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To cite this article: Bonnie M. Nickels (2019): Love Locked Up: An Exploration of Relationship Maintenance and Perceived Barriers for Women Who Have Incarcerated Partners, Journal of Family Communication, DOI: [10.1080/15267431.2019.1674853](https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2019.1674853)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2019.1674853>



Published online: 02 Oct 2019.



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Love Locked Up: An Exploration of Relationship Maintenance and Perceived Barriers for Women Who Have Incarcerated Partners

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ABSTRACT


Familial separation due to incarceration present numerous challenges to the enactment of relational maintenance behaviors. This study explored self-reported maintenance behaviors and perceptions of barriers that hinder feelings of connectedness for non-incarcerated women who have a relational partner in jail. Responses from an open-ended questionnaire of 124 non-incarcerated women with relational partners in jail were analyzed to highlight issues of long-distance relational maintenance. Results from an inductive exploratory analysis yielded twelve maintenance behaviors and seven perceived barriers that the women in this study perceive factor into relational maintenance with an incarcerated partner. I organize the relational maintenance strategies in this context by intrapersonal, dyadic, and network-level behaviors. Openness, assurances, and future planning were reported as frequent behaviors utilized by non-incarcerated women to maintain connectedness with an incarcerated partner. These women also identified a lack of intimacy and communication as barriers to relational maintenance with an incarcerated partner. Findings indicate a strong parallel in maintenance behaviors enacted by women with deployed spouses and the women of incarcerated partners. In this context, the restrictions of prison policy and stigma affects the women of incarcerated partners from exploring network involvement as a way to stay connected to an incarcerated relational partner.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 31 January 2019
Revised 15 September 2019
Accepted 26 September 2019

The war on drugs and tough on crime sentencing of the past 30 years has resulted in record-high incarceration rates, longer prison sentences, and the erosion of social ties for inmates; all of which cause hardship, isolation, and relational discord among families (Bales & Mears, 2008; Hairston, 1996, 1998; Swanson, Lee, Sansone, & Tatum, 2013). As of 2016, 1.5 million inmates were under state and federal jurisdiction (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018). The individuals labeled as prisoners, inmates, felons, or convicts are someone's family members: spouses, parents, or romantic loved ones. Taking into consideration the significance of how a family is defined, this study utilizes an inclusive approach to defining family that emphasizes the communicative and relational processes that connect and maintain familial bonds (Segrin & Flora, 2019). I adopt the definition that a family is a network of people who share their lives over a period of time, bound by ties of marriage, blood, law, or commitment (legal or otherwise) who consider themselves as family, sharing history and anticipated future (Galvin, Braithwaite, Schrodt, & Bylund, 2019). Taking an inclusive approach is significant for families who feel their familial identity is delegitimized when their structure does not appear to fit traditional norms (Galvin, 2006; Segrin & Flora, 2019). This is particularly true for families and committed partners of incarcerated inmates.

Previous research on incarceration has identified the negative effects the prison system has on the family unit and the benefits of maintaining relational ties for inmates, but has been limited in regards

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A previous version of this paper was presented at the 2019 Eastern Communication Association in Providence Rhode Island.

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to the communication process itself (De Claire & Dixon, 2017; Massoglia, Remster, & King, 2011; Mowen & Visher, 2016). A meta-analysis of articles on communication in the context of incarceration found only two articles at the time published in family and communication-related journals (Peterson, Cohen, & Smith, 2013). One of the studies addresses conflict tactics (see Jones, Ji, Beck, & Beck, 2002) and the other explores loneliness (see Segrin & Flora, 2001). Peterson et al. (2013) argue that “... none of these articles specifically explored the actual communication strategies and processes that family members of the incarcerated use in order to manage their situations” (p.86).

Since publication of the meta-analysis (Peterson et al., 2013), a few more studies within the communication and family journals have explored incarceration and family communication, including an analysis of support among incarcerated women (see Hook & Geist-Martin, 2018) and a study addressing mother-child conflict during parental incarceration (See Rudd et al., 2019). More research examining communication strategies enacted by families during incarceration is needed because incarceration is the leading cause of marital non-cohabitation (followed closely by military deployment) (Rindfuss & Stephen, 1990). Furthermore, prisoners’ familial ties are at risk for relational dissolution because marital partners who do not cohabit have a greater likelihood of separation (Rindfuss & Stephen, 1990; Segrin & Flora, 2001).

