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WOULD YOU OFFER YOUR HEART TO THE WOLF WITH THE RED ROSES?
THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH VIOLENT AND
INCARCERATED MEN

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of
Antioch University Seattle

In partial fulfillment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

by

Amber R. Silverwood

ORCID Scholar No. 0009-0008-5613-6747

November 2023

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THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH VIOLENT AND
INCARCERATED MEN

This dissertation, by Amber R. Silverwood, has
been approved by the committee members signed below
who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of
Antioch University Seattle
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

WOULD YOU OFFER YOUR HEART TO THE WOLF WITH THE RED ROSES? THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH VIOLENT AND INCARCERATED MEN

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Relationships with incarcerated individuals can be complex and complicated for the partner outside the prison walls. These relationships are seldom discussed and are poorly studied overall, with minimal information available about the people who start romantic relationships with people in prison. This study aimed to better understand the lived experiences of the women who engage in romantic relationships with men and specifically examined romantic relationships that started after their partner was incarcerated. The participants for this study were located on the website Reddit, in a designated subreddit for women in such relationships. In total, nine women responded and spoke candidly about their experiences and the challenges involved in their relationships. The study utilized interpretative phenomenological analysis to examine the results and established several themes to help better understand the experiences of these women. During Zoom interviews, the participants spoke about their challenges with communication and financial hardships, but the results indicate that the fear of being judged by other people keeps them from disclosing information about their relationships. In some cases, the fear of being judged by other people appears to have increased the level of isolation among this population. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (<https://aura.antioch.edu>) and OhioLINK ETD Center (<https://etd.ohiolink.edu>).

Keywords: hybristophilia, incarceration, prison pen pals, prison wives

Dedication

To my family, who helped me to zig when everyone else zagged. Your personalities and genetics made me, for better or worse, the incredibly strange and unusual person I am today. Your support and encouragement kept me on this path. You'll never read this, but I hope you know how much I cherish all that you've done and sacrificed to help me achieve this goal.

To the friends I have made and lost along this journey. I truly could not have survived this without you. The triumphs and hardships we experienced together forged me into the person I am today. I wish you all the happiness and success you deserve.

To all the dogs who walked with me down this path. I strive to demonstrate a fraction of the compassion and understanding they showed me at every turn, at every challenge, and with every mistake I made over the years. They will always be better than most of the people on this planet.

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This endeavor would not have been possible without the support of my committee. I want to thank my chair, Dr. Michael Sakuma, for his support, compassion, and unyielding guidance. This project would not have reached fruition without his steadfast encouragement and thoughtful challenges every step of the way. I want to extend this gratitude to my committee members, Drs. Jude Bergkamp and John Haroian, who willingly agreed to be a part of this research project. Your contributions will not be forgotten. I will forever be grateful for your enthusiasm, support, and time. All of you believed in this when I did not. Thank you.

I am deeply indebted to all of the supervisors I have had over the past several years. I want to thank you for sharing your time, support, and clinical expertise with me. You always steered me in the right direction and helped me through the challenges of this field. I am a better clinician because of your intervention, guidance, and encouragement, and I can never thank you enough (even if you did call my dog ugly multiple times—you know who you are).

Words cannot express the gratitude I have for all of the women who volunteered to participate in this study. Thank you for being so open and candid during our conversations. Without you, this would not have been possible. Thank you.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The emergence and proliferation of the internet, coupled with continuing advancements in technology, has made communication with individuals from across the globe increasingly more accessible. For people with incarcerated family members, this advancement in technology equals an additional method of contact. A wide variety of services have become available, allowing families to communicate with incarcerated loved ones. Individuals are able to send photos and video messages, add money to an offender's accounts, and send emails instantly after making an account online and paying a fee. With this advancement, families no longer have to wait at the mailbox for a letter from their loved ones.

While these services may initially have been established to help families maintain contact, additional web services were created around the turn of the century to assist offenders in meeting people not connected to their families. Prior to this, offenders had been meeting strangers through pen-and-paper letters. However, as message boards and email services became widely available, offenders could connect more easily with strangers willing to reach out to them.

Although technology has enabled communication, the women who speak to and desire those relationships with incarcerated men are viewed negatively, to the point of being thought of as "mentally ill" (Fishman, 1990; Isenberg, 1991; Seka, 2000; Slavikova & Panza, 2014). A review of the available literature shows that the women who are in relationships with inmates are widely varied in age, length of the relationship, education level, income, as well as the crime and sentence of their partner (Fishman, 1990; Gelt-Price 2001; Girshick 1992; Isenberg 1991; Slavikova & Panza, 2014; Wilcox & Wilcox, 1997). Established research in the area has shown that self-esteem, emotional burden, and financial cost vary significantly across the women who

engage in these relationships (Daniel & Barret, 1981; Dion & Dion, 1975; Grinstead et al., 2001). Previous studies additionally highlight the physical and sexual abuse many of the formerly studied women endured during adolescence and in previous relationships (Slavikova & Panza, 2014). This study sought to explore the phenomena of hybristophilia, a little-known or studied paraphilia in which individuals are attracted to people who have been accused of committing a dangerous crime. The study aimed to further add to the limited supply of literature that is currently available on this topic and the women who ascribe to this relationship model. Specifically, this study looked into what prompted the relationship to begin, how women's lives have changed due to the relationship, and how these women find support, either in person or online, through social media.

Historical Context

Individuals behind bars can suffer losses financially and emotionally, often losing connections with family, losing their sense of identity, and losing their sense of safety. Incarceration can be lonely and isolating. Incarcerated individuals who reach out for companionship through a pen pal service can be sincere in their desire to simply communicate with others and look outside the prison for support.

The individuals who choose to correspond with offenders may empathize with them or merely be curious about seeing the personal ad. Historically, this is not a new phenomenon. After the Second World War, starting a relationship in Europe with German and Italian prisoners of war was prohibited. However, despite the ban, 796 marriages were recorded between German prisoners and British women by the end of 1948 (Seeman, 2018). In more recent years, Europeans, primarily women, have begun communicating with death row inmates more than individuals from the United States. The women can connect with inmates through anti-death

penalty groups or find them through pen pal letter groups. In contrast to the relationships discussed below, there are specific case examples where the first time these couples were able to touch and hug was the same day the offender was executed.

Problem Statement

In an informal survey of the limited peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, and books related to romantic relationships with incarcerated individuals between 1975 and 2020, no research to date has explored the question of what prompted the relationship to begin and how the relationship has directly impacted the lives of the women involved. Multiple case studies and legal reports have been published that highlight how individual women have been seduced by inmates and then injured or killed by them, such as the case of Carol Spadoni, who started a relationship and married Phillip Jacobski and was murdered by him in 1991. Additionally, clinical psychologists have published case studies highlighting how vulnerable patients have started relationships with inmates and have been taken advantage of financially and emotionally, with one particular case resulting in the death of a patient via suicide (Seeman, 2018). This study aimed to further explore the dynamics of these relationships, emphasizing what prompted women to reach out to inmates and explore further the support network these women have, whether in person or on social media. Further understanding the origins of these relationships is expected to help providers recognize this phenomenon and be better prepared to assist their clients.

Purpose of the Study

The study's primary purpose was to better understand women currently in relationships with incarcerated men. The complex relationships between people who engage with incarcerated individuals and how that relationship started and continues to persevere were examined.

Furthermore, this is the only study to date to include how social media and social networks have impacted or influenced women's lives in these relationships. Initially, it was anticipated that recruitment would be challenging due to the nature of the topic and the inclusion requirements. To accommodate, the study was initially formed as a pilot study with the hope the results can be used to guide more extensive parent studies in the future. However, ample participants were recruited, and it was no longer necessary to frame this a pilot study.

Research Questions

For the study, the research question was as follows: RQ1: What are the lived experiences of women who are in relationships with incarcerated men?

Nature of the Study

The study was designed using qualitative methods. Qualitative methods were chosen for this study due to their ability to allow the researcher to understand the participants through the subject's unique experiences. Concerning a topic with such limited research and understanding, qualitative analysis was deemed necessary to capture the personal lived experiences of these individuals. The depth of understanding that was gained from these individuals and their unique answers could not be replicated in a quantitative survey. Once the data was collected, emerging themes and relationships across the interviews emerged across participants, highlighting similarities and differences between each case.

Considerations

The study was created with several considerations in mind. The impact of specific limitations, such as methodology, representative factors, and the unique experiences of the participants, will be discussed in more depth in chapter V. However, during the construction of this study, the impact of COVID-19 was initially considered, but the worst of the pandemic had

concluded by the time this data was collected. While COVID-19 did not appear to negatively impact the data, it is possible that due to the national lockdown, and increased familiarity with virtual communication programs like Zoom, participants were more willing to participate and possibly more open to disclosing personal information during the virtual interview.

Definitions of Key Terms

Hybristophilia: “The word ‘Hybristophilia’ is derived from the Greek words hybridzein, meaning ‘to commit an outrage against someone’ . . . and pilio, meaning ‘having a strong affinity or preference for’” (Watt, 2015, p. 144).

Reddit: A social media site, self-referred to as the “Front Page of the Internet,” that is one of the most popular websites in the United States (sixth most frequented) and the world (eighteenth most frequented) (Widman, 2020). Reddit is a collection of forums created by users to discuss shared interests, experiences, or thoughts.

Social Network / Social Media: An interactive computer-based technology that facilitates user-generated material and the widespread sharing of ideas, information, photographs, videos, and other data (Obar & Wildman, 2015).

Zoom: A video conferencing program that allows for video conferencing and chat options. Zoom is HIPAA compliant and encrypts all audio, video, and screen-sharing data.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

“The word ‘Hybristophilia’ is derived from the Greek words hybridzein, meaning ‘to commit an outrage against someone’ . . . and philo, meaning ‘having a strong affinity or preference for’” (Watt, 2015, p. 144). The literature on the subject is sparse, but it appears that women, more so than men, experience this attraction. The women that have been previously studied do not appear to be restricted to age, race, education, or socioeconomic status. The literature has profiled women who range in age from 19 to 67, vary in ethnicity, education level (high school education to post-graduate degrees), employment status, professions, and religious affiliation (Fishman, 1990; Gelt-Price, 2001; Girshick, 1992). With such a wide variety of women engaging in these relationships, a pattern has not been discernable, and these women do not appear to be different from the general population.

Individuals with hybristophilia are categorized as either passive or aggressive in the existing research. Most of the research focuses on passive hybristophilia, which consists of writing letters to individuals in prisons, sending money or gifts, and supporting them emotionally. The women in this category have no interest in participating in criminal activity and often believe that the men they interact with can be rehabilitated through their intervention (McLaughlin, 2016). According to the reviewed literature, these women tend to be more easily manipulated by the men they start relationships with (McLaughlin, 2016).

The second distinct category is aggressive hybristophilia. The women in this category are similar to the previous group in many ways; they both exhibit a considerable amount of emotional energy and, at times, the financial burden to begin and maintain their relationship. However, aggressive hybristophilia is unique because these women desire to play an active role in criminal acts (McLaughlin, 2016). These women tend to be more likely to manipulate their

incarcerated partners (McLaughlin, 2016). For this study's purposes, the focus was on passive hybristophilia and the women who are attracted to the men who commit violent crimes and harbor ideas of rescue and reform (Seeman, 2018).

Research Strategy

The literature for the study was obtained through the EBSCOhost database. In addition to psychological journal articles, newspaper reports and documentaries were used to obtain background information. The key terms for research included: *Hybristophilia, violence, romantic partners, paraphilia, prison pen pals, true crime, self-esteem, prisoners, offenders, incarcerated, and mental health.*

Background

The current understanding of hybristophilia pulls heavily from theories produced in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The theories utilize outdated and antiquated views of women to explain why they would pursue relationships with incarcerated men. Additionally, nonfiction author and journalist Sheila Isenberg is widely cited as an authority on the topic with her 1991 book *Women Who Love Men Who Kill*, where she developed her own theory concerning these women. The following section details these theories and additional concepts that have historically been used to explain hybristophilia.

Attachment

J. Reid Meloy is a forensic psychologist who was one of the first individuals to discuss attachment and the women who are attracted to violent men in his work *Violent Attachments* (1992). Meloy described the women in these relationships as hysterical, as women who did not receive proper maternal care, and who thus are attracted to violent and dominant men. He offers theories surrounding sadism, suggesting it could be the absence of breastfeeding as an infant, and

offers a link between psychopathy and hysteria. Meloy's theories are not currently supported by the literature that has been produced since his work was initially authored.

However, attachment theory has been extensively applied to battered women and violent relationships (Henderson et al., 2005). Based on Bowlby's attachment theory (1988), Dutton and Painter (1993) proposed a theory of traumatic bonding. In this theory, "women were more strongly attached to their assaultive partners when there was more abuse, and the abuse was inconsistent. Dutton and Painter's theory incorporates the concept of the attachment process but does not address individual differences in attachment which may be associated with the receipt of relationship abuse" (Henderson et al., 2005, p. 221).

Watt (2015) further explored preoccupied attachment in relation to potentially abusive and aggressive relationships. It was proposed that women with this attachment style may be more willing to tolerate abuse from their partners and are more likely to remain in abusive relationships. Watt (2015) noted that these women are more likely to stay in these abusive relationships due to a higher likelihood to dismiss or to excuse the behavior and actions of their partners. In a study with undergraduate students, those with preoccupied attachment styles found high-conflict situations to be more intimate and reported feeling more satisfied after the interaction than individuals with alternative attachment styles (Watt, 2015).

Love Maps

Sexologist John Money initially coined the term *hybristophilia* in 1986. Along with *hybristophilia*, Money coined the term "love map" and explained that a person's emotional and erotic attraction, as well as sexual preferences, are formed at an early age (Money, 1986). He continued to discuss how these love maps are developed from childhood experiences, both positive and negative, and how the development of these maps can be "vandalized" by adults'

predatory behavior via corporal punishment or sexual abuse (Money, 1986). Money further described how the interactions with peers and adults during childhood lay the foundation for an individual's "developing sexuality and erotism and informs his or her fantasies and practices" (Watt, 2015, p. 155). While other people can impact a person's love map, it is also susceptible to the influence of genetic factors, such as personality, and environmental factors, including attachment (Money, 1986; Watt, 2015).

Theories

Since the term was originated in 1986 by Money, theories have been proposed regarding why women would seek out and maintain a relationship with a violent and incarcerated individual. The original idea proposed was by Money when he originated the term. He defined hybristophilia as a "paraphilia of the marauding/predatory type in which sexuerotic arousal and facilitation and attainment of orgasm are responsive to and contingent on being with a partner known to have committed an outrage or crime, such as rape, murder, or armed robbery" (Money, 1986, p. 267). Money likened hybristophilia to Bonnie and Clyde, the famed bank-robbing couple who died in 1934, due to the fame and celebrity brought on by their outrageous, exploitative, dangerous, and lethal behavior (Money, 1986).

Author Sheila Isenberg interviewed multiple women who either had been or were currently in a relationship with an offender (1991). In her book, Isenberg details her interviews with these women, the relationship that the women describe, and the offender and their offense. From her interviews and subsequent research, Isenberg proposed multiple theories based on her interviews.

Dependence

Nonfiction author and journalist Sheila Isenberg proposed that some women who enter into relationships with incarcerated men may be seeking partners who need to be cared for, partners who would be utterly dependent upon them for emotional and financial support. The women who enter into these relationships may become the only link that the offender has to the outside world, which can create a sense of dependency for both partners (Isenberg, 1991). Seka (2000) believed that the women who engaged in these relationships seek to fulfill the caregiver role to compensate for feelings of worthlessness. With this theory, a relationship built with an offender will provide a high sense of worth and importance (Seka, 2000).

Father Figure

The relationship with an offender may provide women with opportunities to recreate situations and relations from their past, namely from their childhoods. The women in these relationships may be recreating or continuing a pattern of relationships (Isenberg, 1991; Seka, 2000). By entering into a relationship with an offender, these women are in positions where they are physically in control and will decide if and when the offenders are contacted, visited, or if they are to receive money or gifts from them (Isenberg, 1991; Seka, 2000).

Masochism

Sheila Isenberg further suggested that some women are not bothered by the self-imposed hardship that a relationship with an offender will bring. The women can become the subject of ridicule and stigmatization, at times, from their own families (Isenberg, 1991). These relationships may bring further economic hardships due to the frequency and expense of communication, travel and visitation, and the pressure to send money.

Fame

A relationship with an offender can be promoted by notoriety more so than affection (Isenberg, 1991). Individuals who seek out high-profile offenders, such as serial killers, mass shooters, or terrorists, are thought to be partially motivated by the fame and notoriety attached to the offender themselves (Isenberg, 1991). Being in a relationship with these high-profile offenders will bring attention and a similar level of fascination to the romantic partner.

Control

Additional research has suggested that not all women who seek out offenders are easily manipulated, but quite the opposite. Wilcox-Bailey (1997) hypothesized that some women may seek out partners who are at a higher risk and more easily manipulated due to life circumstances. The individuals may utilize rewards and punishments, such as letters, visits, or gifts, to satisfy a need to exert control over other people.

Culture

Due to the wide variety of women who do seek out relationships with offenders, it is vital to question if this is abnormal behavior. If criminal behavior and incarceration are normalized in society, then relationships with offenders may not appear to be abnormal (Seka, 2000). In communities where family members have been arrested, incarcerated, or have experience with the legal system themselves, the views on these relationships may be different compared to communities with no experience with the legal system or criminal behavior.

Love Behind Bars

A study by Giebel and Elbert (2014) examined the relationships of 50 women who were in relationships with incarcerated men. The women interviewed consisted of women who were in relationships prior to their partner's incarceration and those who started relationships while their partner was incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison. The study found that the women who met and began relationships while their partners were incarcerated viewed their "relationship as something special and their partners as very romantic, sympathetic and caring" (Giebel & Elbert, 2014, p. 1). The authors found that this was consistent with the limited literature available and highlighted the similarities found in this study and what Sheila Isenberg (1991) found in her interviews. The authors place the love styles of these women in four different categories: eros (romantic and erotic), storge (amicable and friendship), mania (possessive), and agape (altruistic) (Giebel & Elbert, 2014). The authors determined that, consistent with previous literature, the women interviewed viewed their love as "deep, romantic, and full of passion," consistent with the eros style of love (Giebel & Elbert, 2014, p. 3). The authors suggest that while these relationships are challenging to maintain, it may be possible that only when the partner on the outside truly believes in the relationship and is committed without doubts, that it may be fulfilling (Giebel & Elbert, 2014). Additionally, these women ranked high in terms of agape/altruistic love. The women interviewed face multiple challenges, such as limited visitation, phone calls, letter writing, legal support, and emotional support. In addition to sending care packages and traveling for visitation, the extensive support that these women may provide for their incarcerated partners focuses on their partners' needs and less on their own needs (Giebel & Elbert, 2014).

Empathy

Empathy is a social cognitive skill in which an individual will match the emotional state of another. The basic definition of empathy involves the ability to recognize and understand another person's or animal's emotional state, real or fictional, and share in that emotional state (Wray, 2016). It is essential to understand why some people experience empathy for individuals who are labeled as social outcasts by society, such as those who are in prison. The ability to understand how individuals can take in an abundance of negative media on an individual but still seek them out for a romantic relationship calls into question how that individual perceives public events. Empathetic attitudes toward violent individuals may require a level of self-other awareness that allows the empathizer to set aside or repress their feelings to attempt to experience others' thoughts and feelings (Wray, 2016).

Social Empathy

“Social empathy is the ability to understand people from different socioeconomic classes and racial/ethnic backgrounds, while considering the context of institutionalized inequalities and social disparities” (Wray, 2016, p. 27). With social empathy, the ability to understand someone's emotional state is combined with the ability to maintain a contextual awareness of inequalities and social disparities (Segal, 2011). There is limited research available on the concept of social empathy, and no current research examines the level of social empathy exhibited toward individuals who are sentenced and serving prison terms. The idea of expressing empathy for individuals found guilty of committing violent acts can be difficult to imagine to many people (Wray, 2016). It can become even more challenging to express empathy for individuals who have been found guilty of committing shocking acts of violence, such as the crimes perpetrated by high-profile individuals such as Ted Bundy or Richard Ramirez. It has become more

complicated in recent years as these acts have been caught on surveillance footage and smartphones and repeatedly replayed in the media, such as the violent assaults carried out by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the Tsarnaev Brothers, and James Holmes.

