

CAPUTO

A HALFWAY HOUSE FOR WOMEN

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A HALFWAY HOUSE FOR WOMEN



OPPRESSION AND RESISTANCE

GAIL A. CAPUTO

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For my daughter, Gia

PREFACE

I DID NOT SET OUT to write about how a halfway house reproduces patriarchal oppression in women's transition from incarceration to community and how women manage this domination. My research aim was quite different. I wanted to explore how women are able to exploit a criminal labor market despite sexism and other types of exclusion in that setting to make crime profitable. A central assumption in that research was my understanding that even though women involved in criminal and deviant activities may have lived difficult lives characterized by victimization and oppression, they nonetheless maintain a steady attitude of responsibility and determination consistent with the idea of human agency, the ability to act on one's own behalf. While my research topic changed over the course of my research, my understanding of women's agency did not.

The planned research took me to a halfway house, otherwise known as a residential reentry center, for women leaving incarceration and transitioning back to community life. The house was the same location where several years earlier I had conducted ethnographic research. I was familiar with the physical environment of the house, its management, and the population of women it served, so I knew I would be able to interview women with histories of different types of crimes and deviance. After being welcomed back by administrative staff, I arranged a first visit in the fall of 2010.

At this point, things took an unpredicted turn.

As I approached the house from the city street, I began to notice things I had not paid attention to before. The building's stone architecture, strikingly different from the surrounding brick storefronts and inner-city row homes, seemed to fit a past time, invoking a sense of seclusion. The tiny front-door window reflected my image rather than offered a view inside. I rang a buzzer for entry and announced my name into a door-mounted microphone as instructed by a woman's voice that came through a nearby speaker. The woman herself, revealed as a "monitor" clad in medical scrubs, instructed me to sign the visitor's log on a small entryway table. Noting as well the current time and my purpose for visiting, I saw that the last visitor had signed in seven days earlier. *This is unusual*, I thought,

recalling that criminal justice agencies and institutions are generally frequently visited. A second log, this one for residents to sign in and out, showed that only two women had left the house on this refreshing November day. I thought it odd that so few women were outside for work and activities because halfway houses had been developed years before to facilitate the reintegration of men and women into community living after having served periods of incarceration.

After a brief meeting with the administrators of this comparatively small facility, I headed toward the women who lived there—but paused as an intercom sounded a directive: “All residents report to the living room. Ladies, go to the living room for a mandatory class.” The voice over the intercom reminded me of a prison environment; it was impersonal and firm, and oddly formal given that the monitor making the announcement was just steps away from the women and could have easily introduced me personally.

As I stepped into the “living room” and through what seemed like an invisible barrier into the women’s space, I noticed five women dressed in loungewear, slouching in old and worn couches and gazing toward a very loud television. I introduced myself as Gail, shook hands with each of the women, then sat on the edge of a chair among them. One of the women started the conversation: “What your class? We gotta take your class?” Some of the other women stiffened up at that question and waited for my response. “No,” I told them. “I’m not here for a class. You don’t have to do anything for me. I don’t work in the [criminal justice] system. I’m a researcher. I write about women’s lives. I spent a lot of time here before with women who lived here. I want to know more about you guys; I want to learn from you. I want to tell your stories.” I explained that I had been here before and spent time with many other women who had shared this space. At this the women seemed to relax and began asking me questions about my prior research; some even asked for a copy of that work. I explained to the women that most people outside these walls have no conception of what life is like for women in high-crime and poor urban areas like this one. I told them that life challenges faced by women who are addicted and involved in the criminal justice system, who are incarcerated, or who are in a reentry center such as this one are foreign to most people. I told them that I wanted to share their world.

Other women entered the room, and the talk became livelier. Some described experiences in the criminal justice system; others complained about “classes” at this house and were happy to know I was not giving them one. They talked about being a particular “level” of stay at the house, about their past crimes and how they earned money on the “street,” about rules of this reentry center that they op-

posed, and about the two “new girls” in “Blackout” arriving the day before. One woman said she would like to participate in my research but would be “graduating” in the morning. As the minutes turned into an hour, I realized that we, the women narrators and the researcher of the reentry experience, were connecting. We carried on conversation with ease, as if we were in a different place, away from the surveillance that surrounded us.

