

Defending Motherhood: Strategic Comparisons and the Management of Moral Self-Worth among Ex-Offender Mothers

Authors : Geniece Mondé

Abstract : This article examines how formerly incarcerated mothers deploy strategic comparisons to support their claims of moral self-worth. In depth interviews with 69 ex-offender mothers show that although women occupy a morally ambiguous space, they frame their roles as “good” mothers as independent of past illegal activity. In substantiating the “good” mother narrative women draw comparisons with two groups of women. Some respondents identify individuals perceived as morally disadvantaged and draw comparisons that illustrate their comparative strength in relation to mothers who fail to adequately meet the needs of their children. Women also compared themselves to morally advantaged mothers and expressed a desire to embody the ideals and values of women they viewed as superior mothers. Findings reveal that respondents’ use of strategic comparisons substantiates their framing of personal moral identity, as well as their goals for the future. The paper concludes by examining the theoretical implications of strategic comparisons for the study of morality and identity construction.

Keywords : Ex-Offender, Rehabilitation, Incarceration, Motherhood

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