

# A DECONSTRUCTION AND CRITIQUE OF THE FEMALE INTERVENTION TEAM

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*Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in female juvenile offenders resulting in a growing interest in how to best address delinquent girls. In response to the changing demographics of juvenile offenders, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), a part of the Department of Justice, has called for “gender-specific” services. In this paper I will take one particular gender-specific intervention lauded by the OJJDP as a best practice in the field, the Female Intervention Team (FIT), and deconstruct the theories and beliefs that ground the intervention. This paper argues that FIT is problematic for three main reasons: first, FIT essentializes being female; second, FIT constructs girls as victims; and finally, FIT places too much emphasis on the individual girl’s agency at the cost of ignoring how structural forces contribute to and affect her reality.*

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Girls’ involvement in juvenile crime has grown consistently over the past decade (Acoca, 1999). Along with this rise in female juvenile offenders, there is a growing interest in how to best deal with delinquent girls. This changing demographic in the juvenile justice system has contributed to a new call for “gender-specific” services. Some researchers suggest that girls follow a distinct pathway to offending and have different developmental needs that require interventions specifically tailored for the female offender (Acoca; Chesney-Lind & Sheldon 1991; Peters, 1998). Gender-specific programming involves a set of core principles that emphasize nurturing female identity and supporting girls’ needs for “positive healthy relationships” (Daniel, 1999, p. 4). In this paper, I will take one particular gender-specific intervention, the Female Intervention Team (FIT), and deconstruct the theories and beliefs that ground the intervention. I will begin with a brief historical overview of the key theoretical developments that have shaped the social understanding of girls in society. I will then analyze three assumptions embedded in FIT about female offenders. Finally, I will argue that FIT is problematic for three main reasons. First, FIT essentializes being female, or attempts to create an understanding of being female that is universal

for all girls and encapsulates all that is defined by being female within a bounded category. Second, FIT constructs girls as victims. Finally, FIT places too much emphasis on the individual girl's agency at the cost of ignoring how structural forces contribute to and affect her reality.

### Historical Overview

Biological theories were one of the first explanations for female criminal behavior. The classic delinquency text by Lombroso and Ferrero (1895) proposed that criminals were less evolved from normal law-abiding citizens and displayed certain primitive body traits. Building on the theories that emphasized female biology as central to women's nature, further exploration into female delinquency focused more specifically on female sexuality. The emphasis on female sexuality set the foundation for many future theories on female delinquency. However, some theorists who examined the problem of female sexual deviance saw the potential to protect these "problem girls."

The beginnings of a modern theory of female delinquency used the concept of gender roles to suggest that differential gender role socialization encouraged girls to pursue success through relationships (marriage) and males to achieve success through accomplishments (Artz, 1998; Grosser, 1952; Morris, 1963). Grosser was one of the first authors to relate this concept to female delinquency. He suggested that female delinquency was "relational" and reflected an aspect of female subculture similar to the way violent and aggressive behavior in men reflected male subculture (p. 120).

Although socialization theorists acknowledged that much of their research failed to support these ideas, they continued to promote a stereotypical understanding of gender and female identity (Artz, 1998; Grosser, 1952; Morris, 1963). The theories were based on two assumptions: first, that female delinquency was primarily sexual and interpersonal in nature while male delinquency was primarily aggressive and violent. Second, they assumed that girls and boys experience different socialization processes in their early development. These socialization processes play a central role in the development of personality characteristics that make females less inclined to delinquent behavior. Ironically, although they differ on where essential female qualities originate, socialization theories seem to come to the same conclusions as biological theories regarding female delinquency.

In response to theories that emphasized female difference from males, liberal feminists (Friedan, 1965; Wollstonecraft, 1975) challenged that women were similarly capable of reason and rational thought as men.

They argued that women were not by nature intellectually inferior, more prone to hysterics, or more emotional or relational. They suggested that in the absence of social and economic equality, women were subjected to oppression and marginalization that rendered them more vulnerable to poverty and discrimination, which could explain a turn to deviant behavior (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 1991). These feminists demanded equality as a solution to the problem of being denied agency and rights.

When the second wave of feminism emerged, these new radical feminists pushed the equality argument in a different direction (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982). They countered that the sameness doctrine that emphasized how women and men were equals obscured the social realities of women's experiences as mothers, daughters, partners, and the myriad other roles they held (Chodorow; Gilligan). Out of this understanding of the distinct social reality of women, radical feminists created a difference doctrine that emphasized women's unique voice as caring and nurturing beings (Gilligan). Two centuries after the first theories on female delinquency suggested that females were inherently different from males, and that their maternal role and nurturing capacities were central to their identity as women, the second wave of feminism continued to support many of these assumptions. In fact, this feminism was not that radical after all.