As I prepared to leave, the women invited me to return, and I promised I would. On the drive home, I realized I had never before paid close attention to what was happening around me when I was inside the house. I had failed to notice just how idle the women seemed as they carried on “reintegration,” their styles of dress, the argot spoken at the house, and the feeling of distance between monitors and residents who went about their days in close proximity. I now felt the reentry center very much as a domestic space, but at the same time it remained a custodial and highly controlled environment filled with troubled yet determined women with internal struggles, such as drug cravings, and external constraints, including both the world outside that seemed to be so far away from them and restraints on their behavior inside the house. It was then that I knew my research topic would have to change. I needed to learn more about the women’s lives inside this space and give voice to their experiences in a reentry center geared to “changing lives.” After having obtained necessary approval, I returned to the women for a period of about eighteen months with a simple agenda: to learn from the women what it was actually like to progress through the phases, or levels, of stay in this reentry halfway house and how the women demonstrated their agency when defining and caring for their needs.

Ethnographic Method

The book is built on ethnographic research. Sometimes called participant observation or fieldwork, ethnography is the study of groups as they go about their everyday lives. Ethnographic research characteristically involves “participating in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions—in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 3). The participant observer’s task is to describe a scene or culture—here the everyday experience of women progressing through phases of reentry for community reintegration—from the emic, or “insider’s,” perspective (Fetterman, 2010). My goal as ethnographer was to convey for the reader what it was actually like to be

inside the house for reentry. As Geertz (1988, p. 16) writes, ethnographers have to do more than simply establish they have "been there"; they must also convince us readers that "had we been there we should have seen what they saw, felt what they felt, concluded what they concluded." Thus, ethnography requires a deep physical and psychological immersion into the new world under study, not as a genuine member of the group—because that cannot ever be achieved—but as participant or witness to everyday activities and relationships. This participant observation is approached, as Goffman (1989) explains,

by subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their situation . . . so that you are close to them while they are responding to what life does to them . . . to subject yourself . . . to their life circumstances . . . the desirable and undesirable things that are a feature of their life . . . and you're empathetic enough—because you've been taking the same crap they've been taking—to sense what it is they're responding to . . . [by doing this] you're artificially forcing yourself to be tuned into to something that you then pick up as witness—not as an interviewer, not as a listener, but as a witness to how they react to what gets done to and around them. (p. 125)

The physical immersion into the residents' world was accomplished by living with the women as they went about their reintegration. My past relationship with the center worked in my favor. Having maintained a professional connection with the house after the end of my previous research project, I was given open access to the building and the women inside. I was welcomed during weekdays and on weekends at any hour, with the only restriction that I could not reside in the house itself. An administrator said to me, "You're family here. Come and go as you please. The women need you." I was given access to all areas of the house, including the residents' bedrooms and the "Blackout" room, used to isolate newly admitted residents, and I was permitted to attend residents' classes and treatment programming in the house, complete chores and eat meals with the residents, and travel with the women outside of the house.

Such physical immersion at a site of study coincides with the psychological immersion to which Goffman refers, requiring constant focus and commitment to the research no matter how inconvenient or tiresome it may become or how much it invades the researcher's primary social world. Ethnographic studies of deviant populations vary widely in terms of time a researcher spends in the field.

Sometimes the researcher is involved on a part-time basis or on weekends when the researcher's schedule permits; other times the researcher's presence is much more sustained, nearing full immersion in the world under study. As it happened, I had the opportunity to relocate near the house just months before the start of the project. This move proved invaluable because I was able to physically submerge myself in the cultural and economic setting of the house, a neighborhood known for high crime, poverty, open-air drug sales and use, high rates of unemployment, and urban decay. To fully appreciate the area's culture and become part of it, I traveled on foot and by bicycle, and used public transportation. I also ran the streets every day for exercise—past drug users on stoops of abandoned row homes and across discarded spoons from cooked heroin on sidewalks, used diapers and other trash, wrappers from thin cigars used to smoke blunts, and tiny Ziploc drug bags of different colors signifying the products of local dealers. I shopped in local markets and supported local businesses, ate from local take-out, walked my dogs on local streets, and visited local parks. Attuning to the surrounding neighborhoods helped me understand and appreciate the women's frame of reference in many of our discussions.

For this project, I devoted much of my days and nights, weekends and holidays to the women at the house and outside the house. Rather than researching during "work hours," I was able to adjust my social, professional, and personal schedules so that my time at the house would be the focus of my every day. After a while I felt so much a part of the culture there, almost as if I had been pulled in, that I usually had to force myself to leave the house at night. I became psychologically immersed not just when I was at the reentry center doing ethnography but also when I was not physically there; the women were always on my mind.

