The Making of a Female Criminal Class Exercise

This class activity was originally created for a Psychology of Female Offenders course to promote critical thinking and an understanding of contributing risk factors to crime. However, after administering the activity for several years, other applications of the exercise have emerged. The activity is highly adaptable and easy to administer and can be utilized in both online and on ground formats, as well as with various group sizes and grade levels.

Students are given The Making of a Female Criminal handout in class (or provided electronically if online) and asked to answer the questions related to a person’s circumstances and its relationship to crime. This can be done individually or in breakout groups in class or via Zoom, or the exercise can be completed in a discussion forum. Once the students have answered all the questions, the responses are written on the board (or they can write them on a piece of paper if online or use the white board feature of Zoom). The board quickly becomes filled with mostly negative outcomes such as low self-esteem, abandonment issues, depression, anxiety, self-harm/suicide attempts, bullying, gang involvement, addiction, etc. Once all the answers are written down, the students are asked the following in a group discussion:

1. What individual, familial, sociological, and psychological influences are at play here?
2. If you wanted to help this person, where would you start? What would be the priority?
3. Describe what you think life might be like for her in her early twenties. Typically I start getting answers related to addiction, unwanted pregnancies, mental health issues, and criminal and gang involvement.
4. I then ask what this person’s life might look like in their late 30s or early 40s. Here the students typically paint a bleaker picture often involving homelessness, suicide attempts, or say that she has died (usually via a violent means or suicide).
5. I ask the students to consider the label in the title, “female criminal.” We discuss concepts such as labeling, stigma, stereotyping, and alternate ways to refer to women in the criminal justice system.

I then tell the students they did some great thinking here, all these answers are correct. These are all possible risk factors. I tell them they forgot about one thing though: resilience and the power of protective factors, and this is actually a very similar profile of Oprah Winfrey!

After this message sinks in we go back and look at possible points of prevention and intervention, and identify potential protective factors and key stakeholders in the community who might have been able to help. I end the discussion with a talk about recognizing risk factors but never giving up on an individual.

I have found various ways to complete this exercise. I have given half the class the exercise with a boy’s name titled The Making of a Criminal (omitting the word female), and half the class with a girl’s name and watched gender differences appear. For example, obesity is usually identified as a strength for boys as they can bully, intimidate, and succeed in sports such as wrestling and football which can serve as a source of positive self-esteem, escape, and a stress reducer. For girls, however, obesity is often seen as a detriment leading to poor self-esteem, becoming the victim of bullying, and a risk factor for addiction and poor relationships. Any of the criteria can be modified such as the age, race, or socioeconomic level, or adding other elements such as
sexual orientation or religious beliefs, for example, to make any point the instructor wants to highlight. While the purpose of this exercise is to identify how these attributes can be risk factors to conducting criminal activity, the exercise can be modified slightly to address other constructs such as intersectionality, self-esteem, stigma, perception, and stereotypes. The exercise (or a modified version) can also be used in a variety of different courses such as psychology, criminal justice, gender studies, sociology, social psychology, or social justice courses. I do this exercise in the first few weeks of the semester as it is highly interactive and helps the students get to know each other, and it sets the stage for the remainder of the course. The students frequently refer back to this exercise throughout the remainder of the course.

Contact Information:
Dr. Diane Hall
Professor of Psychology
Bay Path University
Email: dhall@baypath.edu
The Making of a Female Criminal

Consider each of the following life circumstances that 16-year-old Vanessa has experienced during her lifetime. Describe how each one may have affected her and contributed to her eventual legal issues.

1. Vanessa experienced childhood sexual abuse by a family member.

2. Vanessa is Black.

3. Vanessa grew up in poverty.

4. Vanessa was removed from her immediate family and placed with a family member.

5. Vanessa struggled with obesity.

6. What legal issues do you think Vanessa might encounter in the future?

Created by Dr. Diane Hall, Bay Path University