### The Female Intervention Team

The Female Intervention Team is one example of an intervention that has come out of the radical feminist movement to acknowledge the "universal experience of womanhood" (Daniel, 1999, p. 14). FIT is a program designed by the Maryland Juvenile Justice system to work specifically with girls in Baltimore City's juvenile justice system. All of the participants in FIT were adjudicated as delinquents in Baltimore and would have been alternatively placed in secure confinement. Their crimes range from drug offenses and theft to simple assault and gang-related violence. The Female Intervention Team's mission is to "restore hope to young women who have lost their direction and focus and lack goals" (Daniel, p. 4). It accomplishes this through a variety of programs and services designed specifically for the female offender (Daniel).

#### *There is Not a Universal Female Perspective*

One of FIT's core programs is called Rites of Passage. This program is designed to help girls "make a positive transition to womanhood" (Daniel, 1999, p. 19). Through the program girls learn to "celebrate womanhood

with symbols, rituals and spiritual awareness” (Daniel, p. 19). The idea of celebrating womanhood is somewhat new in the treatment of female juvenile offenders. Historically, the onset of puberty and menstruation has been stigmatized as something that is impure and causes females to be more hysterical (Birke, 1986). However, the idea of embracing and celebrating the “passage to womanhood” places the female adolescent experience of puberty as a defining point in a young women’s identity formation. The Rites of Passage program attempts to honor the female perspective, yet little is said in the program to explain what is involved in a female perspective (Daniel). This idea is grounded in many of the earliest biological theories that began to study female delinquency. By creating a binary of male and female that presumes these are the only two sexes that exist, girls are forced to act within the confines of the female sex, however female is defined by society (Butler, 1990). Delinquency has traditionally been constructed as a male activity. When girls act delinquently, theorists have argued they were acting male and rejecting their female nature. Programs such as the Rites of Passage, with its emphasis on celebrating womanhood, assume that when these problem girls were engaging in delinquent acts, they were rejecting their core femininity.

### *Female Adolescence Poses Girls with Unique Challenges*

The Female Intervention Team designed its programming to work only with girls because the task force and staff believed that girls face “distinct challenges during adolescence because of their gender” (Peters, 1998, p. 5). The intervention emphasizes female sexuality as a central component of female difference and delinquency. The Female Intervention Team also is reminiscent of the early 19th and 20th century movements to save deviant women. The program provides a safe space for girls, removed from their home environments, where they can learn how to avoid negative peer influences and become more resilient (Daniel, 1999). The Female Intervention Team assumes girls are controlled by their sexuality; however, by providing a “female friendly environment that promotes positive change” (Daniel, p. 22), FIT attempts to undo the effects girls experience from their environments.

### *Females Need Relationships for Positive Development*

During staff training and designing of FIT programs, professionals were keenly aware of the idea that “relationships are central to girls’ lives” (Daniel, 1999, p. 7). The idea that girls are relational is another component of the assumption that there is an appropriate way to act female. Staff attempted to model healthy relationships for the girls and

required mandatory participation in a conflict resolution class (Daniel). This class attempted to teach the girls how to “get along in their families, neighborhoods, and communities” (Daniel, p. 19). The Female Intervention Team’s programs suggest that those females who lacked certain female characteristics such as the ability to nurture and maintain healthy, positive relationships, were at risk of becoming more delinquent. This assumption is gender-biased and suggests that delinquency is inherently masculine.

### Negative Aspects of the Intervention

#### *The Problem of a Universal Woman*

The Rites of Passage program is a clear example of how FIT privileges one understanding of womanhood. Although the program description does not offer an explanation for how FIT defines the experience of womanhood that the participants are supposed to embrace and celebrate, the underlying concept is that there is an essential woman. Establishing a category of femaleness is problematic on many levels. For girls who feel unable to fit their experience of what it means to be female into the constructed understanding of femaleness, this category may feel exclusive and confining. The Female Intervention Team’s attempt to address the issue of female delinquency by creating a program that is “responsive to girls’ needs” places gender at the center of the female identity (Daniel, 1999, p. 9). Ironically, while interventions such as FIT seek to challenge and move past the stereotypical constructions of girls and female deviancy that were posited throughout much of the 19th and 20th centuries, FIT does not stray far from the traditional constructions of girlhood. Indeed, the theories behind FIT reify many of the stereotypes about girls its creators hoped to defeat.

Prominent post-structuralists such as Brown (1995), hooks (1984), and Lorde (1985) question why it is necessary to insist on a single, static construction of “female” subjectivity. As Brown argues:

After all, the most ardent feminist poststructuralists do not claim that women’s pervasive economic subordination, lack of reproductive freedoms, or vulnerability to endemic sexual violence simply evaporates because we cannot fix or circumscribe who or what woman is or what it is that she wants. Certainly gender can be conceived as a marker of power, a maker of subjects, an axis of subordination, without thereby converting it to a center of selves understood as foundational (p. 41).

