



MAGDA FRIŠAUFOVÁ

I Know What I'm Doing

Experiences of Women
who Use Methamphetamine

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Experiences of Women who Use Methamphetamine

MAGDA FRIŠAUFOVÁ



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INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is 'a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances. To reconstitute events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one's own imagination. [...] Storytelling gives us a sense that though we do not exactly determine the course of our lives we at least have a hand in defining their meaning' (Jackson 2002: 15–16).

Female drug users as a specific group have been in the focus of social science research for several decades. Much has been written about their specific situation, especially concerning their unequal gender position, higher stigmatization, or harder access to treatment or social services. On the other hand, not that much attention has been given to their strategies of resistance, or dealing with problems they encounter in their everyday lives. Therefore, the aim of this book is to provide a different view on the living situation of women who have experience with drug use. In this book I present the results of my research whose aim was to gain deeper understanding not only of the challenges that women drug users face, but also the strengths and agency that they use to influence and take control over their lives, negotiate their needs and interests with the world around them. By focusing on agency, I do not deny the marginalization and inequalities which female drug users encounter in various forms. In my approach, the structural and individual dimensions are seen as equally important and inseparably bound together through mutual interaction. It is also important to avoid overly strong emphasis on the structural constraints or the role of individual agency. As has already been discussed by other scholars (e.g. Anderson 2008; Denton 2001; Maher 1997; Sandberg and Grundetjern 2012), such a dichotomous perception often portrays female drug users as either rather powerless victims of oppression, or as volitional agents unrestricted by structural limitations. This view not only fails to provide a complete picture of the life situations surrounding

female drug users, but may also contribute to the further stigmatisation and disempowerment of these women.

In the first part of the book, I critically reflect on this dichotomous tendency in social science research. In the second part of the book, I suggest a theoretical framework through which the exercise of agency is researched in interaction with social structure. This allows an understanding of the life situations of female drug users in a broader context and prevents the further contributing to the dichotomous view of either victim or agent.

The theoretical framework presented in this book is grounded in postmodern feminism, through which I understand the life situation of women drug users as significantly influenced by their gender, but at the same time, the gendered characteristics of their situation are not taken for granted but rather are the subject of what needs to be understood. Therefore, women are not seen as automatically subordinated or oppressed; the focus is rather on the structure of power relations which are seen as both oppressive as well as supportive.

In the third part, I describe methodology of the research presented in this book. The data were generated through twenty-one in-depth interviews and four focus groups with seven women who had experience with the long-term use of methamphetamine. In the methodology part, I also introduce the main research question: **'How do women who have experience with long-term drug use exercise agency in their narratives about interaction with important subjects in their social environment?'**

Further I introduce the narrative analysis which was used for data interpretation and provide reflection of the research context.

In the fourth part of the book, by employing the narrative approach for data analysis and interpretation, I provide discussion of how agency is exercised in the research participants' narratives about interaction with important subjects in their social environment. Based on the data analysis, I identify important subjects and themes in the narratives and interpret how they are described as a source of support and/or oppression. This approach allows me to understand various ways in which agency was exercised in the narratives but also in interaction with me as the researcher.

The qualitative interviews and narrative approach to data analysis and interpretation allowed me to identify themes and relations

which the research participants regarded as important, but also to gain deeper understanding of the complex meanings they have for them as sources of support or constraint, and how they negotiate these meanings with their surroundings. The fourth part of the book contains four main chapters which are based on the most relevant themes from the interviews: drug use, motherhood, housing and experiences with violence.

In the fifth part of the book, I provide a discussion of the main research findings. I describe the important subjects in the social environment and various forms in which agency is exercised in interaction with these subjects. I also analyse the narrative discourse and interdiscursivity as other important forms through which agency was exercised in the interviews.