Maintenance behaviors can contribute to the resilience that relational partners experience and plays an important role in partners’ capabilities to cope with stressful life events (Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002). Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore how communication can be useful to maintaining feelings of connectedness when committed partners are separated by incarceration. I hope to provide deeper insight into how un-incarcerated women interact and maintain relationships with their relational partners who are incarcerated, physically distant, and experiencing significant challenges to sustaining familial relationships.

Familial ties and recidivism

Families positively influence many aspects of prisoners’ lives and the result of either sustained or absent ties has been well documented. Specifically, sustained familial ties have a positive effect on prisoner mental health and well-being and successful reentry experiences post release (Kubrin & Stewart, 2006). Family visits exude a positive effect on prisoners (De Claire & Dixon, 2017). Inmates who are visited more frequently have reduced depressive symptoms and fewer rule-breaking behavior. The argument is that inmates who receive support by close relational others are protected by the belief that they are cared for and are therefore able to cope with the many challenges associated with imprisonment and reentry into society (Bales & Mears, 2008). Increased frequency of spousal visitation can reduce the probability of recidivism by as much as 30% (Bales & Mears, 2008). This is significant considering that 68% of prisoners released are arrested within three years and 44% of these rearrests occur within the first year of being released (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018).

Even with the understanding that strong relational ties can reduce criminal re-offense, researchers across disciplines have documented the profound negative effects criminal justice penalties and prison institutions have on familial bonds (Chui, 2016; Hairston, 1996; Lopoo & Western, 2005; Mowen & Visher, 2016). Of particular interest are the policies that invisibly shackle legally innocent people, forcing them to alter their behavior, reorient their relational expectations, feel stigmatized, and personally experience the effects of disciplinary confinement, surveillance, and control; this subjection has been referred to as *secondary prisonization* (Comfort, 2009). Further, the stigma affiliated with loving an inmate may invalidate the perception of familial identity, while also increasing feelings of isolation, judgment, depression, and shame (Braman, 2003; Lopoo & Western, 2005).

Barriers to relational continuity during incarceration

Imprisonment, in and of itself, presents major obstacles to the continuity of familial and relational ties. Incarceration prevents meaningful interactions between separated spouses by limiting physical

and emotional connections (Massoglia et al., 2011). Married inmates report higher feelings of loneliness (Segrin & Flora, 2001) and the probability of marital dissolution is approximately three times higher among incarcerated men than among non-incarcerated men (Apel, Blokland, Nieuwebeerta, & van Schellen, 2010; Lopoo & Western, 2005). The period of transition immediately following prison in-take is especially jarring for families to experience, both practically and emotionally, making families most vulnerable for dissolution during this period (Chui, 2016). Upon release, even though formerly incarcerated men want to reunite with their wives and children the men often experience great difficulty in the reintegration process (Cooke, 2005). Most challenging for these men are issues associated with communication, such as lack of maintaining contact and/or limited contact due to distance or expensive phone calls. Released inmates feel shame and sadness over the loss of their familial ties (Cooke, 2005).

One criticism of prison policies is that they fail to address familial needs (Hairston, 1998; Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005). Common barriers to sustaining familial relationships include: long distances between where prisoners are housed and where their families live; inhospitable visiting arrangements and surroundings; the cost of phone calls; and poor treatment of visitors/families by correctional personnel (Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005). During face-to-face visits, family members often report feeling treated as unwelcome guests, intruders, or humiliated and intimidated by corrections staff (Hairston, 1996, 1998). Family visit policy in prisons is complex, varying on aspects of when families can visit, the number of visits allowed each month, the length of visits, days per week visits are allowed, and the conditions under which visits can occur. Visitation conditions are often less than ideal, being described as loud, crowded, and devoid of opportunity for meaningful conversations (Austin & Hardyman, 2004). Collect-call telephone policies also can negatively marginalize lower-income families who cannot afford to pay maximum rates (Hairston, 1998; Hoffmann, Dickinson, & Dunn, 2007).

In regards to physical distance, more than 60% of inmates are located more than 100 miles away from their familial residence (Mumola, 2000). The distance separates the inmate from their family members both geographically and socially, essentially incapacitating them from engaging in prosocial roles such as that of a spouse or a parent (Lopoo & Western, 2005). As a result, overcoming physical discontinuity and relational uncertainty for inmates and their family members is challenging. Because prison policy often restricts and hinders consistent contact, it is important to explore the ways in which families and committed partners navigate the barriers in order to maintain feelings of relational connectedness.