Famous Cases

Carol Ann Boone and Ted Bundy

In the 1970s, Ted Bundy murdered at least 30 women across seven states, beginning in Washington State and ending in Florida. Between 1979 and 1981, Ted Bundy was convicted on three separate occasions in the state of Florida on multiple counts of first-degree murder, burglary, and abduction for the attacks perpetrated at the end of his criminal career. Ted Bundy received the death penalty for each of these convictions and was executed on January 24, 1989. Shortly before his execution, Ted Bundy confessed to the murders, sexual assaults, and desecration of over 30 women across seven states.

When Bundy was still in Washington State, he met a woman by the name of Carol Ann Boone. In 1974, they briefly worked together at the Department of Emergency Services in Olympia, Washington. At the time, Boone was going through her second divorce and quickly formed a fast friendship with Bundy. She described Bundy as “shy” and as someone who “was more dignified and restrained” than her other coworkers (Margaritoff, 2019b). Boone continued her friendship with Bundy after his first arrest in 1975, exchanging letters and visiting him out of state while he awaited trial. Boone was steadfast in her loyalty throughout Bundy’s escape attempts, arrests, and after evidence was presented in court. She moved to Florida during his trial and became a fixture in the press for her ongoing support, stating that she “[does not] think Ted belongs in jail” and that the “things in Florida don’t concern [her] any more than the things out

West do” (Margaritoff, 2019b). After Boone moved to Florida, she started to visit Bundy weekly, often bringing her son along.

Bundy was first found guilty and sentenced to death in 1979 for the murders at a sorority house on a Florida campus. During the penalty phase of the second trial in Florida, Bundy, acting as his own attorney, used an obscure law to marry Boone during the court proceedings. According to prison records, Boone visited regularly. While not permitted, conjugal visits often occurred, resulting in their daughter’s birth two years after Bundy’s incarceration. The relationship continued for a number of years, but Carol Ann Boone ceased visits and filed for divorce three years before Ted Bundy was executed.

Afton “Star” Burton and Charles Manson

Charles Manson was a notorious cult leader and White supremacist. He instructed members of his cult, frequently referred to as The Family, to murder prominent individuals in Southern California with the hope of starting a race war across the country. In 1971, although Charles Manson was not physically present at the crime scenes, he was convicted on seven counts of first-degree murder and one count of conspiracy to commit murder. He was subsequently sentenced to death, but that sentence was quickly changed to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole after the State of California ruled the death sentence to be unconstitutional.

While Charles Manson had the name recognition and notoriety of other prolific killers, he did not receive the same amount of attention from the public after the trial concluded; namely, he did not receive letters or visitors from women. However, in 2007, when Charles Manson was 80 years old, a 17-year-old young woman reached out and started corresponding with him (Margaritoff, 2019a). Afton “Star” Burton grew up in a small midwestern town in Bunker Hill,

Illinois, where she remained until going west at the age of 19 to visit Charles Manson in California. Star Burton was raised within a devout Baptist family, and they continued to support Burton during the period of her life when she was communicating with Manson (Margaritoff, 2019a). It was reported that Star Burton did help to take care of Charles Manson as he aged and neared his death (Margaritoff, 2019a). During this period of time, Star Burton acquired a marriage license for herself and Charles Manson, but it expired in February 2015. In and around this time, the rumor circulated that Burton intended to marry Charles Manson with the intention of acquiring the legal rights to his body after he died and possibly displaying his remains to the public (Margaritoff, 2019a). Reporters who interviewed Manson at the time have stated that Burton gave him gifts and attention so he would not end the relationship, but he would not sign the marriage license. Star Burton and her family deny these allegations. Charles Manson was cremated, and his remains were awarded to his grandson.

Doreen Lioy and Richard Ramirez

Richard Ramirez became known as the Night Stalker across Southern California during a yearlong crime spree lasting from June 1984 to August 1985. In 1989, Richard Ramirez was found guilty on 13 murder charges, five attempted murders, 11 sexual assaults, and 14 counts of burglary, and was sentenced to death. Ramirez developed a growing collection of supporters throughout the trial, including magazine editor Doreen Lioy. Lioy wrote to Ramirez over 75 times after he was incarcerated, and they were married in 1996 after corresponding for 11 years. Shortly after their wedding, Lioy described Ramirez as “kind . . . funny, [and] charming. He’s a really great person. He’s my best friend; he’s my buddy” (McDermott, 1997). Lioy disputed the conviction and had faith in his innocence. She described her decision to be with Ramirez as a difficult one. Lioy’s family no longer communicated with her due to her choice, and she could

not start a family of her own. In 1997, Doreen Lioy described her life with Richard Ramirez as “lonely,” saying, “it’s a lonely lifestyle, but I knew it would be” (McDermott, 1997). Doreen Lioy did not divorce Richard Ramirez, but the two became distant. It is believed this occurred after Ramirez was linked to the murder and sexual assault of a 9-year-old child. Doreen Lioy did not claim his body after his death due to complications from B-cell lymphoma in 2013.

Phylis Wilcox and Henry Lee Lucas

Henry Lee Lucas was arrested in Texas in 1983 for the murder of his 15-year-old girlfriend, Becky Powell, and his employers’ mother, 82-year-old Kate Rich. After his arrest, Lucas proceeded to confess to hundreds of unsolved homicides across the United States. Lucas was convicted and sentenced for 11 homicides based on his confessions and was sentenced to death. A majority of these confessions were disputed and discredited, and his death sentence was commuted in 1998 by then governor George W. Bush.

However, prior to this occurring, Phylis Wilcox, a married self-described homemaker, came forward and presented herself as Becky Powell, one of Lucas’s confirmed three victims. Wilcox stated that she happened upon a book about Lucas, and “soon he was all [she] was thinking about” (Stowers, 2001). Wilcox reached out to Lucas on death row, and they began to correspond through letters, and soon face-to-face visits started, where Wilcox reported that Lucas came up with the idea to have Wilcox pose as his victim in an attempt to have him released from prison (Stowers, 2001). If Becky Powell were alive, then the prosecution would be discredited. Wilcox also reported that she would supply Lucas with an alibi for when the other murders took place, further discrediting the convictions. Wilcox made numerous press appearances and made official statements to the police in an effort to have Lucas released. After the letters between her and Lucas were uncovered, Wilcox stated that she did it out of love. However, Wilcox also

reached out to numerous high-profile serial killers prior to Lucas, such as Ted Bundy, Charles Manson, John Wayne Gacy, and Jeffery Dahmer.

Joyce Mitchell and the Dannemora Prison Break

On June 5, 2015, inmates Richard Matt and David Sweat escaped out of Clinton Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison in the city of Dannemora in northern New York. The offenders worked for months to plan the escape, which required intense physical labor to break through walls and cut through tunnels with multiple tools. The prison escape would not have been possible without Joyce Mitchell, an industrial training supervisor who had been employed at the prison since 2008 (Ponti, 2021). Coworkers documented in 2012 that Mitchell's behavior toward inmates in her tailor shop was inappropriate and too friendly, especially toward Matt and Sweat (Ponti, 2021). Mitchell engaged in a sexual relationship with Sweat, and later Matt, after Sweat was removed from her shop following an anonymous complaint (Kirby, 2016; Ponti, 2021). Although Sweat was no longer present in her shop, she continued to send messages to him, including nude photographs of herself (Ponti, 2021). According to reports, Matt and Sweat initially approached Mitchell in January of 2015 about their escape and their need for her assistance (Kirby, 2016; Ponti, 2021). Mitchell proceeded to bring in multiple tools, including six hacksaw blades, two chisels, two concrete drill bits, and a punch. Some of these tools were hidden in packages of raw meat that were then passed to Richard Matt by another officer (Kirby, 2016).

When Matt and Sweat originally planned the escape, Joyce Mitchell had agreed to pick them up once they tunneled outside the prison walls. According to David Sweat, Mitchell wanted the two men to kill her husband after she picked them up (Ponti, 2021). However, on June 5, 2015, Joyce Mitchell chose not to provide further support to the two men. On June 12, 2015, she

was arrested days after the escape and charged with promoting prison contraband, a felony, and one count of criminal facilitation, a misdemeanor (Ponti, 2021). She was released from prison on February 6, 2020. Richard Matt was shot three times and died after 20 days on the run, while David Sweat was shot and injured after 22 days on the run. He was apprehended and is once again serving a life sentence in a maximum-security prison.

Carol Spadoni and Phillip Jablonski

The case of Carol Spadoni displays a sharp contrast to the previous cases. Carol Spadoni responded to a newspaper ad in 1982 placed by Phillip Jablonski. At this time, Jablonski had been serving time in California for rape and first-degree murder. Spadoni and Jablonski began corresponding and were quickly married in 1982 at San Quentin Prison. By the summer of 1990, Carol Spadoni reported that she had become afraid of Phillip Jablonski and wanted to end her relationship with him (*People v. Jablonski*, 2006). Phillip Jablonski was released on parole for good behavior in 1990. He was instructed to stay away from Carol Spadoni and her mother, Eva Peterson, with whom she was living within San Mateo County, California.

On April 22, 1991, Phillip Jablonski left his parole-approved automotive class and did not return (*People v. Jablonski*, 2006). On April 26, 1991, Carol Spadoni and Eva Peterson were found murdered in their home (*People v. Jablonski*, 2006). Evidence recovered from Phillip Jablonski, such as a personal voice recording and a personalized belt, revealed that both women were killed on April 23 by Phillip Jablonski (*People v. Jablonski*, 2006).

The Impact of Social Media

The literature on hybristophilia is limited, with research mainly focused on the characteristics of the women who participate in these relationships. However, a significant amount of the main body of work on this topic is over 20 years old, if not older. Sheila

Isenberg's book, *Women Who Love Men Who Kill*, was published in 1991, and the dissertations that her work inspired were published in 1992 (Girshick), 2000 (Seka), and 2001 (Gelt-Price). Since these works were published, the world and the means of communication have changed. Social media sites and social networking sites have glamorized the individuals who are responsible for some of the most infamous crimes committed in this country and internationally. A 2014 study by Oksanen et al. examined YouTube fan sites that were created for school shooters. They found 113 pro-school shooting profiles, which mainly focused on the 1999 Columbine school shooting. While there are not many people in these groups, they can maintain a strong cohesion due to their mutual interests, shared knowledge, and perceived common enemies (Oksanen et al., 2014). The sites and profiles are subject to high negative feedback levels, which can intensify the shared bond felt between group members.

The fan pages and profiles are not limited to school shooters. In April 2013, the Tsarnaev brothers placed bombs along the Boston Marathon route, injuring hundreds and killing three people. After authorities captured Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the media attention he garnered was sympathetic (Volpp, 2014). After his arrest, several websites were created, which promoted the idea that Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was innocent and should be released and that he was the victim of a conspiracy (Volpp, 2014). *Rolling Stone* magazine was accused of furthering this glamorization when they placed Tsarnaev on their July cover, using an image that “[analogized] him to Jim Morrison and Bob Dylan” (Volpp, 2014, p. 2218).

The fan pages, profiles, and social media sites that have been created and popularized since Sheila Isenberg wrote her book have changed how people communicate, form relationships, and find common interests with each other. The current research into hybristophilia is limited. There is no research concerning the social media presence in the lives of the women

who form relationships with individuals who are currently incarcerated. The present research aims to examine, in part, if the women interviewed are a part of any online communities established explicitly for individuals who are attracted to incarcerated men.

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH DESIGN AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Qualitative researchers identify a human experience as it relates to a phenomenon.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used in this qualitative study to answer the previously discussed research question. The IPA framework guided the research design, method, analysis, and interpretation of the findings. The following section will briefly discuss the history of IPA and the theoretical underpinnings of the framework.

Phenomenology

Phenomenological research is a qualitative research approach that seeks to understand and describe the universal essence of a phenomenon. Phenomenon, originating from the Greek word *phainómenon* (“to become visible”) and from *phainein* (“to show, bring to light, to make known”), is any experience perceived by someone, which can then be studied, researched, and analyzed. The approach investigates the everyday experiences of human beings while suspending the researchers’ preconceived assumptions about the phenomenon (Fuster Guillen, 2019). The research design aims to uncover what a particular experience means to a group of people and discover how they experience the phenomenon (Alase, 2017; Creswell, 2013; Fuster Guillen, 2019). In other words, phenomenological research studies lived experiences to gain deeper insights into how people understand those experiences.

Husserl Perspective

Phenomenological research can trace its origins to German philosopher Edmund Husserl with his book *Logical Investigations* in 1900/1901 (Smith, 2018). Husserl originally established phenomenology as a way to best understand and make meaning out of the lived experiences of his research participants (Alase, 2017). Husserl believed human experience could be best described by individuals who set aside their assumptions and values and could put aside their

personal experiences to fully appreciate the experiences of those they are researching (Smith, 2018). Husserl believed that an individual's preconceived theories, biases, and experiences may inadvertently influence the results of any study. In order to prevent this from happening, Husserl proposed the method of bracketing, where the researcher will exclude all emotions, previous experience, and theoretical leanings, in order to experience the phenomenon in, what Husserl believed to be, its most genuine form (Smith et al., 2009; Smith, 2018).

Hermeneutical Phenomenology

In contrast to Husserl, a fellow German philosopher and student of Husserl, Martin Heidegger questioned the feasibility of limiting all outside knowledge and experience during phenomenological research. He established what would be known as hermeneutical phenomenology, which focused on the lived experiences of the participants and the researcher's ability to interpretate the account and make meaning from it (Alase, 2017). Heidegger proposed that it was not possible to entirely remove a researcher's experience and previous knowledge from phenomenological research (Smith et al., 2009). Rather, he reported that the background knowledge and experience of the researcher are what allow for a correct interpretation to occur (Smith et al., 2009). In this vein, Heidegger believed researchers would gain an enhanced understanding and meaning of the phenomenon when contextualizing it with their own life experiences and knowledge (Smith et al., 2009; Smith, 2018). To further contrast from Husserl, Heidegger believed that a researcher's reality cannot be separated and will always influence their views on the world. Any attempt to fully remove an individual from their cultural background, experiences, or memories is established on false pretenses. In regard to phenomenological research, the relationship between the individual researcher, their background, and the data collected is interconnected and ongoing throughout the entire process.

Interpretative Phenomenology

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) blends Husserl's and Heidegger's philosophies. IPA focuses on the lived experiences of research participants and the meaning made from these unique phenomena (Alase, 2017; Smith & Osborn, 2015; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). "Following from Husserl's phenomenology, IPA is concerned with examining experience, as far as possible, in its own terms as opposed to being overly influenced by prior psychological theorizing or by personal proclivities of the researchers" (Smith, 2017, p. 303). However, while IPA blends Husserl's philosophical foundations, it recognizes the benefits of Heidegger's views regarding interpretation with both participants and the researcher. Regarding IPA's view of Heidegger, "IPA recognizes the exploration of the meaning of personal experience as an interpretative endeavor on the part of both participant and researcher" (Smith, 2017, p. 303).

Smith and Shinebourne (2012) described the IPA research process as occurring in a process called a *double hermeneutic* as "the participant is trying to make sense of what is happening to them. And the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them" (p. 74). Within IPA, researchers cannot contextualize the responses or add value to the analysis if they interpret and analyze the data in a vacuum void of all previously held knowledge, beliefs, emotions, and theoretical understandings, as previously discussed by Husserl. To fully understand one part of the phenomenon and the participants experiences, the researchers must look at the parts to comprehend the whole picture (Alase, 2017; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith et al., 2009).

Procedures

Sampling Strategy

The sampling design was purposeful, as it was necessary to seek out individuals who met specific criteria for the study. However, due to the unique nature of the criteria, a convenience sampling method was also in effect to ensure as many participants as possible were included in the study. Participation was allowed to the first individuals who expressed interest, who meet the study criteria, and who could interview within a reasonable amount of time. Participants were excluded if they had a developmental disability, were under the age of 18, or if they could not read, speak, or understand English.

Participant Selection Logic

Convenience sampling was used during the recruitment of participants in order to gather as many individuals as possible for the study. Inclusion criteria required participants to: be 18 years of age or older and be in a relationship with an incarcerated individual or to have established a romantic relationship after the individual was incarcerated. Participants were also informed that their voices would be digitally recorded for the purposes of the study, with the knowledge that all recordings would be deleted once the study concludes. Participants would be excluded if they could not speak or understand the English language, had a developmental disability, were unwilling to have the audio of the interview recorded, or were under the age of 18. Furthermore, all participants read and signed consent forms prior to each interview. Participants were asked for consent when they initially agreed to participate, they were each asked to read and sign a consent form, and consent was verified at the start of each interview. If any participant refused or changed their mind during the process, their data would have been

deleted and the results would have been excluded from the study. No participant withdrew their consent or asked for their interview to be removed from the record.

Demographic Questions

Basic demographic information was collected before and during each interview. The demographic questions consisted of age, gender, race and ethnicity, and region of the country. The questions concerning demographics were used to gain more information and insight into the relationships and to better describe the population involved and their characteristics.

Research Questions

For the study, the research question was as follows: RQ1: What are the lived experiences of women who are in relationships with incarcerated men?

Interview Questions

For the study, qualified volunteers participated in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. The participants were interviewed via video conferencing software Zoom, which met HIPAA requirements. The following questions were utilized to answer the Research Question:

- IQ1: How did you become involved with your partner?
- IQ2: Tell me about the growth of your relationship and how it developed.
- IQ3: How is your relationship with your partner at this time?
- IQ4: What do you see in the future for your relationship with your partner?
- IQ5: Do you know anyone else who has a relationship like yours?
- IQ6: Do you share your thoughts about your relationship with others?

Instrumentation

Video conferencing interviews were conducted for the convenience of the participants. The decision to use video teleconferencing was the most viable option to quickly schedule and include participants who lived in various regions across the United States. Video conferencing interviews were deemed the most appropriate option to allow for the most participation with the greatest ease. Computers and smartphones were used for all communication purposes. All recording and/or documentation of the interviews were completed using HIPAA-compliant devices and software.

Procedures

Participants were recruited after Antioch University Seattle reviewed and approved the IRB application. Once approval was granted, several online communities were identified through an online search where individuals who met the inclusion criteria were more likely to be found. While several communities were identified (e.g., loveaprisoner.com, meet-an-inmate.com, and writeaprisoner.com) all participants for this study were recruited through Reddit.

Reddit describes itself as being “home to thousands of communities, endless conversation, and authentic human connection. Whether you’re into breaking news, sports, TV fan theories, or a never-ending stream of the internet’s cutest animals, there’s a community for you” (Homepage—Reddit, n.d.). At its core, Reddit is a massive collection of unique message boards, called subreddits, which were created by users to focus on niche topics and shared interests. Individual users can create or subscribe to subreddits to become more involved in the community and stay up to date with the information posted by other users. Reddit is one of the most popular and frequented websites in the world with over 100,000 active communities and over 52 million daily active users (Homepage—Reddit, n.d.). Anyone 13 years or older can make

an account with Reddit provided they are able to supply a unique username, password, and valid email address.

The participants of this study were all found on the subreddit r/PrisonWives. The r/PrisonWives subreddit was created on December 8, 2019, and currently has over 2,500 members and ranks in the top 20% of subreddits based on the size of the community. The r/PrisonWives subreddit describes itself as:

A safe place where Wives/Fiancés/Girlfriends and now even Boyfriends and Husbands of an incarcerated Loved One (LO) can come together with others who know what it's like. We are here for you to provide love and emotional support that close friends or family members may not know how to give (Reddit).