The main aim of the research presented in this book was to explore the living situation of women who have experience with long-term drug use in the wide variety of roles in which they describe themselves. Therefore, the view was not reduced solely to them as clients of social work or other helping institutions. However, all the participants, due to their long-term drug use, insecure housing conditions, or experience with domestic violence, were in contact with social workers from various organizations or other helping professionals. These workers were identified as important subjects with which the participants were in interaction and played important roles as sources or mediators of both support and constraint. Since my professional background is social work, it was also important for me to consider the implications that the research could have for social work, both on a very practical, but also theoretical level. Therefore, in the sixth part of the book, I provide discussion of the implications that the research findings have for social work. I ground the discussion in critical social work and address issues related to sources of knowledge, identity and power relations in social work and also suggest some recommendations for practice.

1. WHY GENDER MATTERS IN DRUG USE

As the target group of this book are women who have experience with drug use, firstly, I need to answer the question of why gender actually matters. Why is it necessary or important to look at drug use from a gender perspective?

The main reason for taking gender into account is that it creates the basis of social organization and division in society. Therefore, if we want to understand society or particular social phenomena, it is also important to understand the role that gender plays in it.

Gender, contrary to sex, which refers to the biological distinction between men and women, is a socially constructed category which enables us to analyse and understand the roles that men and women play in society.

However, to see 'gender as a crucial concept we run the risk to overemphasise the differences between women and men. Looking for the gender differences is by itself based on gender stereotypes and the emphasis on them reproduce another gender differences.' (Palm 2007: 20). Therefore, similarities between men and women, as well as the great differences within one gender category, need to be considered.

It is also important to take into account the intersection of gender and other structural characteristics such as ethnicity, age, or class, not to perceive the experience as essentially feminine or masculine. Therefore, for my analysis, I also employ the concept of intersectionality. This will be explained further in the chapter on agency and social structure.

1.1 A POSTMODERN FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Gender and particularly the unequal gender relations in society are the central issue for feminism. However, what feminists see as the crucial causes or reasons for the inequalities, as well as how greater gender equality should be reached, can differ substantially. Various feminist theories can even sharply contradict each other in what they

see as the reasons for and solutions to inequality. For this reason, it is more appropriate to speak about feminisms, or feminist theories, rather than a single feminism.

The view on gender in this book is grounded in postmodern feminism, which does not see it as a static concept based on essential categories of femininity and masculinity. From the postmodern feminist point of view, gender comes into existence through the way people perform it (Butler 1999). Therefore, when focusing on gender, my aim is not to claim what gender 'is' or even what it 'should be' in the context of drug use, but to explore how gender relations are constructed and reproduced through interactions in the everyday lives of women who use drugs.

Postmodernism brings to feminist thinking the claim for the deconstruction of the binary categories of men and women. The call for deconstruction does not mean to simply deny the role that these categories play in the organization of society, but to reflect the limits of thinking within this oppositional duality. Deconstruction is about calling the concepts into question and opening a wider discussion which also allows the recognition of differences within one category, rather than negating it (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002).

By focusing on how ideas about masculinity and femininity are constructed and operate in relation to each other, postmodern feminism also avoids simplistic theorising based on clear-cut notions of oppressors and victims (Trinder 2000).

In accordance with this postmodern feminist point of view, the fact that I placed women in the centre of my research does not stem from an assumption that women who use drugs are more oppressed, discriminated or vulnerable than their male counterparts. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the gendering processes which take place in drug use, as well as in the research concerning drug use or social work theory and practice.¹

¹ Postmodern feminist theory is closely related with concepts of narrativity, identity and power, which all have roots in postmodern thinking. These concepts are also crucial for my research and are elaborated in the upcoming chapters about narrative data analysis and critical social work.

1.2 THE VICTIM – REBEL DICHOTOMY IN RESEARCH ON WOMEN'S DRUG USE

In this chapter, I give a brief overview of the social science research on female drug use. I also identify two approaches which we can recognize when critically reading the scientific accounts of female drug use: one emphasizes the role of social structure and the second puts emphasis on individual agency. I also discuss the weak points of these approaches, since they offer an incomplete or even stigmatizing view on the life situation of women who use drugs.

Focus on female drug users as a specific group which needs to be reflected in theory as well as practice concerning drug use has been identified since the early 1970s. At that time, several pioneer works criticizing the gender-blind approach were written. Those books, written mainly by sociologists and criminologists, pointed to the relation between dependency on drugs and the unequal position of women in society and the higher stigmatisation or influence of drug use on parenting (e.g. Carter 1997, 2002; Etorre 1992, 2007; Inciardi et al. 1993).

