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Pollack Sh. (2004). *Anti-oppressive Social Work Practice with Women in Prison: Discursive Reconstructions and Alternative Practices*. “British Journal of Social Work”, 34(5): 693–707

Literature review

Shoshana Pollack, the author of this article, holds a Ph.D. in Social Work from the University of Toronto and a Master’s Degree in Social Work from Carleton University. She works as an assistant professor in the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo. Prior to joining Laurier, she worked as a clinical social worker at the (former) Kingston Women’s Prison, providing individual trauma counseling. Since 1991, she has worked as a clinician in the field of women’s mental health, focusing on violence against women and child abuse. She also maintains a small private psychotherapy practice in Toronto.

In this paper, I summarise and analyze the work published by Shoshana Pollack on anti-oppressive social work practices. Furthermore, I discuss relevant information and new aspects or data that have emerged since the publication of the article in 2004. Finally, I offer my opinion based on the article and my research on the subject.

Article summary

In the article, the author analyses actual prison practices with women in rehabilitation (at the time of publication), discussing how an anti-oppressive practice (AOP) framework can contribute to the understanding and intervention with women in prison. In particular, she focuses on how social workers and professional prison workers can better understand and respond to women’s mental health problems and the experience of imprisonment.

Anti-oppressive practice (AOP) is described as a framework that draws upon a variety of approaches such as feminist, critical, anti-racist, post-structural and post-modern theories of practice (Payne 1997). Its aim is to try to de-individualize clients’ problems in order to see them within the broader social context of their lives.

This article constantly criticizes the literature of “what works”, which refers to the cognitive-behavioural programmes used by prison authorities to reduce incidence. These programmes are the antithesis of the practices advocated by the author, which are based on the premise that crime is the result of offenders’ inability to think and reason logically. Thus, these practices limit the causes and consequences of ending up in prison to the “criminal personalities” of the imprisoned. What Pollack (2004) will discuss throughout her work is the need to eradicate such practices or, if not, to change them so that structural and interpersonal inequalities are no longer invisible and the multidimensional aspects (racial, class and gender oppression) of the treatment of women in prison are understood.

Furthermore, Pollack (2004) defends his position with several studies with peer support services done in prisons where AOP-based programmes are used. Studies such as Counseling Education (ACE) in Bedford Correctional Facility in New York State are examples of a more effective way of working between prisoners, social workers, and prison workers, leading to better outcomes in behaviour and understanding with prisoners.

After discussing the need to change the programmes used in prisons, particularly for women, Pollack (2004) concludes that while the struggle between offering support services for incarcerated women and the possibility that these services are complicit in perpetuating the regularisation of incarcerated women is a challenge, it is not impossible as they have already been implemented in some American prisons.

Critical reflections

The overarching purpose of this article is to demonstrate the effectiveness of AOP programmes and to improve the service in prisons. Pollack’s (2004) arguments are based on her own and other researchers’ studies published between 1990 and 2002. Her main argument for the need to change to AOP in prisons is based on a critique of the programmes used so far. While it is true that both cognitive-behavioural programmes (which base their theory on the “offending personality” as a symptom of a pathology) and those focused on mental health programming (based on the deficits of women in prison, i.e., their lack of skills, self-esteem, and independence), Pollack (2004) seems to neglect to show with stronger and more evident data and statistics why AOP programmes are better in terms of understanding, helping, and improving the lives of women in prison.

The Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (2008: 5) specifically states: “Social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity”. Although the definition dates from 2008 and the article was written in 2004, it reflects what Pollack (2004) advocates throughout the text. The practices described adhere to the definition and purpose of social work. Demonstrating once again that the practices used so far are neither in line with the definition of the profession nor follow a correct methodology according to their profession.

In short, although Pollack's (2004) article lacks statistical data to ratify her arguments, throughout the text she defends, explains, and argues her position, making the text an understandable and clarify read.

Further research

In this subsection, I will present publications and work subsequent to Shoshana Pollack's one on the same main theme, social practices, and women in prison. To find out whether AOP programmes have been established in prisons over the years, it is necessary to look for documentation between 2004 and 2021. We seek to know whether, as Pollack (2004) said, these practices will be difficult to change but not impossible, as there are already institutions that practice them to a lesser extent.

On the one hand, we have the work of Concepción Yagüe Olmos, Psychologist of the Cuerpo Superior Técnico de Instituciones Penitenciarias (Senior Technical Corps of Penitentiary Institutions). Shortly after the publication of Pollack (2004), Yagüe Olmos published in 2007 "Women in prison. Intervention based on their characteristics, needs and demands." Yagüe Olmos (2007) explains the situation faced by women in prisons in Spain and the prison programmes used for intervention, citing:

The idea that in order to tackle the historical discrimination suffered by certain groups it is necessary to implement affirmative action measures aimed at equalising differences is not new. So far, there has been no overall gender strategy for prisons, nor have there been any specific programmes specifically targeted at women (Yagüe Olmos 2007: 7).

With this paper, the author confirms that (1) the situation for women in prison described by Pollack in the United States in 2004 continues to be perpetuated in 2007 and not only there, but in other countries like Spain; and (2) the programmes used for intervention in prisons are still insufficient, following completely different working patterns from those of effective social work.

On the other hand, we found another Spanish document, published in 2021, on socio-educational intervention and reintegration practices in prisons for women "The gender approach in socio-educational intervention with women: a study in the Spanish penitentiary environment." This study ratifies its arguments with statistics and results, citing the following:

It involves therapeutic and educational improvements in terms of social, communicative and affective skills, given the difficulties of exclusion and stigmatisation of the group, as well as the creation of an exclusive space for the care of women, away from inequalities and gender differences in professional treatment. However, 25% of the interviewees demand a greater variety of content in this programme (Burgos *et al.* 2021: 8).

We see that in 2021, at least in Spain, AOP programmes will be included more frequently in prisons. The authors also demonstrate their positive effects on prison intervention. Even so, prisoners, workers and other professionals continue to call for greater use and more diversity in the programmes.

Conclusion

Throughout Shoshana Pollack's article (2004) as well as in the other two works, we see the same main idea reflected: the need to change intervention programmes in women's prisons. Although it is true that over the years AOP programmes have been taking up more space in prisons, the need to allocate more hours and resources to them continues to be denounced by both prisoners and workers.

Along with a denunciation of the treatment of women in prison and the generalization of an intervention generated for the male gender, these authors call for a better understanding and division of gender in both the studies done on the subject and the application of these to real life.

In summary, Pollack's (2004) message is clear: if we do not change the intervention methodology of AOP programmes we will continue to offer a service based on sexist, pre-structuralist and racist theories that do not recognise the impact of oppression on the availability of choices, decision-making, identity development and behaviour. And while accepting that such a reconceptualisation implies an ideological, political and programmatic shift in the approach to working with incarcerated women, the effort can and should be made.

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