Requiring more than physical presence, the psychological part of immersion requires focused listening and observing, asking questions, and connecting to the women under study. To understand "what life does to them," as Goffman writes, and to convey "how they react," an ethnographer must relinquish all history at the door and humbly open her heart to a new world. In an environment of women who, as a group, have endured so much struggle and hardship and whose reference points have come from a tough street life, extreme poverty, and battle against subjugation, I worked hard to shed the customs and rules of my comparatively privileged life, to discover their culture, and to make sense of their struggles. Shedding preconceptions and normative routines is sometimes the easy part. Ethnographic researchers must also work to be accepted, gain trust, and maintain rapport.

Being accepted by people under study is perhaps the greatest challenge in ethnographic research. An observation by one of the house residents about a volunteer treatment provider serves as an example of how important it is for an outsider to fit in. Rosa said: "You get in where you fit in." The treatment provider in this case "fit in" with the administrative staff, spending much of her time mingling with them rather than focusing on the women she was there to serve and demonstrating to the women that her allegiance was with the staff—with those who controlled and supervised the women. For this and other reasons, the residents rebelled against the volunteer, refusing to participate in her class. Whatever good the volunteer hoped to achieve was lost. Fitting in requires being aware of and controlling the impression one conveys through one's appearance and dress, demeanor, habits, and speech (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). So I learned the argot used by the women, dressed in a most casual style, and behaved as they did when summoned by monitors; during chores, meals, and mandatory "classes"; and during activities outside of the house, including riding the bus and interacting with strangers. Though I could never really become one of them, I worked hard to be perceived by others, including the residents themselves, as a woman doing research who is "among" residents—that is, engaged in and comfortable with their way of life and not an outsider or, worse yet, an "official" affiliated with the criminal justice system. One interaction with a new resident indicated early on in the research that my appearance and demeanor conveyed the impression I desired. She looked at me from across the dinner table, and, making eye contact, I said, "Hey, I'm Gail." "Polly," she said, as she tore into her fried chicken breast. "That's Gail; she a professor," said another resident to Polly, who smiled at me as she shook her head, saying, "Happens to da best of us. I don't even wanna know what *you* did to get in here."

More than dressing the part, or "talking the talk," as the women say, a researcher must develop and maintain rapport. Rapport is a "harmonious relationship" (Spradley, 2003, p. 44) between researcher and subject and a signal that the researcher has gained the trust of subjects. Rapport should not be confused with "deep friendship or intimacy." Still, the "capacity to feel, relate, and become involved" is key to ethnography, writes Liebling (2001) because "research is after all, an act of human engagement" (p. 474). Caring about the women and their experiences does not equate to bias. However, as Becker (1966, p. 241) argues, acquiring some sympathy for those we study and their life circumstances can "provoke the suspicion that we are biased in favor of the subordinate parties in an apolitical arrangement when we tell the story from their point of view." And it is

true that ethnographers must resist a “hierarchy of credibility,” the false idea that those with higher status and authority over a subordinated group have the right to define how things really are and the knowledge to do it accurately.

Trust is everything for ethnographic researchers. To the ethnographer, trust is like a treasure (Fetterman, 2010). The women at this reentry center did not give trust easily; just as they lived in tense mistrust on the streets and behind bars, they were naturally suspicious of strangers in this correctional environment. Yet, defenses against trust can be overcome. Candy put it this way: “I analyze you. I dissect you like you a goddamn frog. I sit back ’n I analyze you, ’n I go by your first impression, your demeanor, how ya carry yourself, how ya speak. I give you a little, ’n see what you do wit it. Tell you a little about me, ’n see what happens. See where you go wit it. You don’t go to nobody wit it, we good. See in order to talk you got to relate, got to relate to trust.”

Gaining trust involves more than making assurances of confidentiality or promising women that their stories will be told with integrity. It is more than minimizing interaction with administrative staff or adopting the women’s particular argot and routines. Trust is earned through character and action. Two factors come to mind when I think about how I was able to “fit in” with the women and to gain their trust. On a personal level, I have always felt at ease among people of different lifestyles; I have lived in middle-class suburbs and in high-crime minority areas and never felt out of place. A second factor that worked in my favor was my previous work with women from this particular organization. The women residents said they thought it was “right” and “good” that I wrote a book giving voice to women’s lives before and during their drug use and criminality. More importantly, the women knew that I cared about them and that I genuinely wanted to learn from them. I showed them I could be trusted by being with them at the house day after day, hour after hour, rather than being outside in the summer sun or at home on cold winter nights. I wanted the women to know that they were my primary focus during this time. Some of the women said they felt comfortable with me at the start. Rosa remembered feeling a connection almost immediately: “I felt comfortable wit you da day I met ya. The way ya carry yourself. I always had a good vibe wit ya.” Others needed more time, as Candy’s comments illustrate, to test me with knowledge and “see what happens. See where you go wit it.” Candy would test me by giving me information—on one occasion that she had broken a rule and had sex with a woman during her last time outside of the house—and wait to see what I did with that. Once she realized that I would neither repeat anything nor act differently toward her, she began to open