Later in the 1990s, the gender-sensitive perspective was broadened to issues such as 'new drugs', health issues including higher risks of sexually transmitted diseases, violence, victimization, or involvement in the sex-business (Anderson 2008).

The latter were also more practice-oriented, with a clear aim to conclude recommendations for gender-sensitive drug policy (e.g. Stocco 2000, 2002; EMCDDA 2000, 2005, 2006). It was broadly 'accepted that understanding gender differences in drug-related behaviours is a critical requirement for developing effective responses' (EMCDDA 2006: 21), because women encounter a higher threshold in access to treatment and social services.

1.2.1 Emphasis on Structural Constraints

The pioneer works concerned with the lack of attention to the specific situation of female drug users placed great emphasis on the structural level of the problem. This approach needs to be seen in its historical

context, since the emphasis on structural constraints which female drug users encounter was a response to the positivist medical discourse that dominated drug research and policy well into the historical past. Contrary to the medical approach, maintained especially by psychiatrists and the 'disease model of addiction', the structural approach describes drug use as a social problem rather than an individual failing. The focus is on the political, cultural and economic contexts of drug use. Gender is understood as a crucial characteristic of social organization, and thus female drug use is directly linked to women's position in society. For instance, Ettorre (1992) maintains that it is important to recognise that women are socialised into dependency more easily and more often than men. She argues that for women 'dependency' stands not only for 'addiction', but also for 'subordination'. Having a 'dependency as addiction' is socially unacceptable, especially when it interferes with women's stereotypical social roles, such as housewife, worker, mother, daughter, or girlfriend; nevertheless, 'dependency as subordination' aligns with stereotypical gender norms and can even be a desirable state for women to assume as a core form of identity. Furthermore, 'carer' is a common role assigned to the woman since other people are also dependent on her (e.g. children, the elderly, a partner), a complex system of dependency is created, not only in the public sphere but within private life as well (Stocco 2000, 2002).

The structural inequality arising from gendered relations is further exacerbated by the double standards that exist for men and women. Various authors point out that because drug use in many ways contradicts what is seen as the social ideal of feminine behaviour, negative moral judgements and stereotypes are more likely in the case of drug-using women than in the cases of men (e.g. Ettorre 1992; Stocco 2000, 2002). The negative stereotypes are especially associated with what may be seen as 'typical female domains' such as morals, sexuality and the ability to care for themselves and others (Ettorre 1992). If women do not fulfil the expectations arising from these roles, they are often stigmatised far more severely than their male counterparts. These stereotypes generate even more punitive responses, both socially and legally, when women use drugs during pregnancy (Baker and Carson 1999; Carter 1997, 2002; Friedman and Alicea 1995, 2001; Klee 2002; Young 1994). Such negative stereotypes lead to women being described as aggressive and manipulative, acting without feelings

and emotions, or suppressing those feelings for the sake of obtaining drugs, or being sexually promiscuous. In their personal life, they are seen as lonely, unhappy, lacking self-confidence, or destructive. Their femininity is depicted as 'misplaced', 'rejected', or 'insufficient' (Carter 1997, 2002; Ettore 1992; Inciardi et al. 1993; Klee 2002; Lalander 2003; Maher 1997).

Although this overview of the issues discussed in social science research related to female drug use is far from exhaustive, it lends insight into the structural context which has broadened the focus from the previous, solely individual approach.

1.2.2 Emphasis on Individual Agency

However, the research accounts that concentrate on the structural dimensions of women's drug use have been criticised for not allowing sufficient space for the individual capacity to act. Thus, there are scholars who criticise the overestimation of the role of social structure and centre their research upon the role of individual agency. For example, doubt has been cast upon the uncritical acceptance of direct linkages between childhood abuse, or experiences with other forms of violence and involvement in law-breaking, and drug use. Criticism has also been directed at the linkages between female dependency on men and drug use, cast in the light of a highly stereotypical view of women's involvement in the drug world (Maher 1997).