Relationship maintenance

Scholars have developed a rich body of literature on the various intricacies of relationship maintenance (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Dainton & Myers, 2020; Stafford, 2011; Stafford & Canary, 1991). Relationship maintenance refers to communicative and cognitive efforts that serve to strategically and routinely sustain and/or enhance the relationship (Canary & Stafford, 1992). With a vast body of literature exploring relational maintenance with multiple typologies, the original five maintenance behaviors remain omnipresent (Dainton & Myers, 2020). The five behaviors include: (1) *positivity*, e.g., behaving cheerful and optimistic in interactions; (2) *openness* or *self-disclosure*, e.g., disclosing thoughts, feelings, and discussing quality of the relationship; (3) *assurances*, e.g., messages of affection and commitment to the relationship, showing love for the partner; (4) *sharing tasks*, e.g., helping equally with tasks, sharing joint responsibilities; and (5) *social network* involvement, e.g., spending time with common friends, including friends and family in activities (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Stafford, 2011; Stafford & Canary, 1991). These behaviors are consistent and strong predictors of relational satisfaction, commitment, and trust (Canary & Stafford, 1992, 1993). Specifically, positivity and assurances are consistently positively associated with relational satisfaction, with assurances as the strongest predictor of commitment (Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013). Openness is often negatively associated with relational satisfaction and commitment

(Dainton, 2000; Dainton & Aylor, 2001; Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000). Maintenance behaviors vary across relational type. Married couples use the assurances and sharing tasks maintenance strategies more due to the increased investment associated with marriage whereas seriously dating and engaged couples report greater use of the openness relational maintenance strategy (Dainton & Myers, 2020; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Stafford & Canary, 1991).

Long-distance relationships (LDRs), a relationship where time spent together and routine face-to-face interactions are limited, vary in regards to behaviors and outcomes. Physical distance is a significant contributor to relational uncertainty in LDRs (Dainton & Aylor, 2001; Emmers & Canary, 1996). Yet distance can also serve as a promoter of relational positivity and encourage greater openness (Sahlstein, 2004). Models and frameworks such the maintenance-continuity model (Merolla, 2010b) or the model of long-distance relationship maintenance (Merolla, 2012) explore relevant behaviors and cognitions that can be enacted before (referred to as the *prospective context*), during (the *introspective context*), or after a LDR separation (the *retrospective context*). These models extend previous research and thinking about aspects of LDR functioning and relationship maintenance behaviors (Dainton, 2003; Gilbertson, Dindia, & Allen, 1998; Sigman, 1991). The models consider maintenance activity to occur within intrapersonal, dyadic, and network-level contexts (Merolla, 2010b, 2012). The intrapersonal behaviors consist of cognitive activities occurring outside of face-to-face or mediated interactions that promote feelings of connection while separated from others. Intrapersonal behaviors include positive thinking, fond memories, reminiscing, sensory objects (e.g., photos, clothing), and reading old letters (Merolla, 2010a). Dyadic-level behaviors, the focus of the bulk of maintenance scholarship, includes communication between partners (i.e., assurances, small talk, openness, and mediated channels). Finally, network behaviors reflect when individuals discuss their relationship with family, friends, or community members (Dainton, 2003; Merolla, 2010b, 2012; Merolla & Steinberg, 2007).

Maintenance during military deployment has received attention as a type of LDR. Separation during deployment carries unique challenges that not only include distance and time apart, but also uncertainty about communication opportunities, lack of privacy, and a multitude of boundaries concerning information privacy (Dainton & Myers, 2020; Merolla, 2010a). During deployment, military wives often report maintenance behaviors consistent with most LDRs. In addition, behaviors significant to separation during deployment include intrapersonal behaviors (e.g., positive thinking, photos), mediated communication (e.g., writing letters and phone calls), and involvement of social networks as means for wives to maintain feelings of connection with their deployed partner (Merolla, 2010a; Merolla & Steinberg, 2007). However, the involvement of one's social network as a maintenance behavior may not be needed all the time, but instead may be enacted during times of anxiety or distress as separations with high-stress often require greater reliance on social networks (Merolla, 2012).