Each subreddit creates its own code of conduct and has moderators to help all posts and comments stay on topic. The r/PrisonWives subreddit utilized one moderator and established three rules for member participation. They are as follows:

Rule #1: Be kind to one another: Please be kind to one another. Please don't call anyone names, or make fun of them for any reason. We are all in this together.

Rule #2: Do not post anything you don't want to be made public: If you are looking for advice, but would prefer to keep your business private, please utilize the chat feature. You may create a post asking for others to chat with you in order to keep your business private. (Please give a brief explanation on what you need help/advice with.)

Rule #3: No spam posts: Do not create any posts which are related to any of the following; -trying to find a girlfriend/boyfriend (This is a support group, not a dating site.) -sharing businesses that claim to be of help getting someone released. (unless you, yourself, have had success using them for that purpose) -promotion for anything not related to prison (relating to anyone trying to hire people to speak on their YouTube channel, etc.)

Once the subreddit was identified as a likely recruitment source, the researcher created a post identifying herself as a graduate student conducting dissertation research on relationships with incarcerated men. The post briefly described the goal of the dissertation and the inclusion requirements. Additionally, the recruitment post highlighted privacy concerns and the steps that would be taken to ensure confidentiality. Individuals who were interested in participating were encouraged to either message the researcher directly or comment on the original post. All

potential participants were informed there would be no penalty if they changed their mind or declined to answer any question. The post clearly stated that any participant could withdraw their data at any point before or during the interview.

Nine women agreed to participate in the study, with three more expressing interest but ultimately deciding not to participate. Once potential participants were identified the researcher asked if there were any concerns or questions about the research and answered them to the best of her ability. Each participant was emailed a copy of the consent form and were again encouraged to ask any questions they may have about the topic and the research project. After each participant signed and return the informed consent forms, interviews were scheduled. At the start of each interview the researcher introduced herself and provided a bit of background on herself and the research project. Participants were asked if they had any questions or concerns before moving forward with the interview. The researcher answered any and all questions when they were asked and proceeded with the interviews. At the conclusion of each interview the researcher answered any remaining questions and thanked the participants for their time. Promptly after the interview's conclusion, each participant was sent a \$20 Amazon gift card to thank them for their participation.

Data Collection

Each participant received a copy of the consent form prior to the interview. The form briefly went over the study and provided details on what would occur during the interview, such as the use of audio recordings and the protections put in place to safeguard those recordings. The consent form was signed and returned prior to the interview being scheduled. Additionally, the researcher briefly went over the informed consent form during the start of the interview and

obtain oral confirmation from each participant stating that they agree to participate and that they understand audio recording was taking place.

Participants who agreed to participate in the study were interviewed using video conferencing software Zoom. Participants had the option to leave their webcams on during the interview if they chose, but it was not a requirement. A majority of the participants chose to leave their cameras on, with only three participants opting to turn them off. Only the audio transcript was utilized for the study. While the researcher did make note of any emotional moments during the interview process, the image and likeness of the participants was not included in the results.

Interviews

Each interview was digitally recorded using the video conferencing program Zoom. The interviews began by briefly reviewing the informed consent form, going over any questions, and obtaining audio of each participant agreeing to continue with the study. Over the course of the interview, general demographic questions were asked. At times, these questions were answered prior to the start of the interview, such as the participants general location, or the questions came up naturally during the interviews. The researcher utilized six open-ended questions that were designed to answer the research question regarding the participants' current relationship with incarcerated individuals. These questions were asked of each participant, and due to the nature of the research method, no participant was limited in their response length. When appropriate, the researcher asked follow-up questions to help clarify the participants answers and continue to move the conversation as organically as possible.

During and immediately after the interview, the researcher took notes on the meeting and what took place. These notes focused in part on how the participant presented during the

interview and how open they were to their experiences. Furthermore, these notes were used to make note of anything said during the interview that stood out and capture any thoughts or concerns the researcher had during the interview.

Participants

Nine women were interviewed for this study. They were all members of or familiar with the subreddit r/PrisonWives and contacted the researcher through the recruitment message posted on that page. All nine women were living in the United States at the time of the interview. The participants ranged in age from 24 to 47 years old and lived across the United States. The length of their relationships with incarcerated partners varied, with only two lasting six months or less. The index offenses of the incarcerated partners ranged from felony weapons charges to homicide, and their sentences ranged from less than a month away from release to life sentences with the possibility of parole in several decades. Notably, none of the participants were in relationships with condemned partners.

Data Analysis

The researcher used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009) to catalog the data and identify codes and themes in each interview. As stated by Smith et al. (2009), there is no singular method for working with IPA data. Working with qualitative data allowed the researcher to utilize more flexibility during the analysis to fully interpret and understand the meaning, attitudes, and values of each statement put forth during the interviews (Jalongo & Saracho, 2016). The analysis of this study employed Smith et al.'s (2009) six-step, multi-direction framework to catalog the data, identify codes, and recognize themes across the interviews. To analyze the data, the researcher used the data analysis software MAXQDA and followed the process outlined by Smith et al. (2009), which detailed a step-by-step

multidirectional method for analysis of each interview. Using this process allowed the researcher to identify more easily similarities and differences between interviews. The method began with high levels of active engagement with the recorded interviews and the written transcripts. The process ended with the researcher dissecting the coded content of the interviews and creating overarching themes detailing a collective account of the participants experiences, including what they were thinking and feeling at the time of the interview.

Step One: Reading and Rereading

The first step of analysis required immersion with the original data (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher achieved this by listening to the recorded data at least twice prior to transcribing. While the researcher listened to the recordings, notes were recorded in a journal concerning any thoughts, feelings, assumptions, or questions and placed to the side. During the transcription process, the researcher once again listened to the recordings several times and became more immersed with the data as each interview was transcribed as close to verbatim as possible. Once the transcription was complete, the researcher reread the transcript separately and listened to the recordings once more without the aid of the transcript. Finally, the researcher listened to the original recording and followed along with the complete transcript, becoming fully immersed with the original data.

Step Two: Initial Noting

The second step involved with the preliminary level of analysis concerned initial noting. During this step, the researcher utilized three levels of notes while reading and reviewing each transcript. First, the researcher identified *descriptive comments* used by each participant. These comments centered around “keywords, events, and experiences in the respondent’s lifeworld” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 84). The second level of notes used during this section was *linguistic*

comments. These comments highlighted the specific language used by participants during the interview, for example, their “pronoun use, pauses, laughter, functional aspects of laughter, repetition, tone, [and articulation or hesitancy]” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 88). The third and final level of noting the researcher used during this section was *conceptual comments*. These comments were more interpretative in nature. For the *conceptual comments*, the researcher posed more questions that came to mind while reviewing each transcript.

Step Three: Developing Emergent Themes

During the third step, the researcher “[attempted] to reduce the volume of detail [from the transcript and the initial notes] while maintaining the complexity, in terms of mapping the interrelationships, connections, and patterns between exploratory notes” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 91). To do this, the researcher reduced the initial list of phrases and notes and removed redundant and vague expressions. The developing emergent themes spoke more to the psychological essence of the data while still being grounded in the original transcript (Smith et al., 2009). The themes developed in this stage worked to reduce the original volume of detail and aided the researcher in narrowing their understanding of the participants’ experience into a more concise and descriptive interpretation (Smith et al., 2009).

Step Four: Searching for Connections Across Emergent Themes

The fourth step involved categorizing the themes outlined in step three. During this step, the researcher utilized subsumption to identify patterns around themes. The author identified one previously identified theme from step three and matched it with other themes that appeared to be clearly related. This effectively created themed categories, which made the data easier to interpret.

Step Five: Moving to the Next Case

The penultimate stage in the process required the primary researcher to bracket the ideas and information that emerged from steps one through four (Smith et al., 2009). Bracketing the data is a qualitative research term that refers to setting aside knowledge and ideas gained from the previous case or cases already reviewed during research (Smith et al., 2009). It was important to bracket as much as possible before moving to the subsequent transcript to limit bias and reduce the prospect of critical details being overlooked (Smith et al., 2009). During this step, the researcher set aside the existing data set and repeated steps one through four with a new transcript.

Step Six: Looking for Patterns Across Cases

The final stage involved looking for patterns across all of the cases. The researcher examined all of the subthemes across the cases and worked to identify overarching themes across the participants. During this step, the researcher was able to identify similarities and differences and looked at the unique qualities found in each case. The emergent themes discussed in step four further highlighted not only the connections and contradictions between each individual participant but also the strength of certain themes across participants.

Data Collection and Security Measures

Interviews were collected via electronic devices using computers and HIPAA-compliant software. Computers were used to record interviews. The conferencing software Zoom was utilized to set up the interviews and communicate with the participants. All documents and videos were encrypted and stored on a password-protected device to ensure all data was safeguarded. All data collection procedures were in line and maintained alignment with APA, state, and national policies and laws to protect private healthcare information.

Interviews were scheduled at a time that best suited the participants of the study. Each interviewee was encouraged to set up in a quiet, private place with limited distractions. All but one participant opted to be interviewed in a private place. The participant who was in a more public setting was given the opportunity to reschedule, but declined stating they were comfortable with the setting. All interviews took place over Zoom, a video conferencing service that encrypts the session's video, audio, and screen with a one-time use key for each link distributed. Zoom is HIPAA compliant and only collected the basic data required to connect users to one another successfully.

Memos

During the study, memoing was a priority during the collection of data. Memoing is a process that helped the researcher capture their thoughts and feelings throughout the interview process quickly. Memoing allowed the researcher to track their own ideas and to have a record of what they were thinking about during each individual interview (Chun Tie et al., 2019). The living record of the memos allowed the researcher to start to connect interviews, create themes, and add context that was missing from the transcription (Chun Tie et al., 2019). The memos provided an opportunity for the researcher to capture both their immediate thoughts and reactions and to catalog ideas and information that came to light after the interview was completed (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

Issues of Trustworthiness

The integrity of the research study was evaluated and safeguarded using several established standards of research design, specifically with qualitative data in mind (Hays & Singh, 2012; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The research study utilized the following criteria to

establish and maintain high levels of trustworthiness throughout the entire process: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

In qualitative research, internal validity is equivalent to *credibility*, which reflects the confidence in the truth of the research findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In order to establish credibility, the researcher utilized several strategies, such as prolonged engagement and persistent observation to best promote the study's rigor and credibility (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Transferability, the study's external validity, can be achieved when the results can be "transferred to other contexts or settings with other respondents" (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121). The transferability of the data is not measured by the researcher but by the reader, who can view the data through their own personal lens of experience (Smith et al., 2009). The primary researcher worked to achieve transferability by producing context-rich accounts and utilizing the participant's voice, "so the experiences become meaningful to an outsider" (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Dependability and *confirmability* in qualitative research are focused on consistency in every step, with confirmability focusing on the researcher's ability to maintain neutrality (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Dependability and confirmability relied on the primary researcher to take appropriate steps from the start of the research project, through every step of development, and until the findings were produced in this final report. To successfully achieve both standards within this study, the researcher maintained an independent audit trail to provide proof of methodical and raw data collection. The audit trail was utilized to capture notes on research decisions as they were made, thoughts on sampling and the research material as it was collected,

and to best document “the emergence of the findings and information about the data management” (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 122).

Lastly, during this study, this researcher documented reflexive statements through actively taking notes and creating journal entries as the data was collected. The process enabled the researcher to continuously examine their explicit and implicit assumptions, biases, preconceptions, and values as it related to the study and the data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Continuously documenting reflexive notes helped to limit preconceived bias within the study’s results.

Ethical Procedures

The potential risks to participants in this study were predicted to be mild to moderate. This was due to the subject of the study and participants speaking about their personal lives and private matters. It was paramount that the researcher de-identified the responses in a way that ensured none of the participants could be identified. If any participant changed their mind after giving consent, they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Similarly, if a topic became painful or stressful to the participant, they would have been offered resources that focused on crisis intervention. During the interview process, no participant withdrew their consent or required intervention resources. If any participant became uncomfortable discussing the subject matter, they were free to disable their camera and continue with only audio or terminate the interview completely. A total of two participants never turned on their cameras, and one additional participant turned their camera off due to distracting technical glitches.

The researcher did not anticipate any vulnerable persons participating in the study. Steps were taken during the screening process and during the interview to ensure no vulnerable persons

were participating in the study. If a vulnerable person was found to have participated in the research project, the researcher would handle any adverse events that may have occurred and their interviews would have been stricken from the record. Participants were provided with contact information for the lead investigator in the informed consent form and were instructed to notify them of any adverse events or questions they have after the interview was completed.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher conducting this project served as the primary researcher and facilitator of the study, with guidance from the dissertation chair and the committee members. One of the key aspects of qualitative research involves the researcher recognizing their own potential for bias to promote trustworthiness in the results produced (Smith et al., 2009). As the researcher is the thread that connects all of the elements of this project, through data collection and analysis, it was critical that the researcher acknowledge any influences, motives, and expectations prior to collection and evaluation of the data.

Reflexivity Statement

To best conceptualize how the investigator has impacted the research process, the individual must first be aware of how their identity and culture directly influenced their experiences. The researcher is a millennial, White, cisgender female working toward a doctorate in clinical psychology. The researcher was raised in a working-class family and is a first-generation college student. While pursuing this degree, the researcher has worked in forensic settings, including psychiatric hospitals and prisons, and has worked with multiple offenders who have self-reported to have engaged in online relationships with women, up to and including marriage.

As the project took form, the researcher was informed that the topic was more common and closer to home than originally believed. In the early to mid-1980s, an individual in this writer's family was engaged in a relationship with a woman for nearly 10 years. These two individuals are not believed to have been married. While the exact details are not clear, sometime between 1984 and 1986, the relationship abruptly ended when the woman he was with terminated the relationship in favor of an inmate she had been tutoring at the local correctional facility. As it was explained to this writer, the woman fell in love with one of the offenders who attended a Bible group she led at the facility. This writer was unaware of this prior to the beginning of the research, and they have never met this woman or discussed this incident with the individuals involved. At this time, little detail is known beyond what is described here. However, this writer believes it is important to include this instance to underscore how unexceptional and common these events are. These details did not influence the decision to research this topic, and it is not believed to have influenced the direction of the research in any way.

The researcher believes this topic is important due to a variety of reasons. As time goes on, more literature and nonacademic articles are coming out about this topic. However, most books and articles are met with polarizing views, harsh judgments, and anger toward those who volunteer to participate in the research. These publications are often filled with the author's personal narrative, with the experiences of the participants getting lost in the background. This writer believes it is important to put the experiences of these women in the foreground, in a clinical and academic context, to understand the underpinnings of their relationships better and potentially the safety and security aspects involved.

The writer recognized they have insider and outsider status in terms of connecting to the topic and to some extent the participants. In regard to insider status, this writer is familiar with the prison population and has worked within correctional complexes. Concerning outsider status, this writer is a student in a clinical psychology doctoral program who sought this information for the express purpose of research. This writer is an outsider to the struggles and hardships of their relationships and the difficulties they may have experienced due to those choices. Overall, the identity and role of a researcher and doctoral student placed this writer as an outsider, as this identity was not expected to be shared by the participants.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

The study contained nine individual interviews, each averaging an hour in length. Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed into a Word document and uploaded to the data analysis software MAXQDA. Each interview was transcribed as close to verbatim as possible, including stutters, filler words, and repeated words. Once transcribed and uploaded to MAXQDA, the data was coded line by line using inductive coding, with all codes being derived directly from the data set with no preconceived codes in mind. The codes themselves utilized a mix of in vivo and descriptive coding techniques. When possible, the participants' own words were used to convey their thoughts and emotions on the topic being discussed in order to maintain the exact meaning and limit potential bias from the researcher. However, when it did not make sense to use the participants' own words, descriptive coding was used to summarize the meaning and emotion of what was being said.

Each coded interview was read no less than four times, with codes being reviewed, changed, merged, or maintained through each examination. Once completed, all segments associated with a particular code were reviewed and matched with similarly coded segments to create subordinate themes. Initially, 1,603 codes were grouped together into 55 subordinate themes. After further examination, these 55 subordinate themes were rearranged, merged, or discontinued until 30 subordinate themes remained to categorize the codes. During this process, the 55 subordinate themes were originally grouped into 17 superordinate themes as trends within the data started to emerge. However, as subordinate themes changed and merged, the 17 overarching themes were similarly reexamined until the resulting 8 themes (see figure 4.1) were determined to describe the collected data best.

When making the subordinate themes, not every code was used. The decision to negate certain codes only occurred when the code was used less than two times across the interviews. While this did eliminate some data points, multiple codes often overlapped any given section, ensuring that the essence of what was said was captured in the final product (see figures 4.2–4.9 for superordinate themes, subordinate themes, and prevalent codes).

The original 17 superordinate themes were based on the initial trends observed in the data set. Due to overlapping codes, a number of the original superordinate themes contained similar data points. In order to obtain a more concise and accurate narrative, these themes were eliminated or absorbed by other superordinate themes. For example, most of the data points from the original theme “Challenges” were found to be covered by several other superordinate themes, and the decision was made to cut the challenges theme and disperse the remaining unique data points appropriately.

Figure 4.1

Themes

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Multimedia & Incarcerated Relationships	Media Portrayal Support Groups Social Media & Reaching Out
Personal Growth & Struggles	New Experiences Compassion Self-Esteem Struggling
Department of Corrections	Views on Prison Experience with Prison
Views on Their Partner	Helping Each Other Discussing Index Offense & His Prison Experience Minimization A Different Person Now
Communication	Initial Contact Quality Letters & Phone Calls Face-to-Face Communication
Growth & Development of the Relationship	Vulnerability Romance Prison Impact on Relationship Talking to Other Women
Fear & Judgment	Judgment Fear of Losing Identity Only Seeing Index Offense Judging Other Relationships Change in Views
Financial Challenges & the Future of the Relationship	Financial Strain Moving Forward

Credibility

Each question asked during the interview process was constructed to answer specific questions to help fill a gap in current research. To enhance credibility during the research process, the researcher utilized a reflexive journal to help capture and preserve thoughts, beliefs, and personal questions throughout the interviews and during data analysis. The researcher used both a physical notebook and digital memos to help keep track of thoughts and beliefs throughout the research project. The researcher used a physical notebook prior to, during, and after each interview to help capture and record immediate thoughts on the data in real time. Pen and paper were further utilized during data analysis in the beginning stages of theme construction. When the interviews were being transcribed and coded, the researcher used digital memos to track specific questions and thoughts to unique comments made by the participants. Both physical and digital mediums were used to capture the emotion and tone of the interview, the questions and initial thoughts of the researcher, and practical notes concerning what was happening in the analysis and why it was occurring.

Response to the Study

During nearly all of the interviews, the subject of the study itself was discussed. Almost all participants expressed concern about the subject matter. Throughout the interview process, multiple participants expressed frustration with the lack of information available to them. They stated that they were excited to contribute to the understanding of this phenomenon and discuss their experiences with another person. The participants also expressed frustration with the limited information they were able to obtain on their own and the negative images shown on various media platforms. One-third of the participants expressed concerns and suspicion about the study and the researcher. One participant asked, “What’s your angle with [this]?” and

reported a general sense of suspicion within the community as a whole (Participant AA, personal communication, January 16, 2023). However, nearly all participants, including those who were suspicious, expressed eagerness to participate. They further stated that their incarcerated partners were also excited and eager for them to participate in the study.

Figure 4.2

Superordinate Theme I, Subordinate Themes, Prevalent Codes

Multimedia & Incarcerated Relationships		
Media Portrayal	Support Groups	Social Media & Reaching Out
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love After Lockup • Entertainment • Sensational 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concern • Facebook • SubReddit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PenPal • TikTok • Write-A-Prisoner

Multimedia and Incarcerated Relationships

Each participant shared her experience and views on media, including interactions with traditional and social media, online support groups, and prison letter-writing services. While not all participants had experience with each of these elements, everyone discussed how media impacted their relationships with their partners or contributed to biases against them.