The model of gender-specific programming is flawed because it succumbs to pressure from the liberal tradition to reveal and rely upon a universal truth. In order to garner recognition for gender bias in juvenile court and a paucity of alternatives to detention services for girls, advocates and practitioners have resorted to a limited definition of what it means to be a girl (Kempf-Leonard & Sample, 2000).

Gender-specific programming places gender at the center of a girl's life and constructs meaning out of a girl's behavior and life experiences based upon her gender. Yet, theorists such as Butler (1990) have suggested alternative ways of understanding gender. Butler writes, "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid, regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort of being" (p. 33). While it may seem threatening to the girls' rights movement within the juvenile justice field to suggest eliminating the notion of a universal female, the possibilities for understanding girls' experiences are much broader when subjectivity is constructed as a constantly varying and dynamic process.

### *Victimization and Dependency*

After gender-specific programs such as FIT create an essential female for girls to aspire to and celebrate, the program model teaches girls about productivity and dependency. On the surface, the creators of FIT purport to be teaching girls to be self-sufficient through educational interventions and to be productive by encouraging work, skills training, and the value of contributing to society (Daniel, 1999). However, careful analysis of the program reveals the creators' understanding of emotional dependency as acceptable and financial dependency as unacceptable. The emphasis on teaching girls to be in healthy, positive relationships suggests that relationships are important to society and that females have a responsibility to maintain relationships in both families and communities. If only the model of gender-specific programming valued the liberal, rugged individual, it would not place so much importance on girls' ability to successfully maintain relationships with adults.

Clearly, society has a vested interest in producing a girl who is not only productive but also caring and nurturing. As evidence of this interest, during the early stages of designing the intervention, the Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) reported that they must "view these girls not only as individual teenagers but also as mothers and potential mothers" (DJS, 1992, p. 5). DJS viewed the FIT program's responsibilities as going beyond treating the girls but also molding their children and future children. A

key component of the teen parenting group was teaching the girls how to nurture (Daniel, 1999). Raising young women who are caring and nurturing towards their children and families serves society well. These girls may grow up to care for their elderly parents, maintain intact families without public assistance, and pass along the value of taking care of one's own to their children (Folbre, 2001; Peterson, 2001). As Folbre notes, "high quality care creates benefits that extend well beyond the immediate recipients...Parents who raise happy, healthy and successful children create an especially important public good" (Folbre, p. 50). Folbre and Peterson suggest that society is not only interested in producing productive citizens (individuals who have jobs and can support themselves financially), but is also interested in producing citizens who care and nurture.

It is important to note that the individuals who advocate for gender-specific services are in fact well-intentioned people who are using these constructions to serve society. Their motivations are not only to produce a certain type of female, but also to create sympathy for this often invisible population (Acoca, 1999). The practitioners of FIT unfortunately fall prey to the double-edged sword of having to construct this population as victims in order to justify state intervention. In many ways, the identity politics employed by radical feminists calls for a universal womanhood and also relies upon victimization to garner support. Brown (1995) applies the example of consciousness raising or other confessionals that attempt to convey the woman's experience as a way of using a collective identity to legitimize victimization.

### *Structure, Agency, and Rational Choice*

While gender-specific programming does construct the girls as victims, the model of intervention also identifies the girls as individuals with agency to change their position in society and make better choices (Daniel, 1999). For example, one component of the FIT program is the use of simulated baby dolls in the pregnancy-prevention program; young mothers are also invited to talk to the participants about the hardships of balancing work, school, and family at such a young age. The stated purpose of the intervention is to "provide girls with information they can use to make choices" and "to help girls decide if they are ready to be parents" (Daniel, p. 7). The program is problematic because it presumes teenage pregnancy is the result of a rational choice. The idea is that if FIT staff provides girls with information they will make better choices, such as to avoid sexual activity and pregnancy. The model of gender-specific programming attempts to teach girls to make choices that do not drain society financially, which

allows them to produce public goods both economically and socially by providing care and support to both family and community. Little consideration is given to the role societal structures play in constructing the lives of the FIT participants.

### Conclusion

Returning to the original mission of FIT to “restore hope to young women who have lost their direction and focus and lack goals” (Daniel, 1999, p. 15), this analysis shows that FIT had very specific ideas in mind for which direction the girls’ lives should follow and what goals the girls should have. The idea of providing better services for girls may be a noble one, but social workers must be wary of what exactly these services entail. Gender-specific services for girls in the juvenile justice system are spreading throughout the country with the endorsement of the federal government. However, many questions are still left unanswered. Are we certain the services defined as needed for girls would not also be useful for boys? What effect does constructing girls as relational, sexual, and maternal beings have on our understanding of masculinity and male juvenile delinquency? Social work practitioners who work with delinquent girls must move beyond the rigid stereotypes that have been used throughout the last two centuries to understand female delinquency. Social work should acknowledge all girls as unique individuals and examine how society’s expectations should or should not influence girls’ sense of what it means to be successful or complete human beings.

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