up steadily. Then, she told me, "You 'hood," one day when I entered the living room and shook her hand in a style she liked, followed by a "bump" or a quick shoulder-to-shoulder hug. This meant we were connected. Like Candy, Laurel was highly suspicious of me at the start. She said of her initial suspicions and ultimately her trust:

When you came in, we didn't know who da fuck you was. You coulda been a cop like dese otha mothafuckers, but it's you, Gail; there's just sumthin' about you. You fuckin' give it up real. You 'hood. You don't perceive to be this muthafucker, you're a fuckin' criminologist like you got some shit wit ya, but you still wanna use your role to be teach'd for understandin' 'n for betterin' our situation 'n in the world. I loves dat shit. Don't you know we look for you? You see how crazy we are when ya come in da fuckin' door? 'Cause we love you, you been in my life, to me you're my friend now.

Gradually, the women said they felt comfortable with my presence, which naturally led to stronger connections and dependable routines. The women would reveal secretes about their lives, their fears, dreams, and troubles; I would look to them for support and encouragement at times. Laurel's comment "You still wanna use your role to be teach'd for understandin'" illustrates the importance of care in ethnographic research, as does Adeline's remark "Everything you do, talking to us 'n listenin'—you care 'n we need you." I share these comments to convey just how important it is for a researcher to listen and to truly care, not just to maintain trust and acceptance. I was privileged to have been "let in" to the women's world, and over the course of a couple of months, I transitioned from stranger to friend. Eventually I became "homey," "my nigga," and "family now," who was "locked up in here wit us."

Once I felt accepted by the women, the fieldwork was simpler. I spent many days and nights participating in routine activities with the women. Some days I would stay for thirteen hours or more. Other times I would come and go two and three times between morning and night. I would often rest at the house after a long run in the neighborhood, stop in for a talk with women before I left to teach a class, and spend hours in front of the television with the women on long weekend nights. This physical immersion and the corresponding psychological immersion entrenched me in the resident world. As I took part in groups and "class" for treatment, completed chores, ate meals, played games, broke rules, and passed time with the women, the monitors also began to see my presence as routine, even summoning me over the intercom, which is used to communicate

only with residents of the house. In many ways, I did what the women did and felt what they felt, enabling me to “witness” their experiences during their phases of stay at the house and, in some cases, as Goffman writes, “taking the same crap they’ve been taking.” In time, new staff and treatment providers, as well as new residents, often assumed I was a resident at this halfway house for reintegration, which was another indication of just how comfortable the women and I had become with one another. The work also led me outside of the house with the women as they ran errands, rode buses, participated in treatment programming, deviated from outside appointments, and used drugs. The research carried me to the women’s neighborhoods and, in some cases, inside their homes and families.

Ethnographic data collection happens constantly—through listening, observing, asking questions, and interacting. It took place while at the house when I was “doing” the research, but also afterwards when I was reflecting on the experiences of the day. Most of the time, I carried a digital recorder and notebook, which I used to record information while I was in the house, then afterward when I detailed notes of my observations in the field. With the women’s permission, I conducted many interviews and often recorded conversations at mealtime, when women played board games, at chore time, and in many instances of idleness in the living room. Scenes depicted in this book as well as the women’s narratives are taken from these recordings, carefully kept field notes, reflections at the end of each day, and digital images. Some information was gleaned from publicly available records and house materials provided to residents.

An ethnographer must sometimes struggle with how to report findings, especially when results are critical of a system or organization. Ethnography, says Van Maanen (2011) carries both moral and intellectual responsibilities. The goal of the written ethnography is to tell a story of a culture without distorting it. It is through intensive and focused participant observation or fieldwork that this culture, argues Van Maanen, will be revealed. While I write with as little personal bias as possible, situate my findings within a broader body of literature, and keep the actual name and location of the study site, as well as the identities of the women, confidential, my research reveals harmful aspects of the reentry experience. Nevertheless, the right approach in my view is to be true to the data and, most importantly, to the women who are the best narrators of their own experiences. By virtue of the women’s graciousness and open hearts, this book reveals life inside Alpha Omega House,¹ a home for the reintegration and reformation of criminally involved women.

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