Media Portrayal. Nearly every participant spoke about how relationships like theirs are depicted in visual media, such as television shows. The majority of opinions expressed were negative, with women discussing the impact these programs have had on themselves and the negative stereotypes they perpetuate about the nature of these relationships. Participant GG offered one of the most passionate critiques of these programs:

I hate those shows. I hate those shows. Because like you say, it does perpetuate that stigma and I think it gives a really bad impression. In fact, to be honest, I don't really like watching any prison shows at all. Even what's that one? It's like, 60-60 days in or something when someone pretends to be [incarcerated] any sort of shows like that and

even if it's really a documentary, I find it really difficult to watch personally. And this was actually before I even met [PARTNER'S NAME]. Yeah, I just they make me cringe, they really do because I know that perhaps there is some internalized stigma there, but I know they're talking about people like me and I try to avoid, but sometimes it's unavoidable. You know, the Twitter threads of people laughing at women who are in relationships with people in prison or, you know, making comments that the men are this way and that way. Or they're—just all people who are incarcerated are disgusting people or whatever. And I know firsthand that, you know, even if I wasn't with [PARTNER'S NAME] that, that's just not the case. And most people who are in prison will be released from prison at some point. So, to have this negative stigma of people who have been incarcerated, I think it's really damaging whether someone's in a romantic relationship with them or not. So yeah, those shows I understand the kind of car crash element of wanting to watch them, you kind of can't stop—not watch you can't look away. And it feeds into some sort of gladiatorial mentality that we haven't disinherited, I guess. (Participant GG, personal communication, February 9, 2023)

She went on to discuss how these shows have directly impacted how other individuals view her current relationship:

But yeah, I—people who I have spoken to who I told I'm in a relationship with someone who's incarcerated. They always ask have you watched this show? Have you watched that show? Because that's what they think I think our relationship's like, and before I even tell them, or they before they even asked me, oh, you know, what's your relationship like? What's he like, what did he do? Blah, blah blah, they already think—they have this idea that oh, he's pretty much the same as so-and-so off *Love After Lockup* or, I don't know, whatever they're called. So yeah, I really and as you can tell from my rant. I really do have a problem with that stuff. (Participant GG, personal communication, February 9, 2023)

Her views were shared by other participants as well:

Most of the stuff that I think my friends and family had seen is like *Love After Lockup* and shows like that. So, their idea was sort of skewed by sort of like these reality TV shows and stuff that weren't really like my experience at all. (Participant AA, personal communication, January 16, 2023)

Some participants reported they are aware of the television programs, but do not watch them. However, these women similarly reported that the programs help to perpetuate negative stereotypes of their relationships:

I have not personally watched *Love After Lockup*, but I know that they watch it a lot in prison because he watches it a lot. I don't feel like it's accurate and I don't feel like the media portrays these relationships correctly or accurately. I think that they focus more on, like, how could she possibly love a murderer and less on the fact that there's humans

involved and feelings, and emotions and the financial part of it, the money part of it. So, I feel like they just focus on what's sensational and they don't focus on what, like, that's 10% of it and they don't focus on the other 90% that actually matters. (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

The negative impact of these programs was similarly expressed by Participant II:

So I've never seen it, but you know, I—I just feel like the way that they're portrayed in general in society, it is like you said, either those fanatical type people or they're painted as like, oh here's this—Sometimes they make it seem like, oh, here's a desperate woman who just, you know, wants attention and is seeking it from these people form—from these men or women, or whoever, and end up being used. And I don't feel like that's true. Or sometimes they're like the men or women who are incarcerated, are lonely. So they're, you know, looking for, or they fall in love with the first person they talk to. And I'm like, I don't feel like that's really the truth either. (Participant II, personal communication, February 28, 2023)

Support Groups. Participants discussed their ability to connect and communicate with other women through digital media, such as the subreddit r/PrisonWives. Although some participants found encouragement and support from the subreddit, others reported feeling anxious and fearful after reading comments from women in similar relationships. Participant II mentioned how the support group members could better understand her situation than her friends:

[Regarding the subreddit] Some friends try to be supportive, but they don't know how to, but I do appreciate them, you know, trying. So that's kind of why I joined the Reddit because—I—there are some supportive people on there and some of the post have helpful tips on, you know, how to deal with the loneliness and whatnot. (Participant II, personal communication, February 28, 2023)

Participant HH spoke about learning about the experiences of other people in similar relationships:

[Regarding the subreddit] Yeah, that's been really cool and it's been really cool to umm—Just read other people's experiences even if there's nothing that I've experienced or like there's a lot of, there's a lot of women like they showed—they share everything, they show their success stories. They share I was scammed by this guy. These are things to look out for like common scams that guys in prison try to pull or red flags or, you know, just like, they just, there's a just everything on there, which is cool. Just anything you might want to know or they—people share like, you know, different things of like

what they've sent people in prison or whatever. (Participant HH, personal communication, February 26, 2023)

While some women voiced the beneficial impact of the subreddit, others were concerned with the content they've viewed on the page. Participant FF explained how the subreddit exposed her to new and worrying possibilities with her relationship:

That page kind of scares me a little bit. And I will say, it has also gotten in my head a little bit because people talk about how, like their guy has cheated on them, and it turns out he's talking to other people and you can pull their phone records and that stuff all really got in my head because I realized, you know, I don't know if he was this whole time, like maybe he's been talking to seven other me's. Maybe he gets off the phone with me and he gets on the phone with the next person and tells them all the same things that he's telling me but, yeah [*laughter*]. (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

Participant FF went on to further explain how the content on the subreddit has created fear and a sense of uneasiness around her own relationship:

And for whatever reason I just was going on happy about my life and then when I got in the subreddit, I was like oh my God I never thought of all of these things—you guys are correct. He could be—I could be really stupid. I don't want to spend eight years being really stupid. (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

Whereas Participant FF voiced concern with the subreddit and her own relationship,

Participant GG spoke more broadly about her concerns. Stating:

I have my reservations about the subreddit. Purely because some of the things I read on there, I find concerning when it comes to some of the stories that I'm hearing about women who potentially are in quite abusive relationships or exploitative, perhaps the better word. I feel frustrated sometimes at those groups when people bragging or laughing about things that their partners really shouldn't be doing and that they're getting away with doing because it's frustrating when my partner does everything by the book, has never got a write-up. Never anything wrong, besides, you know, get himself in prison in the first place. To this day will never do anything dodgy—doesn't hustle. Doesn't, you know, do anything you would expect some to do to kind of like dance that line of illegality I guess. And has no chance of getting out of prison when you know that other people are doing things, they really probably shouldn't be doing and they know they shouldn't be doing and it's fine, like I get it, you take your chances but that kind of aspect I find really frustrating. And I think it again, similar to the television programs that you were mentioning it perpetuates that stigma of the people, you know, aren't really changing or trying to become better people or and I don't know, maybe I'm being idealistic, but I like to think that people would want to do better. And sometimes I feel

like those subreddits do glorify that kind of negative and cool and bad boy thing. That people kind of, I don't know fetishize, maybe is the right word so speak and that I find troubling. It's one of the reasons why I only really recently joined that subreddit because I felt like in that way I couldn't relate to a lot of the women in there, all of the people in there's not just women. And I was kind of hesitant. When I told I told [PARTNER'S NAME], I joined the group, he was really quite shocked because I expressed my discontent at joining something like that before. But with any other kind of like curiosity and stuff. And one of the things recently, that's concerned me is someone had posted something—I could hardly remember the exact thread but she was she was venting because her partner had, she felt, had clearly felt kind of the weight of the racist system around her partner and that, you know, he shouldn't really be in prison. And she voiced that concern as she has every right to do and people really piled on her, for making it a race issue and I stepped in and said, well, you know, there is a disparity in the criminal justice system. And even if you don't agree, this is really not the place for you to start, you know, having a go at this person because she's clearly upset. She's clearly having a difficult time and we should just give her the benefit of the doubt and I left a few links to different data and newspaper articles and stuff. And there's a race problem in that group and that I find really difficult to want to be associated with too. And I don't think that's helpful when there are so many issues when it comes to race in the criminal justice system, that ultimately affect all of us, no matter your skin color. So, I've kind of, after that event, stepped back from contributing and just observe and if I feel someone's being piled on then I would kind of step in because I don't like seeing anyone be picked on like that. But yeah, I'm not sure how helpful those kind of sort of groups are. So, I definitely can - have - can see why people feel intimidated. I'm sure it's probably black women that feel intimidated by those sort of spaces. (Participant GG, personal communication, February 9, 2023)

Social Media and Reaching Out. Each participant spoke candidly about how they first became aware of their partner and how the relationship started. While half of the participants reported having some prior connection to their current partners, such as being friends with their partner's sibling or cousin growing up, other participants reported reaching out through specialized services and social media. These participants spoke about why they contacted incarcerated strangers and how they made the decision to take the first step. In particular, one participant mentioned how she discovered a mail writing service for incarcerated individuals through the social media app TikTok:

Um, so like a year ago or so on TikTok, there was—so on TikTok there's lots of like videos of people who are in prison, posting from prison. And so, I first saw those videos and I think because of, like, the way the algorithm works like from interacting with those, I started seeing videos of like people saying like, oh, there's these like websites you could

talk to people who want pen pals. So, for about like a year, I would see those videos, but I never, you know, did too much with it. And then eventually I checked out one of the websites called WriteAPrisoner.com. Yeah. That's when I, so from that website is, when I started writing a few people and then eventually. Yeah. Writing the only one person now. (Participant HH, personal communication, February 26, 2023)

Participant HH went on to describe the videos with incarcerated men talking about their personal lives and how they appreciate and value communicating with someone outside of prison:

Well, with the video like with the videos specifically there was like, because there's some videos that are like, people telling their personal experiences and then there's some videos where it's almost like a commercial and it's like the commercial videos, they're kind of just like, you know, these people, they really want someone to talk to—so many people don't have anyone writing them. So maybe just kind of like an appeal at emotions or something. And then with like the personal experience videos, just like a lot of people said that they've made, like really good friendships, and it's something that they've like enjoyed and so, that just those things and like. . . . Then just paired with like my personal beliefs and studies and like my position on probably like abolition—prison abolition and all that type of stuff probably played a factor too. (Participant HH, personal communication, February 26, 2023)

While social media was influential with multiple accounts, Participants like GG spoke about her experience with the frequently referenced Write-A-Prison website:

So, him and I first met so to speak although it was more of a pen pal relationship through WriteAPrisoner.com. I'm sure it's something you've heard of quite a few times and that was when I was back in the UK actually—I'm originally from London. So yeah, that was that was two years ago, and I reached out to him purely on a pen pal friendship basis. I had no intention of beginning a relationship, especially with someone who was on the other side of the world, let alone in prison. And we had lots of things in common, he was interested in education, and I'm in grad school too. So, I felt like, I don't know, he'd be someone interesting to talk to and I felt like I could be a good friend and I'm not the best at like making new friends and so I felt like having that distance. I don't know, just felt less intimidating I guess in an odd sort of way because you would have thought, that reaching out to someone in prison is more intimidating. Because, yeah, there were certain things that I was conscious of when choosing someone to reach out to, like there were certain crimes that I don't feel comfortable reaching out to someone who would commit those crimes. I'm not a particularly judgmental person, but anyone who, like, who committed crimes against children or sexual violence, anything like that. I wasn't comfortable speaking to someone—I believe everyone can change but that was just kind of like my boundary at that stage I suppose. And yeah, so, I wrote to him and then he wrote me a letter back and we kind of exchange letters for a few months and then I had the opportunity to do my PhD here, had kind of lost contact with him for a little while

because covid hit and I was working in healthcare so you can kind of imagine how hectic that was and sending a letter out—well, when we were on lockdown it wasn't really a part of my priorities, not that he'll thank me for saying that, but it's true. I guess I moved here and then we started chatting more, and started chatting on the phone and decided to start dating I suppose and whatever form you can constitute that as dating. We didn't meet in person until May 2021 and that was—what, a year and a half since we first started corresponding, and again, that was because of covid lockdown—visitation procedures and policy—and safety measures. (Participant GG, personal communication, February 9, 2023)

Figure 4.3

Superordinate Theme II, Subordinate Themes, Prevalent Codes

Personal Growth & Struggles			
New Experience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Background • Unique • Past Relationships • Stability 	Compassion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affection • Generosity • Joy 	Self-Esteem <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boundaries • Guarded • More Secure 	Struggle <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guilt • Isolation • "Seperate lives" • "Take it a day at a time"

Personal Growth and Struggles

Each participant reflected on themselves and their own journey, including struggles, hardships, and joyous moments experienced in their relationships. They spoke candidly about their backgrounds, both personal and professional, and how those experiences have shaped their current selves and their views on their relationships. These reflections ranged from positive to neutral to negative, but all focused on their personal levels of comfort and the struggles they have encountered independent of the challenges or views regarding their incarcerated partners.

New Experiences. Several participants mentioned how their current relationships have led to new and positive self-awareness. They referred to past relationships and contrasted them with the unique and positive aspects of their current relationships. Participant DD, during the

interview, specifically discussed how much she has learned about herself through her current relationship:

There's so much that I've learned just about being in a relationship and like, pushing myself to do things out of my comfort zone, and I think that he came into my life in a really—very abruptly, but I wouldn't trade it for the world because just the things that I've learned just about myself as well, through this year of us dating, I don't think that I would have been able to learn it with anyone else. I feel like things—things definitely aligned with him in an odd way. Even like—I said—even if things don't work out, I learned so much about him. I've learned so much about myself and just about relationships in this relationship that it's not a waste of time, it wouldn't be a waste of time. (Participant DD, personal communication, January 27, 2023)

Compassion. When discussing the growth of their relationships, the participants frequently mentioned their own feelings of compassion. Some reported empathizing with their partner's life experiences, such as struggles with addiction and sobriety. Others expressed compassion by attempting to improve their partner's life while they are incarcerated. Participant BB spoke about the challenge of managing her desire to give with her partner's inability to reciprocate the actions due to her compassion:

He's very appreciative of what I do and think. Thanks me all the time and even like when he—when I got him shoes, or I'll order him books sometimes, like I think he almost even feels guilty about it and doesn't want me to do it like, because I have kids, I'm a single mom, but I told him I like, you know, it's it, I enjoy doing this for you, you know, it's, it's not I'm not going to put myself in a bind to do it, so, you know, just, you know, just—just take it. These men, [*laughter*], so I think it's hard to for men to, to be, you know, to be in that position where they're taking and taking and they're not able to give anything back at that point in time. (Participant BB, personal communication, January 17, 2023)

Self-Esteem. During the interviews, participants discussed personal boundaries and how these restrictions have made them feel more secure with themselves and with their relationships. They emphasized how different their current relationships are compared to their previous ones. For example, participant DD contrasted her current relationship with her previous ones and shared her positive experience with her current partner:

Yes, before I met him, I was umm, I was not like, as emotionally intimate with my partners, you know, before anything, that was kind of, like, I have to hide all of that and have to put that away and make myself smaller. But because we talked so much and because I have to actually be vulnerable because I want to continue working on this relationship, but I want to continue having this relationship and it's the same for him. Feel like we've just gotten to know each other in such a, such a deep and like different way for both of us, kind of like scary. And it gives me the kind of like inner security that we can work through any issue that arises and I've never had that before. So, it feels, it feels really nice. Feels really different like yeah, the fact that I can't be intimate with him like physically—I can't like, you know, I can't like kiss him—I can't, you know, do all these things. But again, I don't think that I was like really ready for those things because I was doing it like a very empty, almost like self-harming way before. So, someone actually getting to know me and like caring about what I have to say and about who I am. Really made me a lot more secure, just in my own self esteem as well. (Participant DD, personal communication, January 27, 2023)

Participant II spoke about her boundaries and how she needs to protect herself and help her partner become healthy before he is released from prison:

I mean, I think it's still something building because I've also made it clear like I'm not here to save anyone. I can be supportive. I can tell you what works for me but don't, you know, put your sobriety or your life or anything like that—Like don't put that on me because that's too big of a responsibility, you know, then plus you're supposed to be doing that yourself. So, you know, I just make sure I have good boundaries and and help with things that I'm comfortable with and be supportive in ways that I'm comfortable. But if not at all, I'll speak up. (Participant II, personal communication, February 28, 2023)

Struggling. While participants mostly shared positive experiences with themselves through this journey, a majority of the women voiced experiencing personal struggles directly related to the relationship. The women spoke about experiencing higher levels of isolation, with one woman reporting guilt over her partner's incarceration. Participant FF spoke about her feelings of isolation, reporting:

It's hard and it's hard because I don't talk to anybody about him, so that it's hard. It's hard to make sense of it. I kind of feel like I'm living two separate lives. And that's weird. (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

She continued and spoke about her hesitation to reach out to others in the community with similar relationships:

No. I just feel like, in some ways my story is not any different than anybody else's in there, so I just have never posted about mine. I just feel like I don't know, my story has probably already been told a hundred times. (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

Participants BB and CC spoke about the struggle of being in a relationship with an incarcerated person:

Yeah. Yeah. It is like it's it's it's I try to just take it a day at a time and tell him to do the same but it but it gets hard. I mean like if you stop and let yourself think about it too much or dwell on it too much, you know, you can get discouraged, really fast. (Participant BB, personal communication, January 17, 2023)

She went on to reflect on her relationship and how she wished her situation was different:

Like I wouldn't have chosen this if I if I could go back and like meet him just a couple months where he was getting out, that would be great. I would not choose this, it's not, it's not easy, it's not at all, you know, not having to stop and think about how much time it is before he gets, he gets to come home. It's the lot, you know what I mean? And it's it's not something I would choose for myself. (Participant BB, personal communication, January 17, 2023)

Participant CC spoke about her personal feelings and physical struggle when she physically visits her partner:

I never turn around and look back once I start walking away and I just can't, it just makes me sad . . . I mean, you could see and still to this day when I go and see him and I can hug him—it's it—I can feel him shaking. So I feel bad. (Participant CC, personal communication, January 25, 2023)

The personal challenges were not limited to isolation; one participant voiced that she struggles with feelings of guilt over her partners incarceration:

I feel like I'm also responsible because so our—for the situation that he's in because you know, I called 911, I don't know who else to freaking call. I called everybody I possibly could you know, I even told the police that he was supposed to be getting that stupid counseling from and he had told me that, he was like, I call them but you can't even leave a message and I'm like, oh bullshit. You know, you don't call a business and they don't have an answering machine. But he—sure as shit—I called [the counselor] during regular hours. I called them during off hours and there wasn't—they said the answering machine broke, couldn't leave a message. So, I mean, I feel partially responsible because maybe I just didn't try hard enough and I knew something was wrong and I should have—I don't know what, but there must have been other steps that I should have done and get him the

help that he needed, you know? (Participant EE, personal communication, January 29, 2023)

Figure 4.4

Superordinate Theme III, Subordinate Themes, Prevalent Codes

Department of Corrections	
<p>Views on Prison</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy for Prisoners • Prison Abolition • "Super compassionate person" • They Shouldnt Be There 	<p>Experience with Prison</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corrections Officers • "Humiliated" • Targeted • Threats

Department of Corrections

There were multiple accounts of participants discussing their personal experience with the Department of Corrections (DOC). Many interviewees spoke passionately about the challenges they have faced interacting with DOC. Participants expressed frustration with the Correction's environment, being taken advantage of regarding communication options, and the continued incarceration of their partners.

Views on Prison. Throughout the interviews, participants voiced their general thoughts and concerns about incarcerated individuals and the criminal justice system. The women spoke in general terms and were not specifically speaking about their experiences or about their partners. During these discussions, the women spoke with sympathy and understanding for those who are incarcerated.

