open or they would offer to stay in the room during the interview. I was appreciative of their concern and on occasion did leave the door ajar, but these kinds of precautions were usually unnecessary. Although physical attack is a possibility in any correctional setting, the frequency of its occurrence seems to be over-rated. During the two year period, I interviewed over 1300 inmates, many of them in jail for violent crimes; others were blatantly psychotic. I never experienced any threat to my person. In the presence of a female, in fact, the prisoners actually seemed less likely to be overtly aggressive than when with a male consultant. The presence of a woman often seemed to have a calming effect on the inmates and there was less of a need to act out their masculinity in an aggressive way.

It is difficult to find support for this viewpoint in the literature, because no attempt has been made to deal with it. Thus, I decided to explore it with the officials of a prison where women have been used on the staff--the Bucks County Prison in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. Trained women volunteers and professionals have been used as coun-

selors in that facility for many years (Case, 1973). According to the Director of Volunteer Services (Rodman, 1976), "the women counselors have proven to be less threatening to the male inmates, because the prisoners do not feel that they have to prove their masculinity to the women." She also noted that they have had no difficulties at all with bodily harm coming to the women. Only one woman has been injured in the prison and she "tripped over a doorstep."

These reports corroborate my observations. However, my experiences and those of the women at the Bucks County Prison do not comprise a large enough sample on which to make any definitive judgements as to whether or not dangerousness is actually decreased with women counselors. It is an area that needs further exploration. The whole issue of dangerousness is being raised because much of the reluctance to working in correctional settings on the part of women professionals, and of men to having them there, seems based on an inflated estimate of the risk involved.

### Conclusions

As is evident, throughout this paper, I believe that there is a definite place for women professionals in correctional settings. To what extent the use of women enhances the therapeutic process with inmates or improves the atmosphere of the penal facilities are questions that need more attention. It is surprising that more scrutiny has not already been given to this issue here in the United States. In Sweden, the merits of using women in male prisons have been recognized for many years. Morris (1973) notes that the United States' prisons have a valuable lesson to learn from the Swedish prison system and says:

"Women bring a softening influence to the prison society, assisting men by their presence to strengthen their inner controls, through a variety of entrenched processes of psychosocial growth."

As more women enter the correctional field, benefits such as those noted by Morris should become more clearly recognized. For the women themselves, it can be a challenging experience, in that they will essentially be pioneers in the field and make a tremendously needed contribution to an underserved segment of the population.

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