Some authors take a rather challenging opposing position: that female drug use may be interpreted as a form of resistance or rebellion to social pressure and stereotypical gender expectations (e.g. Friedman and Alicea 1995, 2001; Baskin and Sommers 2008). Contrary to claims that women are becoming drug users through relationships with men in particular, they propose women's use of illicit drugs as a possible indicator of rising gender equality. Scholars interpret drug use as a denial of the passive role and an adoption of a more independent and rebellious lifestyle (e.g. Measham 2002).

From this viewpoint, the rising participation of women in the drug economy and the greater association with violent behaviour have been described as resulting from increasing emancipation of women throughout society.

1.2.3 The Victim – Rebel Dichotomy

I regard the contribution of scholars who put strong emphasis on the structural dimension as crucial for understanding the gender aspects of drug use. If the gender-sensitive approach is not to be reduced to a simple division between women and men drug users, based essentially on their sex rather than gender, we need to include the structural dimension to the analysis. It allows us to understand the dynamics through which the specific situations for male and female drug users are constructed and reproduced.

However, to look at the life situation of women who use drugs only through the structural dimension provides an incomplete view, since we can recognize the tendency to reduce the structure to restrictions and not reflect structural sources of support. There is also a lack of discussion about what strategies the female drug users employ to cope with problems they encounter. Structural approaches were quite successful in contesting what Anderson (2008) calls the ‘pathological narrative’ about female drug users, based on the idea that drug use is an individual failure. On the other hand, stress on structural inequalities and restrictions supports the ‘narrative of powerlessness’, in which female drug users are depicted as victims of oppressive constraints in society.

Furthermore, if the approach which emphasizes the oppressing force of social structure transpires into social work or other helping professions, it might contribute to practices which do not recognize available structural resources (e.g. the role of various informal networks), or fail to support and encourage a client’s individual agency. Such over-emphasis may also be deterministic, focusing only on situations involving dysfunction, dependence, powerlessness, exploitation and victimization. In the context of social work, it may be assumed that clients who are perceived as victims may consequently appear to be more legitimate recipients of help than clients who are perceived as strong agents. Professional workers may therefore expect that their clients may deliberately choose to identify with or play the role of victim in order to gain better access to institutional help, social benefits or other resources. When it comes to issues such as drug dealing, involvement in sex work, or the use of violence, it may also be easier or more acceptable for social workers to interpret such issues as a result

of social pressure rather than a deliberate choice on the part of the client.

Explaining drug use from the perspective of structural constraints may provide significant advantages for the people involved. For social workers, it may be a possible solution to dilemmas concerning legitimate and illegitimate recipients of help. For clients, the role of victim may facilitate better access to institutional help. However, this approach may still contribute to the further stigmatisation of drug users, since it fails to empower them, blocking attempts to achieve equal positions within society, to becoming responsible and capable of taking control of their own lives (Frišaufová 2013, 2014).

Paradoxically, an approach which aimed to free women who use drugs from the pathological stigma can contribute to their victimization in another way.

Due to the potentially victimizing effect of the approaches which stresses the structural oppression, I regard the understanding of female drug use which acknowledges individual capacities as paths to resistance to structural constraints as very important. However, even this approach is not without its drawbacks. If the view of the female drug user, on the other hand, is not placed within a broader social context, it may contribute to perceptions of women as volitional agents unrestricted by structural limitations. To see agency as exercised only through active resistance does not provide a complete understanding of women's capacities to deal with the problems they encounter.

This approach may support the image of women drug users as the so-called 'new violent female criminals', or 'troublesome girls' (Jackson and Tinkler 2007; Hudson 2008; Maher 1997; Worrall 2008) and explain their behaviour in a context which, contrary to the previous 'seen as the victim' scenario, over-endows women with agency and free will that is not appropriate to the actual structural conditions.