Participants BB and II spoke about incarcerated people who made bad decisions or mistakes:

And like and I think that I think that that prison is a good thing and there there, you know—People, some people deserve to be in there, but I mean, a lot of, like, a lot of the

guys that I've met even, you know, just not or not met but know of even through him like, it's doesn't even seem like they should be there. You know what I mean? Like, if they just made a bad decision one day and their life, and then now they're they're doing all this time because they did one stupid thing. (Participant BB, personal communication, January 17, 2023)

I wouldn't say that just because I, you know, I'm a super compassionate person and when I lived my life, you know, through my addiction, I met people in so many different places in life and a lot of them had been to prison and you know, I thought that they were wonderful people. They were just lost or they just made a mistake and I even had like an uncle who went to prison for a white-collar crime. And, you know, I don't necessarily—so no, I've always been pretty compassionate and understanding of people who are incarcerated. (Participant II, personal communication, February 28, 2023)

Participant CC echoed these points, describing how good guys sometimes do bad things:

I—like my brother, perfect example, you know, he'd been in jail and this is one of my favorite sayings is—You know, people especially when you're talking to little kids like bad guys go to jail and yes, bad guys do go to jail but, sometimes good guys, also go to jail because they did a bad thing. Doesn't mean they're a bad person. (Participant CC, personal communication, January 25, 2023)

A common sentiment through the interviews revolved around incarcerated people being isolated and viewed as less than human:

That the people in prison, regardless of what they've done are still humans. So not all of them need to be out on the streets ever again, but they are still human and they deserve interaction. (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

Participant HH spoke about prison reform and discussed systemic issues around the criminal justice system:

So, I think that, like the way that our prison system like functions in our society, by largely preying on oppressed people or creating oppressed people and I just think that a lot of the ways in which our prison system functions has, like, based off studies I've seen, and just based on the outcomes and then in comparison to other parts in the world is just largely ineffective isn't—like doesn't focus on rehabilitation and like actually creating a safer society. It's more of just like creating an oppressed class and then with my own specific community just like having some of the highest incarceration rates and just seeing how that impacts us and like even when you're free, it can put you in a subclass of people with, you know, not full protection or rights under the law. So all of those things make me really big for reform and abolition. (Participant HH, personal communication, February 26, 2023)

Participant GG voiced similar thoughts and belief about the criminal justice system and

the inequalities and stigma attached to incarcerated individuals:

So yeah, I think it's dam—and I also think it's damaging to the ways in which you think about rehabilitation and the ways in which we think about what the role of prisons are because from what I've seen and these stereotypes, it's just kind of perpetuating this idea that prison is a revolving door and men and women aren't changing and—I don't know, I could go on really but I just think on all counts it gives poor representations of people on either side and that's the really negative aspect. (Participant GG, personal communication, February 9, 2023)

She went on to say:

I think it's a sort of kind of institutionalization and unfortunately, people don't have the support in their younger years to have that independence. Yeah. Yeah, it's really complex. I think it's been designed for the public not to see it that way. And to see that prisons are just a place, not even really a place—a concept for the bad guys to go to without realizing that actually, these are spaces where things are happening and people most of the time are experiencing, you know, mental trauma—let's face it or trauma from childhood poverty. (Participant GG, personal communication, February 9, 2023)

Experience with Prison. When the women spoke more purposely about prison and the experiences they had, many of the women reported negative experiences, specifically with corrections officers:

I think sometimes that you're seen as like, enabling criminality or you're seen as being kind of just as bad as them, especially when you go on visits and stuff, you're definitely kind of perceived as a potential threat to the prison rather than being someone the prison should be protecting just as much as the people inside, if anything they should be protected more than people inside, then I think people incarcerated and then I think the guards themselves. But often you feel just as kind of judged and made to feel like you're committing a crime for even associating with someone in prison, let alone going to visit them. (Participant GG, personal communication, February 9, 2023)

GG continued to describe feeling humiliated by the actions taken by some of the correctional officers:

Yeah, I have on a few occasions. I've also found on a few occasions when that hasn't been the case and I've written, you know, letter to say, like, thank you because it makes such a difference to feel like you're a person and not just being judged as a criminal. But there's plenty of times when I felt quite humiliated really and it's to the point where it's disrupted my visit because I feel deeply surveilled and violated, I think on some occasions quite frankly. (Participant GG, personal communication, February 9, 2023)

Additionally, one woman reported having negative experiences with other inmates, namely, when her partners cellmates attempted to extort her for protection money:

Like when he was in County, somehow the perps got my phone number and would call me like they were [PARTNER'S NAME] and I don't know how the hell they were able to do that. But they they did and they would call me and say that I needed to pay them money or they said that he was going to get a beatdown. (Participant EE, personal communication, January 29, 2023)

Figure 4.5

Superordinate Theme IV, Subordinate Themes, Prevalent Codes

Views on Their Partner			
Helping Each Other <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overstimulation • Patience • Provide Assistance 	Discussing Index Offense <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case File • Crime/Index Offense • Raised in Prison • Sentencing 	Minimization <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dangerous • Justification/Dismissive • Territorial • Violence 	A Different Person Now <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change • Honest • Remorse • Rehabilitation

Views on Their Partner

While each participant spoke about their own personal experience with the Department of Corrections, they also voiced concern for their partner's experience. Separate from their own involvement, the participants spoke at length about their partners, their index offenses, and how their partners have changed over the years of confinement. The theme dedicated to the participants partners further explores how people in these unique relationships view themselves in addition to their partners as individuals.

Helping Each Other. During the interview, some of the participants spoke about how their partners have struggled with transitioning away from their incarceration. One participant spoke at length about her husband who was in a work-release program and how he reacted to sudden changes in his life and their relationship:

I figured that he was going to have like a hard time whenever he got out with like overstimulation and stuff. But it was really, it wasn't scary, but it made it very real. Like, when I saw his kind of anxiety and overstimulation and stuff, like, even just even just me and him in the car, you know, there was like a little bit of like he told me, he said, I feel like we're doing something illegal, like I'm not supposed to be here and stuff, you know, but you know, then it was nice because you're able to like be like intimate with somebody who you've been like, in a romantic relationship with—but haven't been able to do really romantic things with, you know? We went to Walmart, and but then he was very overwhelmed by that too—it was really hard for him. So, it was just kind of different anticipating that things things were happening and then actually like witnessing them. (Participant AA, personal communication, January 16, 2023)

Participant AA went on to describe her husband's struggle with routine decisions and choices after being incarcerated for over a decade:

I was allowed to bring him clothes and stuff, like, I was allowed to go up there one time and do a home drop off of like, food and clothes and soap and all that kind of stuff. And I was asking him, you know, I'm going to go buy you some jeans what size jeans do you want. And it took him two weeks to make this decision because he hadn't bought pants for himself in 13 years and I don't think he even knows what he likes really. (Participant AA, personal communication, January 16, 2023)

Discussing Index Offense and His Prison Experience. A majority of the participants spoke about their partner's index offenses and their history of incarceration throughout the interview. Nearly all of the women acknowledged their partner's guilt and culpability. However, more than one participant expressed challenges talking about the offense, and at times, frustration with how or why their partner was sentenced in comparison to others. Participant EE reflected on how she felt about her partner's previous incarceration when she first learned the details:

And I was super freaked out because I was like, oh my God he's been in prison a long time. The hell did he do? You know? And she told me what had what he had done and I was like how the hell did he end up in prison for that fucking long like damn. It seems ridiculous. Like, he could've killed someone and had the same amount of time. You know, you could have robbed people for millions of dollars and had less time. What the hell [*laughter*] is this about? (Participant EE, personal communication, January 29, 2023)

Participant EE later described his current offense and her frustration with the situation:

And he was like, I'm going to go get a gun and kill myself, then he went to the bedroom and I was like, does he really have a fucking gun in there and he came out with a gun and he really had a gun. So I didn't really know what was going to happen. You know? I told him that I was calling 911 and he needed to put the gun away because there's nobody else. Who else do you freakin call for somebody who's like, having an actual psychotic break, you know, and and was I scared? Hell yeah. I was scared. He really had a gun. I don't know what he was gonna do with it. Now that I'm calling 911, I don't know if he's going to shoot me, shoot himself, shoot the dog, our bird, dog, or puppy because he thought that I wanted him to get rid of the dog.... He was sentenced in like December for the federal [charges] and he got nine and a half years. (Participant EE, personal communication, January 29, 2023)

More than one participant expressed difficulty discussing their partner's crime. On more than one occasion, the women made similar statements as Participant FF, who reported:

I don't know how to talk about his crime. One because it's not mine to talk about. But two because he—what are people going to say? Like, how am I able to reconcile his crime and be in a relationship with him? So that parts hard. (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

Participant FF went on to describe how it would be easier to discuss his index offence once he is released and people are able to know him. This view was expressed by multiple women during the interviews:

It would be easier because then people would know him and you know right now he's just going to be this faceless person, that nobody's had any contact with that killed a kid. And at least maybe if people know him, maybe that won't sting as bad. But when you go to bed at night, I mean, it still sucks. He still killed the kid. (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

Participant GG voiced concern about her partner's innocence and the mass incarceration of African Americans in the American criminal justice system:

Yeah, I think on one of the things that one of the reasons why I decided to reach out to [PARTNER'S NAME] was because I, although I knew he was on a murder charge . . . well not a murder charge he'd been convicted of murder rather. I read his case files and stuff to find out what had actually happened and before I reached out to him I kind of had the realization that he probably hadn't committed this crime at all based on the evidence and what was provided. I think a big part of why I felt compelled to reach out to him was because I felt a sense of injustice on his behalf and that it wasn't fair that he was in prison and he should have opportunities like . . . and that again kind of open my eyes to the idea

that these preconceived ideas of people are not productive or helpful in any way really . . . I mean, I've always kind of known this stereotype of criminal justice systems locking away the key when it comes to black men in America. Anyway, and well not just America . . . in the UK and wider, I'm sure, but. . . . Yeah, I was conscious to make sure, I don't know, got all the facts I guess and I have taken that with me whenever I have met someone that he's been in the visiting room and introduce me to or been chatting about or people he's gone to school with the way that I don't know. (Participant GG, personal communication, February 9, 2023)

Minimization. At times participants seemed to minimize their partners challenging past and some of their actions within the relationship. Some of the women appeared to be dismissive of the behavior. During the interview, the women appeared to minimize their partner's actions, specifically when it came to jealousy, possessiveness, and violence:

I don't feel afraid of him and I know that he still has violent tendencies. I know that he's worked on it a lot and he's been in a medium-security prison now for two years and he hasn't hurt anybody. But I do know that the first, you know, probably 15 to 18 years he was in prison. He spent like probably five or six years cumulative in segregation because of violence. (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

Similar to views regarding the index offense, Participant EE seemed unconcerned with her partner's verbal aggression:

And then yeah, it's just crazy. I mean that they are like I said, I was like, I was expecting a murderer, you know, or a rapist. Somebody like to be afraid of I mean—but he's not, I mean he's a little bit scary if you're not the friend, you know? And the whole—when he starts going down the paranoid schizophrenic cycle, you know? Because he's big and strong and he can be really loud. But he doesn't ever like hit you or anything—he's just usually yelling at you and like trying to hurt your feelings, you know? (Participant EE, personal communication, January 29, 2023)

Although not married, Participant FF reported her partner had “jokingly” requested she change her last name to his:

He said recently, that he wanted to change my last name and I said, well, what does that mean? Are we getting married while you're in prison? And he said, no. And I said, well, it's expensive to change a last name, like you just want me to go file to change my last name and he said, yes, but he said it jokingly and I said, I'm not doing that. It's expensive and that's stupid. (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

She continued to reflect on her partner's request for her to change her last name:

He hasn't—I don't know, he hasn't said that we should get married. He hasn't said, we shouldn't get married, but he has been kind of—He's not really like a territorial person but the last name does come across a little bit territorial. (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

During the interview, Participant HH spoke about an incident when her partner expressed jealousy over her communication with other inmates:

And even like, when we were talking one time and I had told him how I had messaged other people in the beginning, he was like upset by that. . . . He said he said he was upset like by, yeah, and he expressed like maybe—what did he say—something like but it made him feel maybe like less special or that I was just trying to write anybody . . . which we like talked through. And I was like, okay, well, I'm not trying to lie to you. I'm just telling you the truth, like I did write multiple people, but like, I don't talk to them anymore, only talk to you. Like, I don't—with the amount that we communicate with each other. I don't have time to communicate like, with other people on that same level. (Participant HH, personal communication, February 26, 2023)

A Different Person Now. When discussing their partner's index offenses and their history within the criminal justice system, a majority of the women spoke about how their partners have changed over the years. The participants spoke about how their partners have grown and changed emotionally and have taken advantage of the resources available to them in prison.

During the interview, Participant FF highlighted how she still struggles with his index offense but has been able to see her partner for more than his charge the more she gets to know him. She further emphasized this change by describing his new friendship with a transgender inmate:

But, I don't feel afraid of him but I still do struggle with his crime sometimes. Less so the further we get and the more I talk to him, and the more he—I'm watching him soften and change like he just befriended a transgender person. [The other inmate is] in a male prison but he identifies as a she. And when we first started talking that would have never happened. He had a very defined idea about things because he's basically only ever been in prison. And I was talking to him earlier today and he was telling me about this person and their tarot cards like they're legitimately becoming friends. And I just think that that's so neat. So, watching him change and soften I don't know. It's very, very fun, and cool, and wonderful, and it makes it easier dealing with his crime. (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

Participant AA reflected on how her partner's incarceration has given him a new appreciation for life beyond prison:

I think the unique thing about—He's wasted a lot of his life and so something that I really admire about him is that he has like this real zest for things. You know, kind of has like this, this wonder about the world like and he really appreciates—he has an immense amount of gratitude for stuff that I think, even sometimes I take for granted. (Participant AA, personal communication, January 16, 2023)

Participant DD spoke about how different her partner is today compared to who he was before his incarceration:

You know, I was wondering if you were going to ask me something about them, or like him being like, like a changed person or like a rehabilitated, because, you know, how prison or like jail's supposed to be, you know, "supposed to be" [*laughter*] Umm, because I know from the stories that he tells me before and like, what his family and his friends tell me about the kind of person that he was before he was there. He's very, very different than the person I talk to now. (Participant DD, personal communication, January 27, 2023)

Similar to the previous accounts, Participant GG underscored the positive things her partner has been able to accomplish during his incarceration:

Yeah, absolutely. You know, he he and I both maintain hope that he is doing—He is doing what prisons are supposed to do so to speak, you know, he's getting his second degree. He's starting initiatives to help people in the youth offender pod, he's doing various other charity things setting up, you know, his own charity foundation. He's publishing writing. All the stuff that I think brings him purpose in the hopes that you know, he shows that he is a rehabilitated person. He is someone that can contribute to kind of the rest of society and isn't seen as this stain on society, which is what I think is just how I think he's felt for most of his teenage years. (Participant GG, personal communication, February 9, 2023)

Figure 4.6

Superordinate Theme V, Subordinate Themes, Prevalent Codes

Communication			
Initial Contact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact Through Family/Friends • Culture • Randomization • Why They Reached Out 	Quality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequency • Intimate • Long Distance • Safe 	Letters & Phone Calls <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email & Letters • No Visual Communication • Nonverbal Communication • Phone Calls 	Face-to-Face Contact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Concern With Meeting in Person • Tablets • Visitation

Communication

The foundation and quality of the relationships discussed during these interviews was predicated on the ability to communicate with each other. During each interview, the participants discussed how communication started between them and their partners and the unique challenges each relationship faced due to the limited and strict guidelines around interacting with their partners. The women spoken at length about the quality of their communication and how the limited access has helped form the foundation of their relationship compared to previous relationships they have had in the past.

Initial Contact. During the interviews, all of the participants recalled how they initially started communicating with their current partners. Two-thirds of the participants reported they were originally introduced to their partners through family or friends of the incarcerated individual. Participant AA recalled how she started talking to her partner when his sister asked her to mediate a conversation:

But four years ago, her [Partner's sister] and—they they got into an argument and she asked me if I would three-way with them on the phone and kind of mediate it. She's got—she kind of reaches out to me a lot for sort of advice about things and I'm kind of I guess the more level-headed one in the friendship and so she asked me she's like hey would you like mine kind of getting on this call and sort of like you know, having my back or mediating this difficult conversation with my brother and so I said yeah, and I got on the phone and then he asked her if he could have my number and I said no, but she

gave it to him anyway and he started calling and I just always answered the phone and it just progressed after that. (Participant AA, personal communication, January 16, 2023)

Participant BB shared a similar story where communication started after assisting someone else:

We—I knew him before we—because he was, he’s friends with my ex-husband and so when we were first like writing each other, it was about a year ago and I would, uh, I would—my ex couldn’t figure out how to work the Getting Out app which is, you know, the text messaging app that’s used and so I would send messages for him. And then after that, you know, we just started talking more back and forth and after like three or four months of texting and writing and we use Text Behind for letter—writing letters back and forth and texting like that—we developed feelings for each other and then we’ve been together ever since. (Participant BB, personal communication, January 17, 2023)

While a majority of the participants spoke about communication starting through friends and family, three participants initiated contact through letter-writing services such as Write a Prisoner. Participant HH spoke her reasons for reaching out:

So, I’m Native American and I study sociology and I’m really into like prison reform. So, I wanted to write Native people around my age because I know, like I’ve seen a lot of, I’ve learned about it. And I’ve seen lots of videos about like the use of like promoting culture to help like have better outcomes during and after prison with Native people. So, I just, I wanted, like I specifically filtered it to find native people around my age, so that I could write somebody else and kind of maybe be a part of that somehow. (Participant HH, personal communication, February 26, 2023)

Similar to HH, Participant FF reported she reached out to support people who may be experiencing isolation and loneliness while incarcerated:

So I had decided that I was going to write a few people and it was kind of for a number of different reasons. I’m bored is one of them and I’ve been listening to a true crime podcast, or not a true—well that too. But a podcast that’s done out of San Quentin called Ear Hustle. I’ve been listening to that for a few years now and I always go back to this episode where they were talking about how important mail is to them. And I have a lot of military friends who kind of have the same feeling on deployments how important mail is. And so I just decided I was going to write some people so I just went through and picked profiles. And I don’t know, there wasn’t really any rhyme or reason, just kind of what whoever spoke to me. And then I just sent them out letters and some people responded, a couple were creepy, but him in particular, I don’t know, our letters were just normal letters, just friendly back-and-forth letters. (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

Quality. Participants spoke about how their relationships grew over time and how they found quality despite limited communication. Each participant reflected on how the connection with their current partner was different from all of their previous relationships. Participant AA reflected on how the limited contact has been difficult, but added to the quality of their phone and letter communication:

Yeah, but there's like more quality in the visits. I had never been in a room alone with my husband until December 24th of this [past] year, so it's like I don't get to see him as much but the quality of the visits are so good. It's—I wouldn't trade it for what the alternative is of him, not having this opportunity to go to work and for us to get to spend time together. (Participant AA, personal communication, January 16, 2023)

Participant BB spoke about the quality of her relationship and wondered if she would have the same connection with her partner if she had met him outside of prison:

Yes, because we've talked about life. I've, I've talked about things with him that I haven't told anyone ever, you know, like, things that I've experienced or things that I think that I've never shared with anybody. And because I felt like they wouldn't understand and he does, you know, it's, it's the level of connection that that we have felt from the beginning has been, you know, not like anything else I've ever experienced so it's, you know, and I don't know if that has to do with—that is because that's the only way that we can speak or if we would have if he would have been here if he would have been out, you know if we would have met would have gone the same way, I don't know. (Participant BB, personal communication, January 17, 2023)

Letters and Phone Calls. During the interviews, each participant shared the challenges they have faced with the options available for communication. Almost every participant spoke about the limitations and surprises of communicating through letters and phones. Participant AA spoke about how difficult maintaining a relationship can be when unable to visually see one another:

I had no idea how important nonverbal communication was. Until I didn't have it, you know? Like and I knew that that was important, you know, something I've been hearing since I've been in school forever like how there's so much stuff that you say without saying it with your face and your body and your mannerisms and stuff. But I had no idea. Until my relationship was exclusively on the phone, how true that was and, I know that I said the physical part was hard but like as I'm reflecting on it, I think that might be—we've had more arguments from the misunderstanding of not looking at the other person

than anything else. You know, not—not being able to read that something is upsetting someone as you’re talking about it. So, I’ve kind of had—we’ve kind of had to learn to voice stuff that you wouldn’t normally voice. You know, you’re upsetting me, I’m getting sad. This conversation is hurting my, you know, like you kind of having to say that stuff, because you’re not there reading the person’s face. And you also don’t know what all the surroundings are, you know, like when he’s trying to talk to me and I’m trying to cook things on the stove and take out the trash and feed the dog and he’s not there to see that I’m doing 50 things, and so maybe that’s why I’m being short, maybe that’s why I’m not in the best place to have this conversation right now. But he’s not there to know that and vice versa. That’s that takes a lot of patience and working on to be expressive about things. I guess you take for granted when you’re talking to someone face to face. (Participant AA, personal communication, January 16, 2023)

Participant FF spoke about how her relationship changed once she spoke to her partner over the phone for the first time despite not having visual communication at the time:

Yeah, it’s funny because I went back recently and looked at our emails and our emails are so just nice and friendly and normal. And then the email after we spoke on the phone, the tone was completely different and we were just, I don’t know, it was like we were just already in a relationship, but we hadn’t had any conversations saying that we were going to be, we hadn’t—I mean, our phone conversation was completely normal. There was nothing romantic about it or anything, but the tone of our emails instantly was more—not romantic—more intimate, but not intimate. But you know what I mean? (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

Participant DD continued to speak about the limitations related to nonverbal communication. She highlighted the challenges and benefits related to not being able to directly see her partner during conversations:

There have been kind of like, conflicts that we had had where it’s just about, like, communication styles that were I guess like conflicting. But I’ve been very vulnerable with him. And I think it’s easier because he’s not directly here in person, so I don’t have to, like, actually face it or have to give up, control in some sense, because I can’t just show up to his house or anything like that. (Participant DD, personal communication, January 27, 2023)

Face-to-Face Communication. Every participant was able to utilize a combination of letters, phone calls, text messages, and emails to communicate with their partners on a somewhat regular basis. However, a select few participants were able to speak to their partners face to face either through video applications on a tablet or through visiting in person. While not every

participant was able to do this, Participant FF gave voice to how the potential of in-person visitation can be beneficial and challenging at the same time:

I think it [visiting in person] would make our relationship stronger but I think for me mentally, it would make it worse because I've never been to a prison before and I know that that alone will be shocking. and then having to leave somebody there that you care about, I mean, I know he's already been there for 22 years, but for me, I will have never left somebody I care about in person and I think for me that's going to be hard.
(Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

She went on to express concerns regarding her relationship and whether it would translate to face-to-face communication:

I think that it—so part of it, I think at first it's going to be really awkward because we already—I've just never been in a situation where we are already going to have an established relationship. But is that going to carry over in person? Like are we going to be able to sit across a table from each other and talk for however long a visit is? And he was saying that because I'm coming from out of state, we can get an extended visit which I think he said is like 4 hours or something. That's already giving me anxiety. Because what if we don't have anything to say to each other for four hours? What if that is when we realize that this actually—is not for us? This is not going to work, but we have this four hour visit where we just have to look at each other. So, getting to visit right now is giving me anxiety. But if I don't think about that part, I do think overall it will make our relationship stronger because we'll be able to share the same space and share the same air. And I just think that there's an intimacy to that in any relationship. I think that it'll just strengthen it. (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

Figure 4.7

Superordinate Theme VI, Subordinate Themes, Prevalent Codes

Growth & Development of the Relationship			
Vulnerability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparison & Past Relationships • Control • Trust • Vulnerable 	Romance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attraction • "Fall in Love with a Stranger" • Love • Shared Interest 	Prison Impact on Relationship <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult Conversations • Emotional Growth/Connection • Lack of Privacy • Physical Contact 	Talking to Other Women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expensive • "Impossible" • Other Women

Growth and Development of the Relationship

During the interview, participants were asked to share their views, challenges, and unique experiences with their relationship. A theme quickly emerged regarding the participants' connection and romance with their partner, their experience trusting each other, and how prison has impacted their romantic relationship. While all of the questions and the interviews focused on the participants and their relationships, this theme emphasizes the participants' experience and understanding of the relationship and the limitations they have encountered unique to being in a relationship with an incarcerated person.

Vulnerability. When discussing their relationships, a majority of the women spoke about their ability to trust their partners and be vulnerable with them. Some of the women spoke about not being able to do this in previous relationships and related how being physically distant from their partner has aided their ability to trust them:

Yeah, but I think for me because of the situation that brought us together, it was better for me to not be in a physical relationship because I didn't want someone here. I didn't want someone around my daughter because it's just like, you know, yes I've known [Partner's Name] for 20 years, 23 years now, but I also knew and loved one that abused her for almost as long. So it doesn't—time doesn't matter to me like that anymore. So, I think that's what kind of and it's weird because him and I just had this conversation the other night but that's kind of what it was like, okay for me to be like, okay, yes, I'm willing to be in a relationship with someone because I know where he's at. He's not here. (Participant CC, personal communication, January 25, 2023)

She went on to briefly discuss the ability to trust in any relationship, regardless of the unique circumstances of his confinement:

He trusts me, 100%, which is really hard to get from just the standard relationship. Let alone a long-distance relationship, let alone a long-distance relationship with very limited ability to reach out whenever you want. And I think that's really important to have because that's something I've never had in a standard relationship. (Participant CC, personal communication, January 25, 2023)

Similarly, Participant DD spoke about how she has been able to get to know her partner and be more vulnerable with him due to the physical restrictions of incarceration:

But because we talked so much and because I have to actually be vulnerable because I want to continue working on this relationship, but I want to continue having this relationship and it's the same for him. Feel like we've just gotten to know each other in such a, such a deep and like different way for both of us, kind of like scary. And it gives me the kind of like inner security that we can work through any issue that arises and I've never had that before. So it feels, it feels really nice. Feels really different like yeah, the fact that I can't be intimate with him like physically. I can't like, you know, I can't like kiss him—I can't, you know, do all these things. But again, I don't think that I was like really ready for those things because I was doing it like a very empty, almost like self-harming way before. So, someone actually getting to know me and like caring about what I have to say and about who I am really made me a lot more secure, just in my own self esteem as well. So that's that's why I'm saying. It's very weird. (Participant DD, personal communication, January 27, 2023)

Romance. The topic of romance and love was mentioned by nearly every participant.

During the interview, many of the women spoke about when they first realized they loved their partners. A common theme when discussing their relationships centered on how surprised they were with themselves and the relationships they found themselves in. Participant AA spoke about the growth of her relationship and the first time she said “I love you” to her partner:

I would say probably about four or five conversations in we started also exchanging letters, so it was initially just talking over the phone, but then we started writing to each other. There was, like definitely piqued interest between the two of us. And I would say at least for me, and I think he would say the same thing, it went pretty quickly into being more than a friendship so I would say pretty, pretty soon off. We were—pretty soon— You know, asking more personal questions that you would ask somebody I guess if you were like on dates with them, you know, like how do you feel about the, you know, just things that would be more intimate than you would just ask somebody that you were just pursuing a friendship with, you know, started pretty quickly and then probably about three or four months in he we exchanged “I love you's” to each other. This was very quick for me. (Participant AA, personal communication, January 17, 2023)

Similarly, Participant GG shared details about her relationship and some of her hesitation around taking the first step from friendship to romantic relationship:

Anyway, so [communication] went on from around September-ish until Christmas. And I could kind of tell there was some flirtation and stuff in our conversations. Like I'm not, you know, I'm not stupid. I've been around the block, but it was more—I was, I was the one that was hesitant and not wanting to cross any kind of nonplatonic boundaries until Christmas Eve. He told me that he loved me and a couple of days before I kind of realize that I developed feelings for him even though I was denying it a little bit. So, when he

said it, I responded back to him, saying I loved him too. And we still hadn't met at this point was only purely through telephone and voice mail messages. He was still writing me letters and stuff and after Christmas, in my head stupidly, I had to like clarify, like are we in a relationship now, like what is the kind of—what's the situation, because I'm feeling a bit confused, like, I'm not sure where I am with these things. I have never been with someone that I've never even met in person. (Participant GG, personal communication, February 9, 2023)

Participant FF reported she knew she loved her partner as soon as she heard his voice:

And I said, okay [to receiving a phone call], yeah, that's fine and I don't know as soon as I heard his voice, I just I just knew that I loved him and that that was it. Yeah, it was really crazy. I'm 42 and I've never, I mean I've dated, I was married, and I've never experienced that feeling. (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

When discussing the love she feels for her partner, Participant DD reflected on the situation and her own surprise at being with an incarcerated individual:

So, like never in a million years did I picture myself kind of being in that situation like yeah, that's the person I love. You know, they can't be here right now. You know, not every day you fall in love with a stranger over the phone, not every day. (Participant DD, personal communication, January 27, 2023)

Prison's Impact on Relationships. While discussing their relationships, it became evident that their partner's incarceration has deeply affected the progression and current state of their romantic relationships. Throughout the interviews, the impact of their partner's incarceration was weaved through nearly every topic. Nearly every participant spoke about these limitations and how they view them as beneficial more so than harmful. With some reporting they would not currently be in a relationship with their partners if they had met outside of prison. However, one participant passionately disputed the belief that these limitations have been helpful in any way.

Like many of the women in this study, Participant BB reported how she and her partner have been able to get to learn about each other and love one another without the physical component:

Well, I guess it's because when you—when you bring in that physical, I feel like sex can cloud a lot of things—sex can muddy the waters and can cause a relationship to burn really hot. But it's short because that's all that you were doing, you weren't talking to each other. You aren't getting to know each other and then, you know, you burn bright and hot, and it's done. So, it's like and you never even really get to know that person. So, it's like ours is the opposite. You know, I'm getting to know everything about him and—and you know, I love him more and more and more. The more I learned about him in the time I'm with him. So, by the time we get to that point, you know, and every relationship I've been in sex has been one of the you know, early things that we've done. So, it's almost like, you know, this is—this is kind of nice to get to know him on this level. Before we sleep—sleep with each other and then, you know, that should make that better as well. (Participant BB, personal communication, January 17, 2023)

She went on to discuss how through letters and phone calls, she's been able to connect with her current partner more than previous partners who she could see without these limitations:

So, the only people allowed on his visitation list are his immediate family, which obviously, I'm not so we can't even do visitation, he only gets two phone calls a week because of that. And so but, you know, so there's no physical aspect of our relationship, it's just been talking, writing letters, and getting you know, getting to know each other that way. And—and so I feel like I know him a whole lot better than I even knew my husband. Because, you know, it's only been on the mental. We've only, you know, connected mentally. And that's a, that's a big thing. So it's, you know, we want the physical obviously. But, you know, it's not possible. And even and even when we want, even if we ever did or were able to have visits with him, being a level 3, we can't have contact visits, they will be behind the glass. (Participant BB, personal communication, January 17, 2023)

Similar to several other women, Participant FF reflected on the benefit of getting to know someone without the physical aspect of a relationship:

I think [the limitations of prison] have [been beneficial] because we've been forced to get to know each other emotionally because there can't be anything physical. So, I think sometimes you have sex sooner than you should. And then those emotions kind of get involved and get messy, but you can't have any of that when it's long distance or in prison or whatever the case may be, where you can't touch. (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

Participant DD speculated that she likely would have met her partner through shared friends but doubts a relationship would have formed without his incarceration and the connection they've made through the limitation of his confinement. Participant DD was not the only woman

to speculate and doubt a relationship would have occurred outside of prison with their current partner:

To be honest I really don't know because we've kind of talked about it, we probably would have met at a party somehow because we do know some, like, we have some like mutual friends. So, I just don't think that we would have been ready for each other in that sense—we wouldn't have actually clicked in that way. Yeah, I know, he's like a big family person and so am I. That's one thing I really really love about him. Um, so I know that that's something that we would have in common, but I just really think we're very different people. And if we didn't meet the way that we did, I don't think it really would have happened. (Participant DD, personal communication, January 27, 2023)

Participant II reiterated how important it is for people in these relationships to be strong communicators compared to relationships outside of prison:

I would say, yeah, we have to just be better communicators but I kind of think it—and then another way I really like it because I don't think that people take as much time these days like, you know, writing each other letters. And, and really saying, you know that, hey, I am thinking about you. I feel like I have to put more effort into their—this type of relationship than if I was just dating someone on the outside, you know, it's so easy just to send a quick text or, you know, catch up with them at lunch time or with something like this, you know, I have to be a little more on a schedule and, you know, make like arrangements to be available. (Participant II, personal communication, February 28, 2023)

Participant AA spoke about how her partner's experience during incarceration has changed the way she views her own day-to-day struggles:

I'm sure you're familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. He's really fucking low down there right now. You know what I mean? It's and so sometimes when I'm trying to have like a very kind of like emotionally mature conversation with him, like I don't realize that like, okay, he's not even having his basic needs fulfilled right now. Like he's not even capable of fucking being right here with me at this moment. You know what I mean? Someone just got stabbed next door and they're not bringing trays out and he hasn't eaten and he has no toilet paper and so he's not really into hearing about, you know this funny joke that I said at the office today is just not registering with him right now because he's dealing with you know, these these bigger things and I have all my needs met really. You know, I'm not worried about what I'm going to eat or what I'm going to do, or my safety or sleeping, or anything like that. So, it's kind of, you know, sometimes can make it hard. I tell him all the time, it's really hard for me to feel bad about myself around you. And sometimes I need to feel bad and I feel like I can't because you're always in a worse situation than me. You know, like I know I feel trivial complaining about stuff sometimes. And so that's kind of, I mean, I know it sounds kind of selfish but sometimes you want your feelings of like “this sucks” to be validated and it's like, you know, it's

complaining about your legs being sore to a paraplegic. It's just like fucked up, you know [laughter]. (Participant AA, personal communication, January 16, 2023)

Talking to Other Women. When talking about their relationships, the subject of other women and potential manipulation was mentioned. A majority of the women involved in this study reported having little to no concern about their partners remaining faithful while incarcerated. With one exception, the women reported their partner's financial limitations, in addition to the challenges of incarceration, prevented their partners from reaching out to other women:

Yeah, with him being level 3, like he has to be, it would be almost impossible. And as much as he talks to me, I can't—I can't see—he'd have to have two tablets. You know what I mean? They're being that there's no way. So, it's just and then like, so a lot of this is, this is a difficult thing to go through. I can't, you know, and especially with him being the level that he umm because there there's no visitation. And then there's only a couple of phone calls when you can't find a [access code for the phone]. And so, yeah. I mean, I haven't, I haven't worried about that. (Participant BB, personal communication, January 17, 2023)

Participant GG reported having faith in her partner and their relationship, due in part to him never asking for money or other assistance. When asked specifically about any concern she had regarding other women, she stated the following:

No. I've never been concerned about that. I think one of the major things that did make me feel not concerned is that he never once has asked me for money, even to this day, he may have mentioned that he's running out of money on the phone and things like that, but he's never once said, oh, can you send money to this person or can you, you know, do this, and you know the kind of like usual signs that something doesn't feel right and whatever else. So no, I don't suppose I am worried and he's always been pretty open about friends who are women or other women who have approached him on write-a-prisoner. So he's not really given me a reason to suspect him or think that he, you know, may not be faithful or what have you. (Participant GG, personal communication, February 9, 2023)

However, when asked about other women, Participant EE was a notable exception. She stated she would welcome another woman into her partner's life in order to help provide financial assistance:

Nah, I've told him that if he wanted to great, give me a sister wife, just break up with her by the time you get out. But if she wants to share commissary fucking money and put money on the phone and all of that, just, you know, go ahead let her. *[laughter]* He's like, I'm not doing that that's cheating. *[laughter]* Well whatever dude - it cuts down on my cost. (Participant EE, personal communication, January 29, 2023)

When this writer remarked on her unique perspective, she suggested the other women in this study could benefit financially from their partners being involved with other women:

Well maybe you should tell them that—I mean Jesus—aint nobody gettin' the D, right? *[laughter]* Share all the cost and whatnot—no, but after he gets to federal prison, I'll be able to count the minutes that he spends, and I can guarantee there all going to be spent talking to me. (Participant EE, personal communication, January 29, 2023)

Figure 4.8

Superordinate Theme VII, Subordinate Themes, Prevalent Codes

Fear & Judgment				
Judgment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Judging My Past • Negative Family/Friend Reaction • Stigma • They Don't Know 	Fear of Losing Identity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Girl Who Married an Inmate" • Judgment at Work • "Not Trust Me" • Stereotypes 	Only Seeing the Index Offense <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defend Himself • Glorify • Preconceived Notions • Worst Moment 	Judging Other Relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alarming Behavior • Dishonest • Manipulation • Unique 	Change in Views <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being Manipulated • "Seeing a Difference" • Support

Fear and Judgment

Over the course of each interview, participants expressed varying degrees of concern regarding their relationship and how other people, including family and friends, could perceive them due to their proximity to an incarcerated individual. Each participant went into detail concerning their fear of being judged by other people or spoke about experiences where they have already been judged for their romantic choices. Interestingly, while all participants expressed a variation of this concern, some women articulated their own judgment of other women in similar situations. While individuals spoke broadly about their fear of being judged by

others, they connected these concerns to their own identities, their partners index offense, and reactions from friends and family members.