Seeing the situation of female drug users only through agency exercised by active resistance to oppressive circumstances can support the image of female drug user as a kind of 'villain', 'rebel', or rational agent only seeking ways to maximise deviant or criminal opportunities and self-interest. When this approach translates into the practice of social work or other helping professions, it can contribute to the view of clients as 'addicts by choice', who use drugs for their own pleasure, without caring about the possible negative consequences for

themselves and others. Thus structural context is often un-reflected or underestimated. Social workers and other professionals who perceive female drug users in the role of ‘villains’ or ‘rebels’ may denigrate or blame clients for being aggressive and inconsiderate to others, which especially in the case of women is seen as problematic or inappropriate behaviour. From this standpoint, women may not be seen as legitimate recipients of help, and institutional support might therefore be withheld. As Anderson points out,

Showing women’s power and agency in illegal endeavours will diminish sympathy for assisting them in securing better lives. To their credit, ‘powerlessness and pathology’ frameworks have succeeded in elevating academic attention to women and in rising support and resources for them (2008: 3).

If agency is only seen as active resistance without understanding the broader context, social workers might also find themselves in a dilemma: how to support and engage with resistance, because such behaviour might be perceived as encouraging their clients in deviant or illegal behaviour. An example might be found in the situation where a social worker wants to support a client’s ability to finance housing, herself and her family, but does not agree with the illegal source of money which might have been gained through drug dealing, prostitution or theft, for instance (Frišaufová 2013, 2014).

1.3 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have explained the relevance of gender and the post-modern feminist perspective in the research of drug use. I have also given a brief overview of and critical reflection on the social science accounts on the topic of female drug use.

In the chapter about the social science research on female drug use, I have identified two approaches which by their emphasis either on structural constraints or individual agency might support the images of female drug users as either rather powerless victims of outer circumstances, or volitional agents, some kind of rebels who are not restricted by any structural limitations. I also critically discussed

how this dichotomous perception can contribute to their further stigmatization.

Therefore, in my own research it was very important to develop a framework which would help me to prevent contributing to these potentially stigmatizing approaches by depicting the involvement of women in the illicit drug world through either powerless or pathological narratives. As explained earlier, this is where I find the postmodern feminist perspective as very useful. It allows me closer examination of the narratives about female drug users as they are constructed through social science research. Furthermore, drawing attention to the women drug users themselves enables me to understand how they construct their life situation, what they see as problems, challenges, opportunities, sources of support, etc. As Fawcett (2000) explains, postmodern feminism rejects the modernist, universalistic and essential conception of self, but at the same time, moves away from merely seeing the subject as constructed by discourse. It endows the subject with agency, because there is also space for resistance within the discourse. Women are positioned in the discourse of drug use, but at the same time they have the capacity to position themselves within this discourse. Thus, the subjects are not only 'being constructed, but also constructing'.

As with anyone, the life situation of women who use drugs includes a whole spectrum of relations, experiences and desires. In the following, I suggest a framework which allows me to gain a deeper understanding into how female drug users exercise agency in their everyday life, but at the same time enabling them to exercise agency through constructing their own narratives about their life. This framework provides a definition of agency which is conceptualized through interaction with the social structure and social environment.

2. THE INTERACTION OF AGENCY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

As was already discussed in the previous chapter, the limited view on structure as mainly restrictive, and agency as exercised only through active resistance towards oppression contributes to an incomplete and dichotomous view on a life situation. To avoid this shortcoming, in this chapter, I suggest broadened definitions of agency and social structure. I also introduce the concepts of intersectionality and social environment, which are both useful tools for understanding the interaction of agency and social structure.

2.1 AGENCY

Researchers seeking to understand the exercise of agency have to address the difficult task of how to define it in a way that includes all the various and often paradoxical or contradictory forms in which agency can be exercised.

A number of authors agree that agency can be defined as the individual, socio-culturally-mediated capacity to act; that is used to overcome the structural constraints that operate upon social action (e.g. Ahearn 2001; Giddens 1984; McNay 2000, 2004; Sewell 1992). However, it is important to understand structural conditions not only in terms of oppression, but also as a potentially enabling source of support and resources. Agency therefore needs to be defined also as the capacity to act in order to use the sources to the benefit of self and/or others (Anderson 2008). Agency is thus seen as exercised not only in situations in which individuals encounter structural constraints and are acting against them, but also in cases in which female drug users use structural resources to their benefit. The capacity to act includes the ability to intervene, as well as any decision to refrain from intervention. Therefore, agency can be present in action, as well as in any choice for 'non-acting'.