Judgment. A majority of the women interviewed spoke about the potential judgment they could receive if other people, including family members, learned of their relationship. Many of the individuals explicitly stated they do not share information about their partner, or even their relationship status, due to the potential for judgment. Emphasizing the concern around judgment, one participant was interviewed while sitting in her car to ensure her adult child did not hear the details of her relationship or about her partner:

So my mom knows and my cousin knows and I have another cousin that knows but that's it. None of my siblings know. My dad doesn't know and that's solely because of the fear of judgment and I like to, I like to say that, I don't want people to judge him as a person before getting to know him, you know, just based on his situation but it also has a lot to do with I don't want people to judge me because of my past relationship choice and what, what happened. So yeah, it's, I like to put it on that, I don't want people to judge him, but it's not just about him. It's all—It's also about this fear that I face about the judgment from certain people. (Participant CC, personal communication, January 25, 2023)

Participant GG made similar statements and voiced similar concerns around other people learning about her partner:

I was scared of the judgment, and I still am to this day really from other people who don't know at work and stuff like that. Just because I don't know how to like explain myself every time, you know? Yeah, there's still a lot of stigma and judgment I guess. (Participant GG, personal communication, February 9, 2023)

When speaking about judgment, Participant AA shared how some members of her family stopped communicating with her:

Now when—when we got married, because we're married now, my brother and my grandfather stopped speaking to me and still don't speak to me. (Participant AA, personal communication, January 16, 2023)

Fear of Losing Identity. Similar to a generalized fear, multiple participants expressed concerns about losing their own personal and professional identity. Some of the participants reported they do not want their relationship to become their defining quality to those around

them. Their concern focused on the judgment from others, not on any sense of shame or embarrassment about their partner:

Well, no one, like no one at my job knows. Everyone at my job thinks my husband's like, a union welder, who, travels a lot—It is totally intentional. As a matter of fact, my husband and I have talked about it at nauseam about it. He's just a very, very honest person, and, umm it's something that we kind of go back and forth on his view on honesty versus my view on honesty. I have like a professional job, and my husband understands now that we've talked about it, that he works in a very kind of different environment and has worked in different environments. You know what you say on a construction site is not something I can say in my office building. And I'm also—I'm in the South and I work as a scientist for a government agency. So, a lot of the people that I work with are men and a lot of the people that I work with are old, very religious, White men who I am, very aware, would feel some type of way about this. You know, I'm not delusional about, you know, the the way that this this looks or that it's not super palatable to some people. But I was very firm that I've, I've worked very hard to get where I'm at and I don't want to be known as the girl who's married to an inmate and that's what would happen. It would become the most interesting thing about me at my job, you know, like that's all people would—that's how I would be identified and I don't want it. I don't want it to encompass who I am or to take over my accomplishments and what I do at work. (Participant AA, personal communication, January 16, 2023)

These views were echoed by Participant BB who spoke about not wanting to be judged or treated differently for her personal choices at her place of employment:

Whenever you tell people that your significant other is in prison, you can almost see the judgment that, you know, like all of that in there, you know, you—because I don't even tell everybody, you know what I mean? Like I just don't because I don't want, I don't want, I don't want them to especially with work—like because you know I don't want them to in a professional thing to know that my man is in prison, you know what I mean? Because of the way that it could cause them to treat me unprofessionally but it's a lot like it's just because they made mistakes and they're prisoners does not make them any less human than any of us. Like I mean a lot of people make mistakes, there's things I did that that I could have gone to prison for so I'm not gonna, you know, be mean about them. I just wish that people would try to have more understanding and compassion than they do. (Participant BB, personal communication, January 17, 2023)

Only Seeing the Index Offense. During the interviews, it became apparent the women were concerned with their partners being judged for their index offenses. Multiple women express significant concern that other people would not be able to see past their partners index offense and would not be able to see him for the person he has grown to be while incarcerated:

Um, I firmly believe that if you were to talk to my husband for five minutes, you'd have a hard time not liking him because of that, well, I just want him to have the opportunity to defend himself, and I feel like while he's not here, I don't want people to create an idea of who he is based off of [his index offense], I would rather people meet him—really who he is and then if they know that and that's still the determination they make and fine, you know, I just don't want—that I don't want anyone to have preconceived notions about him or to treat me differently because of that—some reason I just think it's different. Yeah I want them to like, if you're going to judge my husband you have to look at him in his face and make that judgment. Like I want you to have to be in his presence to decide that. I don't want you to decide it outside of this presence based off of you know this single mistake that he's had to wear like a Scarlet Letter. I just—I just don't think it's fair. (Participant AA, personal communication, January 16, 2023)

Participant FF reflected on how she would not want to be judged for her worst moment and her desire to see the change in other people:

Yeah, I've always felt like people can change and I've never killed a kid, but I would never want to be judged for the worst thing that I've done and I've always tried to be that way with other people. But not everybody is like that. (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

Similar to the other women, Participant GG spoke about her desire not to have her partner defined by his incarceration:

I'm just not kind of in the mindset of wanting to glorify the criminality around my fiancé. And I think, as well, whenever I have told someone that I'm with someone—in a relationship, I've always kind of told them about the prison side last. So that he's not defined by being an incarcerated person and I think that when it comes to the kind of big like serial killers and the big, the big names, so much of that identity is about the crimes they commit and I think that's what people are gravitated toward. (Participant GG, personal communication, February 9, 2023)

When speaking about her partner's index offense, Participant FF voiced concern for a difficult conversation she may have with her daughter and the anticipated judgment that may come with it:

I feel like I'm just so normal. I've never been to jail. I drive a Jeep that's paid for, I don't know. Like I just feel like I'm so normal and his background is so different like I've never done a drug before other than marijuana and he was smoking meth at like 12 and you know, he killed a child, and I don't know, and I spend so much time talking to him and emailing with him because we still email. I don't know, it's just like and he's getting out, you know, in eight years and my plan is to be with him when he gets out because otherwise this is all just a huge waste of time. But I worry still about his charge, like, how

do I . . . like my daughter who just had a baby in October and what is she going to say when I tell her: Hi, this is [PARTNER'S NAME] and he's a really amazing person. P.S., he just got out of prison because he killed a kid. Like I don't even understand how that's going to go. (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

Judging Other Relationships. Nearly every participant expressed some concern about being judged by others for their relationship. However, multiple women cast that same judgment toward other women in relationships similar to their own. Some of the women seemed to separate what they have romantically from others in comparable relationships. When asked if she would like to know other women in relationships with incarcerated individuals, Participant AA stated:

Like knowing women that have like met people who are incarcerated? I mean, I guess it would depend and I know this sounds terrible because I mean, I've done it, but I think I think I have this stereotype in my head from what I've encountered like the few women that I have met, the relationship doesn't really seem to be like mine or the dynamic doesn't seem to be like mine quite so much. (Participant AA, personal communication, January 16, 2023)

Participant CC openly stated she previously judged women in relationships like the one she is currently in:

Yeah, so that's actually kind of why I wanted to participate in this because I feel like it's such a different situation from what people maybe are used too, I mean, definitely before this situation, I 100% would have judged someone in this situation. Like, I wouldn't have been able to accept it or believe it like why would you? But I'm pretty understanding once I get past that initial like, what prompted you to do this? (Participant CC, personal communication, January 25, 2023)

She went on to express concern about other women being manipulated and questioned why anyone would want to willingly put themselves through the challenges of being in this type of relationship:

You hear so many horror stories about people who are in these relationships, especially if it's someone that they don't know, on a personal level and they either just recently met or they met while they were already incarcerated. That's, it's just crazy to me to think that anyone would want to put themselves through that? (Participant CC, personal communication, January 25, 2023)

Participant GG spoke about how she doesn't place herself in the same category as other women in these relationships:

Truthfully, until you asked that question, I hadn't really thought about it. I guess that's more telling in itself that I see myself, not categorized in the same book as those women. I'd like to think I'm sensible and I'm relatively intelligent that that I've done my due diligence to not have kind of fallen into the hype of, oh, he's a bad boy, he's like, done this done that. I don't know if I have any thoughts really besides that I just feel so not like them. I don't know if that's even a way to put it because that sounds like I'm being naive. But there's definitely a sense of distance that I feel from that especially because I have no desire to publicly display the fact that I'm with someone who's in prison. In fact, sometimes quite the opposite. There's quite a few people who have no idea at all especially if it comes to like work and stuff like that. I haven't told my boss and what have you. Yeah, I don't feel any pride in flaunting the fact that I'm with someone in prison. Yeah, I guess that makes the difference for me. (Participant GG, personal communication, February 9, 2023)

Change in Views. Some women reported that the friends who previously judged their relationship are now able to provide emotional support after their concerns were addressed over time. When asked if her friends and family believed she was being manipulated, Participant DD stated:

I know a lot of them did in the beginning as well because it's like—I don't know. They have these like, preconceived notions of people. Obviously, that are incarcerated. Sure. But I feel like, you know, the things that they've been supporting me through—things that I've told them about like our relationship or just like how I've gone about my life these past couple months like they are really seeing a difference so they're giving him a shot in that sense like give it—they're admitting that they've been wrong and like who knows? I mean, I don't know. He could be like a super evil villain like going ha ha ha [*laughter*] you know, sure that could happen but but why would I want to think of that? And again, I totally understand where they're coming from because I would probably think the same. I didn't expect to really like someone that I talk to over the phone, about some freaking TLC TV series, like of course—does it sound ridiculous? Of course it sounds ridiculous. Like isn't that how most things kind of sound? (Participant DD, personal communication, January 27, 2023)

Figure 4.9

Superordinate Theme VIII, Subordinate Themes, Prevalent Codes

Financial Challenges & The Future	
Financial Strain <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I'm the Only Person He Has" • Money • Partner's Wellbeing • Reducing Contact 	Moving Forward <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Release • Share a Life With/Companionship • "Some People Revert to Old Things" • "Walk Away from Relationship"

Financial Challenges and the Future of the Relationship

An overarching theme throughout each interview was how challenging, stressful, and emotionally taxing these relationships can be for the participants. Each contributor spoke about the unique challenges they have encountered during their relationships. Nearly all participants spoke at length about the financial strain related to simply communicating and visiting with their romantic partners. When participants spoke about the future of their relationship, they continued to speak about a general uncertainty and concern with where their relationship will be in several years, and for some, there was concern with the longevity of the relationship once their partner is released from the Department of Corrections.

Financial Strain. During the interviews nearly every participant spoke about the financial challenges related to communicating with their partners. The women expressed a general sense of frustration directly related to how expensive and at times challenging it is to speak with their partners. Multiple women expressed a strong believe that they are being taken advantage of financially by the communication systems and methods utilized by the Department of Corrections:

I put money on [the app used for communicating with the tablet] and I can't do anything and I feel like the companies, you know, that it's it's because it's inmates because it's like that, they don't care and like they've even—they've even said that by making the

service be crappy, they're making more money because if we send a text message and it doesn't go through, what are we going to do? We're going to pay the money and send it again. So it's almost like they're making more money by providing crappy service. (Participant BB, personal communication, January 17, 2023)

When asked about the general cost of phone calls, Participant AA stated:

[The cost is] astronomical. It was he, he funded our phone calls for the first year and a half or two years. Because he's sold tobacco and so he generated an income from that and was able to fund our phone calls and then I started funding them and I actually got a Google number because it's cheaper when it's the same area code, when it's out of state it's an extra charge. So I got a Google number but I mean, I would say, I was spending several hundreds of dollars a month talking on the phone. It was it was very expensive. (Participant AA, personal communication, January 16, 2023)

Similarly, Participant FF reported how surprised she was with the financial cost and the difficult choices she has made in the past:

I had no idea how much it costs to talk to somebody in prison. And they seem like small costs, but they really add up and I feel bad to say, maybe we should not talk so many times per day. . . . Or sometimes like the phones won't be working correctly, which is a huge issue, and I, again had no idea. So, we'll spend, you know, three 15-minute phone calls just trying to understand each other because the phones are so garbled. . . . And of course, we could just not, you could just not keep calling back and I could not keep answering, but it is. It's expensive between the emails, the phone calls, sending—if I send pictures the videos, video grams. It definitely adds up. (Participant FF, personal communication, January 31, 2023)

Participant GG spoke more broadly about her partner's monetary struggle and how she has been his sole financial supporter during their relationship. She reflected on how their dynamic has flipped the traditional gender roles and the complications that has caused in the past:

The little he does make; he uses to kind of just maintain his existence when it comes to his toiletries and stuff like that. So, I'm pretty much the sole person, financially responsible for our relationship and that's caused a strain in multiple ways that's difficult to me. I'm on a graduate stipend. I really don't earn enough to support, you know, barely myself, let alone two people. I mean it's—as students I can't, you know, go out and just get an extra job. But also I think it's caused a strain in him feeling like being a man in the relationship. I don't subscribe to those kind of expected gender roles, but I think it is hard to break them sometimes, if you have grown up your life, entire life like that. So he rarely asks me for anything, he doesn't like to kind of even put me out by asking me to do other things for him like Googling something or anything like that. I thought he rarely likes to

ask because he would rather do it himself or go to the library or something. So what I kind of tend to do is—we sat down and had a conversation about finances and how much we’re spending on the phone calls and stuff like that. And I said to him, I’m just going to put on money every month without you having to feel like you have to ask and, you know, I’ve always been independent. I don’t mind taking initiative with that sort of stuff, but that’s going to make him uncomfortable. I obviously don’t want to cause that conflict in our relationship and I think he was appreciative of that. And so, I’ll just kind of have a routine of putting money on the phone. I put on like fifty dollars every two weeks. So yeah, unless we have like lots left over. But I want to say, it’s like \$3 per half an hour or something, which is quite cheap from what I’m hearing other people were paying—but still, it’s expensive. (Participant GG, personal communication, February 9, 2023)

Moving Forward. Toward the end of the interview, all of the participants were asked where they see their relationship in the future. The answers varied largely based on their partner’s sentence, but nearly all of the participants expressed hope and expectation that their relationships would continue in the years to come:

I would like to think in five years time, he’ll be able to get some sort of commutation or work toward, I don’t know, community release but otherwise in terms of logistics and what we have spoken about because it’s easier to prepare for him being in prison, then it isn’t. There’s no way he can move to the UK, obviously. So I would have to look at staying here in the US, which wouldn’t be a problem. But again, kind of limits opportunities for me which is fine. But I would probably have to think about moving closer to him if I’m going to want to see him more often. So again, that kind of limits my working pool that sort of thing. So those are just typical things, I’m not worried about it. It’s just the kind of once they’re in the back of my mind, they are more troubling than the yeah, I can do this. This is fine sort of thing. (Participant GG, personal communication, February 9, 2023)

Participant GG spoke about her relationship in the future and reflected on the steps she would need to take to be near him if he is released. However, prior to this statement, Participant GG spoke about the possibility of the relationship ending if physical contact cannot be introduced to the relationship in the future:

No, no, I wish. Funny enough we have had a conversation about what it would look like if he was to transfer to a state or facility that did offer [conjugal visits]. And how would I feel about that? It wouldn’t be ideal, but I genuinely wouldn’t be—I wouldn’t walk away from the relationship if that was the case. Or I would be less inclined to—Not to suggest that I’m going to now, but there’s more of a chance without that option than if we were able to have, you know, conjugal visits. (Participant GG, personal communication, February 9, 2023)

Similar to other women, Participant DD spoke about her desire to continue the relationship once he is released from prison. However, like many others, voiced concern her partner may fall back into old habits once the restrictions of prison are gone:

He's very, very different than the person I talk to now and that's why I guess earlier when you asked me about like my concerns when he gets out, it's like will he just revert back to his old self? Because it's just too crazy out here for him, or if like, he's just going to still be the calm person. I'd like to believe he's going to be more calm and whatnot but again I don't know, some people just revert to old things. (Participant DD, personal communication, January 27, 2023)

Toward the end of the interview, Participant EE spoke generally about her relationship and what she sees in the future. She became emotional when voicing her hopes for the future, her partner, and her own desire for partnership:

Man. I certainly hope that he doesn't die before he gets probation again, you know? Umm. . . That we have an appeal for his sentence because it seems a little extreme. I don't know how that'll go but I'm hoping. Otherwise, yeah, I guess, oh, I mean, I'm I'm hoping and I can at least see him, you know, I'm 47, you know. So it's not like I think—and he's 55—so it's not like we're going to have kids, you know. [laughter] (Participant EE, personal communication, January 29, 2023)

We're really at this stage in our life where we want someone to share, you know? And he had said this way before we even got in a relationship, was like a marriage, you know, is meant to be that there's someone there to share your life with and, and record the highs and the lows with, and be there when you're down and to celebrate when you're up, you know? And that everything else is just extra, you know, and and so yeah that's what I was like, yeah that's awesome. You know and he's like in-in that marriage you're making agreements, you know, to be faithful that, you know, you're not going to have those kind of relate—close relationships with another person. (Participant EE, personal communication, January 29, 2023)

So, yeah, were at a place in our life that you know, that's what we want is to have someone there for, you know, be there for for us, which is true. But it's really hard when you don't get to have the time, you know? It's so limited, you know, we have to write everything down. I mean it's good now where we can email—before we couldn't do that, it was just the phone calls. So being able to talk with the email thing is better, you know, at least then you can write down some of the stuff that you don't get to say in a 15 minute phone call, you know? 15 minutes goes by really fast, you know? (Participant EE, personal communication, January 29, 2023)

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Chapter I of this study provided a brief overview and discussed the historical context of women in relationships with incarcerated men. It was established that these relationships are complex and poorly studied within the field of psychology. Chapter II continued to discuss these relationships and the previously established theories around them while highlighting several famous cases. Chapter III established the methodology for the study and discussed every step utilized in the collection process. As reviewed in Chapter III, the researcher used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009) to investigate the research question: What are the lived experiences of women who are in relationships with incarcerated men? Chapter IV established the superordinate and subordinate themes encompassing all nine interviews and the data collected from those women. Each interview was coded independently, then examined collectively, resulting in the creation of eight overarching themes. The final section, Chapter V, will provide further discussion of the results, how the collected data compares to established data in previous chapters, and suggestions for future research and the limitations involved with this topic.

Overview of the Study

The study's primary purpose was to better understand the relationships between incarcerated men and the women involved in them. Prior to the start of this study, it was assumed that these relationships may be rare due in part to the limited literature about them. However, the source for participants, the subreddit r/PrisonWives, was ranked in the top 20% of all communities on Reddit and had more than 2,500 individual members. The academic literature on this topic continues to be sparse, with few peer-reviewed journal articles available for review. The goal of the study was to further expand on this topic and provide more academic literature

on the infrequently researched subject. The study set out to explore these unique relationships, examine how the relationships started, the current status of the relationship, and investigate the support systems these women utilize.

Summary of the Data

The study's findings are the result of nine individual interviews transcribed into a Word document. The researcher used interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009) to code each interview line by line and create themes to best make sense of the participants' lived experience of being in relationships with incarcerated men. The following eight superordinate themes were identified as best capturing the group's experiences based on the research question and subsequent prompts:

- Multimedia and Incarcerated Relationships
- Personal Growth and Struggles
- Department of Corrections
- Views on Their Partner
- Communication
- Growth and Development of the Relationship
- Fear and Judgment
- Financial Challenges and the Future of the Relationship

Discussion and Interpretations of the Findings

The following discussion explores the story told by the themes and further examines how they relate to the original research question. The discussion will work to explain what the findings are, what they mean, and how they connect to each other, along with available literature, to help provide an account of the lived experiences within these relationships.

Each theme constructed and detailed in chapter IV tells a unique and individual story. However, the themes previously discussed are not isolated from each other, and significant overlap can be seen across all of the data. The following discussion works to address each theme and help tell the story of their interconnectivity.

During the interviews, all of the participants spoke about how impactful multimedia has been on their relationships. For one-third of the women, websites like Write-A-Prisoner.com connected them to their current partners. The women expressed a high level of empathy for the incarcerated men and connected their lived experiences with them. For those who connected through an online service, they spoke about bonding through the personal experiences shared by the men on those websites, including feelings of loneliness and experiencing a cultural connection to them.

When asked about the use of social media for social support, a majority of the women spoke negatively and reported adverse consequences related to online support—including the subreddit where participants were located. The participants spoke at length about being concerned with the content they have seen on the platform, becoming aware of destructive behavior and questioning the stability of their own relationship. For those individuals who did not express negativity toward the digital communities, indifference was voiced when asked about using social media for meaningful support.

One of the primary sources of frustration concerning multimedia came from how relationships like theirs are presented on television in shows like *Love After Lockup* and *Love During Lockup*. While not every participant had watched the reality shows, all participants viewed them negatively. Participants spoke about how the reality show perpetuates a negative stigma of their relationship and fuels the judgment they receive from community members,

including their own families. It was underscored by many of the participants that what is broadcast in these shows propagates unrealistic versions of these relationships and continues to enforce negative stereotypes.

When speaking about the impact of multimedia, it appears that media has created a foundation for both expectation and judgment for relationships such as theirs. The presence of reality television and social media content creates and disseminates a negative image around incarceration and the women who are in these relationships. These negative stereotypes appear to seep into every aspect of their lives, from their personal struggle and identity to their relationship, and perhaps most critically, to the isolation and fear of judgment which comes from other people learning about their romantic partner of choice.

Throughout the interviews, each participant was able to speak about their own personal journey and the struggles they've experienced during their relationship. They spoke about how they have been able to learn about themselves and what makes a positive relationship with the help of their partner. When discussing their own emotional growth, participants frequently compared previous negative relationships to their current ones. They described how they have become more emotionally intimate and vulnerable with their incarcerated partners. The emotional intimacy of the relationships helped some participants become more sure of themselves and their actions, and it worked to increase their self-esteem. During this discussion, the experiences of these women seemed to stand out for the lack of uniqueness. The women in this study breathed life into the normality and regularity of their relationships. Aspects of these relationships did not appear to be exceptional from relationships that take place outside of prison. The experience of emotional growth and being vulnerable with a romantic partner is not atypical from what people can experience in what could be considered a more typical relationship.

However, while the relationships seemed typical and not exceptional when described by the participants, there was a distinct negative undertone that cut through the interviews. Some participants spoke about themselves and their needs dismissively, discounting their experiences and their need to communicate with others about what they have experienced due to their relationship. It was not uncommon for the women to describe the negative aspects of their relationships with terms like “isolating” and to report that they felt like they were living “separate lives” due to their relationship. While many positive aspects of these relationships seemed unexceptional from relationships outside of prison, that also seemed to be true for the negative elements of the relationship. The women seemed, at times, to dismiss their own needs in favor of maintaining their relationship without disruptions or challenges. It seemed at times the women in these relationships are asked to make negative changes to their own lives to better accommodate their partner’s needs.

The discussion surrounding the Department of Corrections encapsulated the participants’ views and experience with the institution. All of the participants had high levels of empathy and compassion for incarcerated people. They spoke at length about the inequalities and stigma attached to incarceration. The element of stigma was present through a majority of the study’s themes, similar to what participants referenced regarding how the media can perpetuate stigma around incarcerated relationships. The stigma related to incarceration has been felt by the participants as well. It was not uncommon for the participants to report feeling judged by the correctional officers during their own visitation. One participant memorably stated she felt like a criminal herself during visitations with her partner due to how the correctional officers treated her.

When considering the Department of Corrections, it seemed the bias and judgment discussed around multimedia were also present here. The women's negative experiences within DOC may be amplified due to the previously established expectation of bias and judgment from their experience with media representation. The exposure to judgment and bias in the media likely impacted the women in these relationships in more than one way. For example, the stigma and bias these women reported experiencing at DOC have possibly changed or influenced the way they perceive incarcerated individuals as a whole. In other words, the more stigma around their relationships and incarceration, the more positively they may view that population.

Aside from their own experience with the Department of Corrections, the participants spoke about how incarceration may have changed their partners. One of the theme's main elements centered on how the participants viewed their partner's index offenses. Nearly all of the women spoke openly and candidly about why their partner was currently incarcerated. However, many of the participants continued to voice concern about stigma when speaking about their partner's index offense to other people. Many women expressed a view centered on the idea that if other people knew their partner, the index offense would not be the defining feature of the relationship.

Additionally, while speaking about their partner's index offenses and their behavior, some of the participants seemed to express a level of minimization and at times seemed dismissive of their partner's actions. Multiple participants spoke about their partner's history with violence, both past and present, and expressed no concern for themselves. This was also seen with the participants whose partners expressed higher levels of jealousy and possessiveness. At times, the minimization of physical and behavioral red flags seemed reminiscent of some of the previously discussed high-profile examples of women in these relationships. This was

underscored when some of the same participants spoke about how their partners have changed and have been rehabilitated during their incarceration. The minimization of this behavior may be the result of their partners currently being incarcerated and not directly interacting with them as they express what could be construed as violent or possessive behavior.

The quality of the relationships in this study were dependent on each partner's means and skill with communication. All participants initially made contact with their partners through family and friends (six participants) or by initially contacting them through a letter-writing service (three participants). Regardless of how contact started, nearly all of the participants spoke about how communicating through letters, emails, and phone calls enhanced the quality of their relationship. It was not uncommon for the participants to report feeling comfortable enough through the letters and phone calls to share personal details with their partners that they have never shared with anyone else. One participant reported feeling an instant connection and knew she loved her partner as soon as she heard his voice on the phone.

The physical distance around communication seemed to be a positive and a negative for most of the participants. More than one participant reflected on how the distance has made being vulnerable with their partners easier. Another participant explained that this relationship has forced her to give up some control due to the physical restrictions. Another participant similarly spoke about how the distance has strengthened the relationship, but voiced concern whether their connection would still be there when they meet face to face.

The previous discussion around the participants' personal growth and struggles seemed to continue when they spoke about communicating with their partners. Regardless of the positive or negative nature of the changes made during the relationship, it seemed nearly all of the participants were put in a position that required them to change in order for the relationship to

continue. Once again, the physical distance between partners seemed to have impacted the boundaries some of the women described having in previous relationships. While long-distance relationships appear to benefit from connecting over the phone and with letters, it raises the possibility that the connection will suffer once the comfort and dependability of the distance is gone.

One of the main tenets of the interviews focused on how the participants viewed the growth of their relationship, centering on the challenges and unique experiences related to being romantically involved with an incarcerated person. Similar to the communication theme, some participants spoke about how they have been able to trust their partners and be more vulnerable with them due in part to the distance. More than one participant reported not being ready for a physical relationship and finding comfort in having a relationship without the physical element. A majority of the participants discussed how they have been able to “front-load” difficult conversations with their partners without sex or physicality complicating matters. More than one participant speculated that they would not be in a relationship with their current partners if they had connected naturally in the community.

All of the women spoke about their relationship with a high level of trust and an undercurrent of control. This was most apparent when the possibility of other women came up. All of the participants reported having little to no concern about their partners having additional relationships with women other than themselves. Almost all participants reported it would be nearly impossible for their partners to see other women due to the financial cost and time it would involve. Interestingly, one participant doubted other women would want to go through the difficulty and challenges involved with the communication restrictions, despite going through those challenges herself. Furthermore, one participant explained they would be able to find their

partner's call logs and see how many minutes had been used. She was confident all used minutes would be spent on phone calls to her and no one else.

Once again, the physical distance seemed to create a false sense of security for these relationships. The women in this study routinely minimized the challenges and difficulties involved with their relationship. However, they simultaneously expressed disbelief that other women would want to be involved with an incarcerated person due to the challenges involved. While discounting their own experiences, the participants seemed to be amplifying those same struggles when it came to the possibility of other partners. Based on how these women spoke about their relationships, it is possible they may be experiencing something akin to a halo effect when they think about their relationship and partner. In other words, the participants may be unable to imagine their partner doing anything that could negatively impact their relationship.

The central anxiety expressed by the participants in this study centered around their concern with how other people would view them if their relationship were discovered. Nearly all of the women spoke about being scared of potential judgment if other people learned about their relationship. This fear tied in directly with previous themes and how relationships like theirs are portrayed in the media. The participants did not report experiencing shame related to their partners or their index offenses, but rather a fear that the stigma attached to their partner would extend to themselves if friends, family, and coworkers discovered the relationship. Multiple participants reported a high level of concern that they could be treated differently and unprofessionally due to their partner's history.

Due to nearly universal concern about being judged by other people, it was noteworthy that some participants seemed to judge other women in similar positions. More than one individual reported having a stereotype of women in relationships with incarcerated men. Some

of the women appeared to have internalized the negative stereotypes portrayed in the media regarding other women in these relationships. One participant reflected on how she does not view herself as being in the same category as these other women. While a majority of the participants expressed some level of isolation due in part to their relationship, they almost universally discounted connecting with other women in similar situations.

A central theme throughout the results of this study concerned fear and judgment. Nearly every theme has some element of this, starting with how the media portrays these relationships. It seemed this internalized stigma may have impacted the way these women view themselves, how they view others, and surprisingly, how they view other women in similar relationships. The internalized stigma seemed to have created a cyclical pattern of being told their relationships are taboo, leading to increased isolation and not disclosing their relationship while simultaneously holding on to that stigma and projecting it onto other women in the same situation. The stigma-induced isolation may make these women more dependent on the few individuals with whom they feel safe enough to share their relationship status. The safety and security being sought out may only be available through their incarcerated partner, which may lead to more isolation.

As the interviews concluded, the impact of the financial strain and the future of these relationships came into focus. A common sentiment expressed during the interviews concerned how expensive these relationships have been over the months and years. A majority of the women felt victimized by the system, believing the technology is purposely faulty since it serves the prison population and is designed to earn more money from those who contact them. More than one participant described being in situations where the phone calls are unintelligible or their digital messages fail to go through, putting them in a position to pay more money to communicate with their partners. Furthermore, some of the participants reported that they were

their partner's only means of financial assistance, with some expressing a sense of obligation to help their partner financially.

When the participants reflected on where they see their relationship in the future, nearly all of them seemed optimistic and expected their relationship to continue. However, it was surprising to hear one participant discuss the possibility of the relationship ending in the future if physical contact continued to be restricted. While she clearly stated she was not terminating the relationship or thinking about doing so currently, she was the only participant to voice termination as a possibility due to prison restrictions.

One participant became emotional when discussing the future of the relationship, and her responses stood out among all of the other answers. She spoke about her general desire to have a partner and to be able to share their lives together, both the positive and negative aspects of life. When she spoke, she connected nearly all of the themes together, broadly speaking about the need for connection with her partner and the challenges and limitations involved in the basic communication that most people take for granted. While some participants were in relationships with men serving long or life sentences, she was the only one who voiced concern about her partner dying in prison and possibly being unable to see him again.

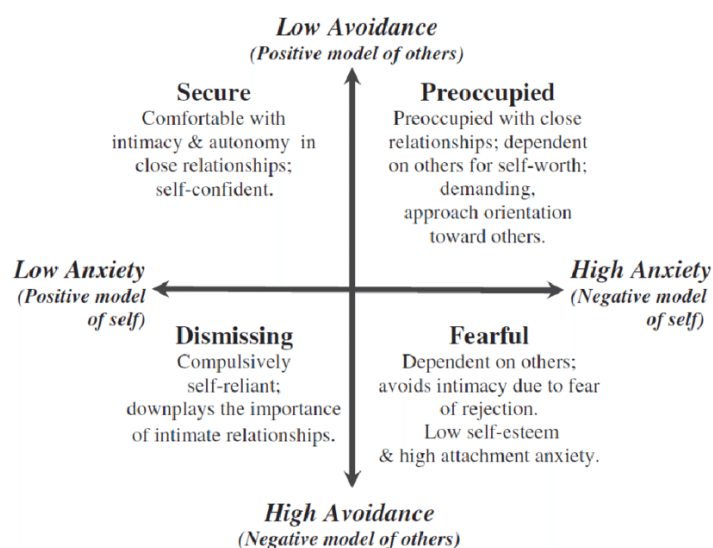
Each interview seemed to boil down to individuals yearning for a romantic partner and a need to be accepted by others for the choices they have made. The challenges experienced through communication and financial constraints only seemed to focus frustration on the institution and not the incarcerated partner. Once again, due to the fear of judgment and isolation from others, women in these relationships may be in a position where they are only able to confide with their partners, further enforcing the isolation. Despite all of the challenges and limitations involved with these relationships, the women involved were consistently hopeful and

optimistic their partners would be accepted by their friends and family after they are released from prison. Although nearly every woman expressed this hope for the future, there was an undercurrent of fear that this would not be the case and their concern about judgment from friends and family would come to fruition regardless of their partner's release.

Theoretical Implications

Figure 5.1

Bartholomew and Horowitz's Model of Adult Attachment, 1991



The study did not seek to view the data through any specific theory. However, through the process of interpretation, how well the data set fit Bartholomew and Horowitz's model of adult attachment (1991) is worth discussing. The participants in this study appear to share similarities to the individuals discussed in previous literature by Henderson et al. (1997, 2005) and Watt (2015) regarding their discussion on attachment styles and abusive relationships. Based on the nine interviews, it is theorized that the women involved in these relationships can be viewed, in part, as having preoccupied and fearful attachment styles (see figure 5.1). The

following section discusses how preoccupied and fearful attachment styles are reflected, in part, with themes that emerged in the data set.

With preoccupied attachment, individuals maintain their self-worth through the acceptance and approval from other people. Elements of preoccupied attachment style appeared in half of the themes described above.

Multimedia and Department of Corrections

With both the multimedia and the Department of Corrections themes, multiple women spoke about how these elements perpetuate negative stereotypes and, in turn, can reflect poorly on their relationships. Within these themes, participants spoke frequently about how negative stereotypes and biases can influence other people's opinions of them and their relationships. For individuals who are more dependent on others for their own self-worth, the internalized stigma surrounding incarcerated individuals can be damaging to their self-image and self-esteem. With the Department of Corrections specifically, more than one participant voiced feeling that they are seen as a criminal themselves when they visit their partners. For those whose self-worth comes from external sources, this judgment by figures of authority can be damaging to their own self-image.

View of Partner and Fear and Judgment

Similar to the multimedia and DOC themes, there was a heightened concern surrounding how people would react if their partner's index offense, or even simply the relationship, were to be discovered by other people. When speaking about their partner's crimes, multiple women voiced concern about being judged for their partner's actions. This poses an interesting balance for some of the women who participated in these interviews. It appears that they continue to balance their relationship and desire for connection with a looming fear that other people could

judge them harshly for their choices. It appears, in part, that the self-worth from their relationships is precariously balanced with the fear of rejection by other people. The balance of these two elements can only contribute to the isolation that many women expressed during these interviews.

With fearful attachment, individuals can struggle with their own self-esteem and self-image. Individuals can become dependent on other people and can experience high levels of distress establishing close personal and romantic relationships, due to an overwhelming fear of rejection. Elements of Fearful attachment style were identified in the remaining themes.

Communication

While discussing communication methods, a majority of the participants spoke about writing letters, using phones, and sending messages through the tablets their partners possess. However, a few participants spoke about the anxiety and fear they have about potentially meeting their partners in person. At least one participant spoke about how potentially meeting in person could create more mental and emotional challenges for her in the relationship. For long-distance relationships such as these, the fear of rejection by their partner may be reduced due to the miles between them. However, meeting face to face for an extended period of time may bring that fear back. It is possible that some of these participants may be reluctant to meet face to face due to a heightened level of anxiety and fear of rejection that may come with face-to-face contact.

Personal Growth and Development of the Relationship

Throughout the data, themes concerning trust and control could be identified. While the participants never said they did not trust their partners, some were quick to discuss how they verified and monitored them. Some of the participants explained that they could monitor call

logs and track the number of minutes used by their partners through the online accounts used for communication. For individuals who struggle with trust, low self-esteem, and intimacy, being able to monitor their partner's interactions may add a level of comfort and confidence in the relationship. Furthermore, participants who experience challenges with trust may find a sense of security by simply knowing where their partner is at all times.

Multiple participants reported they would not currently be in a relationship if they had not connected with an incarcerated person. Furthermore, multiple participants reported that their relationships with incarcerated men have been the most fulfilling and healthiest relationships they have ever experienced. This could speak to an underlying distrust of other people and a possible fear related to close relationships. It is possible that some of the participants are able to experience the benefits of these relationships due, in part, to the physical limitations and the distance that comes with incarceration. The limited contact and physical restrictions imposed by their partner's incarceration may reduce any fears of rejection some participants might have experienced in previous relationships.

Finances and the Future

The final theme concerning finances and the future of the relationship highlighted aspects of both preoccupied and fearful attachment styles. During the interviews, some participants emphasized how their incarcerated partners are dependent on them for emotional and financial support. While the participants consistently framed their partners as being dependent on them, it is also possible for the participants to depend on this power dynamic. For some of the participants, it appears they may be more dependent on this dynamic and may continue to feel an increase in their own self-worth by actively providing financial and emotional support to their incarcerated partners. While simultaneously, it appears some of the participants may be using

their relationships and the needs of their partners to remain isolated from other people. The self-worth they experience from helping their partners seemed to go hand in hand with a fear of rejection they may experience from friends and family if their relationship is disclosed. It's possible that some of the women in these relationships may continue to maintain them out of a need to find value and worth within themselves and to avoid rejection by people close to them.

Connecting with Established Literature

The data collected echoes, in part, elements from the literature review completed in chapter II. The women who have previously participated in these studies come from a wide variety of backgrounds, with no discernable pattern across age, ethnicity, education level, employment status, or religious affiliation (Fishman, 1990; Gelt-Price, 2001; Girshick, 1992). This was similarly present with the current data set, with minimal similarities among the women aside from their relationship status.

Multiple theories have been proposed to explain why an individual would participate in such a challenging and restrictive relationship. Author Sheila Isenberg proposed multiple theories in her book *Women Who Love Men Who Kill* (1991) based on several interviews she conducted with women similar to those in this study. Elements from several of her proposed theories match with the women who participated in this study. However, no one theory seemed to encapsulate any one participant completely. For example, Isenberg spoke about women who sought out these relationships to become caregivers for their partners (1991). While a majority of the participants spoke about supporting their partners financially, few reported feeling fulfilled by that part of the relationship. It was more common for the women to express a sense of obligation, rather than fulfillment, and self-reported frustration with the prison system and the financial cost of the situation.

Out of all of Isenberg's theories, her writing around masochism and the self-imposed hardships related to these relationships came closest to best describing the women in this study (1991). Isenberg theorized that some women are not bothered by the challenges and stigma of these relationships. Isenberg continued to discuss how women can experience ridicule and shame from their peers and family members due to their chosen relationships. While a majority of the participants spoke about their concern about being judged by other people, many took steps to prevent this from happening. In this study, a majority of the women who participated reported not telling their peers about their partners, specifically to avoid possible judgment and stigma. This was highlighted during one interview when the participant was physically isolated in her car to eliminate the possibility of other people hearing details about her relationship.

The results of the data seem to be supported by previous literature regarding culture. It was previously hypothesized that these relationships may not be unusual for someone who has experience with the criminal justice system (Seka, 2000). Many of the participants in this study reported having a wide range of experience with the criminal justice system due to past actions and in some cases, due to friends and family members. Multiple participants spoke about their past struggle with addiction and reported they could have been incarcerated for their past actions. Additionally, some participants spoke about family members who had been previously incarcerated. The closeness or experience with the legal system may have, in part, normalized these relationships.

Finally, established literature suggests that the women in these relationships, specifically those who started their relationships after their partner's incarceration, may be more empathetic (Giebel & Elbert, 2014; Isenberg, 1991). While this study only interviewed women who started their relationships after their partner's incarceration, nearly all of them spoke with a high level of

empathy for their partners and imprisoned people everywhere. The established literature may support the findings of this study, but without a control group, it is difficult to compare the responses of these women to those in different relationships.

Implications

The clinical implications of this study underscore the importance for clinicians to exercise empathy and work to limit bias within therapy sessions. The participants in the study spoke at length about their fear of being judged by others and appeared to be more isolated due to that ongoing fear. At times, it seemed the participants had not discussed their relationships or their partners with anyone before participating in these interviews. The bias and stigma experienced by participants appears to have limited their ability to be open and discuss one of the most important relationships in their lives. If individuals in these relationships do reach out to a clinician to discuss their relationships, it is paramount that they be met with empathy and unconditional positive regard. If individuals in these relationships experience bias or stigma due to their relationships and partner, it would likely do irreparable harm with the possibility of some never seeking treatment again due to a clinician's reaction or statements.

Limitations

The study struggled with several limitations. First and foremost, the study was a qualitative design utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009). While qualitative studies can produce more in-depth data, they do struggle to maintain objectivity. The answers to certain questions may have been impacted by the way the researcher asked or delivered them. Insightful follow-up questions may have been missed due to the researcher's presence of mind or understanding of the response. Second, the analysis process can be difficult and complex with qualitative data. The opportunity for bias or misrepresentation is higher due to

the researcher's involvement with the data. Third, all of the participants were recruited from the same message board. The ability to hear from a more diverse population may have been limited due to the recruitment process. Furthermore, the study relied heavily on participants being familiar with technology. It is possible that essential perspectives and experiences were left out of this study due to its reliance on technology, both with the recruitment and interview process.

Future Directions for Research

Due to the lack of academic literature on this topic, it is recommended that future studies involve more diverse participants. The number of participants who connected through friends and family was surprising in this study. It is believed that future research could be more precise by comparing individuals who met through online letter-writing services to those who connected via friends and family. Additionally, the participants involved in this study were in relationships with partners who had varied prison sentences. Future research may prove insightful by interviewing people who are in relationships with partners who have similar sentences, for example, partners who are all serving life sentences. It is anticipated that these suggested criteria would make finding participants more challenging. However, it may result in a more cohesive understanding across the group.

Summary

This study aimed to further examine the lived experiences of women in romantic relationships with incarcerated men. This topic has minimal academic literature, and one of the goals was to better understand the women involved, their views on the relationship, and the challenges they may face due to their partner's incarceration. The study examined individual interviews, roughly one hour in length, from nine women who are members of the r/PrisonWives

subreddit on Reddit. The participants in this study varied greatly from one another, with little in common aside from their relationships.

The results of this study showcased how the challenges of their relationships come largely from the negative views and stigma ascribed by other people. While the participants spoke about the difficulty with communication and finances, a significant source of difficulty seemed to come from potential bias, judgment, and lack of understanding from other people. The participants all spoke about how media portrayals have maintained negative stereotypes, which seemed connected to the fear of judgment expressed by most of these women. The potential for bias from their peers and family seemed to further isolate some of the women, with many women sharing that they do not talk about their relationships with other people, even in an anonymous online support group. Ultimately, the participants in this study expressed a desire not to be judged for their choices, and to be able to see and share their lives with the partner of their choice regardless of their criminal record.

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