The current study explores the processes of maintaining relationships within the unique context of families experiencing incarceration. Within this context, partners experience a negative association between marital quality and loneliness (Segrin & Flora, 2001). Therefore, those who enter prison with a satisfying and committed marriage, or who develop one while incarcerated, are more likely to also report being less lonely. Thus, efforts at maintaining (and possibly improving) the quality of inmates' marriages may be beneficial in both the short and long term (Segrin & Flora, 2001). Therefore, the first aim of this study is to explore behaviors that women in committed relationships separated by incarceration report enacting to maintain feelings of relational connection with their partners. Considering the unique nature of incarceration and the significant hindrance on familial ties it imposes, this study takes an exploratory approach to relationship maintenance in the introspective period. The proposed maintenance-continuity model and model of long-distance relationship maintenance (Merolla, 2010b, 2012; Merolla & Steinberg, 2007) were adopted as guiding frameworks to organize results within the subcategories intrapersonal, dyadic, and network. The second goal is to identify perceived barriers women in committed relationship report as a hindrance to relationship maintenance with their incarcerated partners. To that end, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ₁: What specific behaviors do women in committed relationships separated from their partners by incarceration report enacting with their relational partners to maintain a feeling of connection?

RQ₂: What barriers do women in committed relationships report experiencing with their incarcerated partners when trying to maintain a feeling of connection?

Method

Participants

Participants for the current study were recruited through a nonprofit online organization that provides support for wives and families of incarcerated individuals. With a current membership of over 60,000, the nonprofit organization provides support, council, and advice for wives, families, mothers, and relationally committed others of inmates. To protect participant confidentiality, an open-ended online questionnaire was the chosen instrument for this particular population due to the heightened fear of stigma and misrepresentation. In conjunction with the principle investigator (PI), the organization posted study announcements on their social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, and online website). The announcements included a call for participants who were in a romantically committed relationship with an inmate and a statement regarding the goal of the study seeking to learn the ways in which romantic partners maintain feelings of connectedness with their separated partner and the challenges they experience. Also included in the announcements was an endorsement of support from the organization, contact information for the PI, and a link to the consent form and online questionnaire. Announcements were posted three times over a six-week period. All study procedures were IRB approved.

A total of 124 participants completed the questionnaire. Due to the organization's primary demographic, all participants were female ($n = 124$). From the sample, 62% identified as Caucasian ($n = 75$), 20% identified as Hispanic/Latino ($n = 24$), 9% identified as African American ($n = 11$), and others identified as Asian, Asian American, AfroLatina, and Native American. Ages ranged from 18 to 64 years old with the average participant being almost 35 years old ($M = 34.84$, $SD = 8.75$).

Participants answered a series of questions about their current relational status and pertinent information regarding their partners' incarceration. Although all participants were relationally committed to their incarcerated partner, they differed in their self-identification of status. For example, from the sample 38% ($n = 48$) reported being engaged, 31% ($n = 39$) married, 19% ($n = 24$) single, 7% ($n = 8$) divorced, and lastly 4% ($n = 5$) cohabiting. Current relationship length ranged from 3 months to 26 years ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 4.99$), with 70% ($n = 87$) indicating relational commitment before their partner was incarcerated, 26.61% ($n = 33$) report starting their commitment during incarceration, and 3% ($n = 4$) reported other (e.g., while residing at a halfway house).

Participants provided the length of their relational partners' current incarceration and prison sentence. Current incarceration length ranged from one month to 35 years ($M = 6.04$, $SD = 7.07$), prison sentences ranged from 6 months to life ($M = 27.81$, $SD = 44.56$), with 13.6% ($n = 17$) serving life sentences without the possibility of parole (including life x2, x3, and death row). Participants indicated the distance in miles from their residence to where their relational partner is incarcerated. Distance ranged from 2 miles to 10,000 miles or on another continent ($M = 541.27$, $SD = 1174.89$). Participants identified what communication channel they use most with their relational partner. Written mail sent via postal service and emails were the most utilized channels of communication (89.7%), followed by phone calls (87.6%), and face-to-face visits within the prison (57.3%). Participants reported variability in regards to visits taking place in large visitation centers, family-oriented visits, conjugal visits, and/or physical visits separated by a glass/plastic partition. Lastly, a small proportion of the respondents (5.2%) indicated having video chats available as a means of communication.

Procedures

The current study focuses on individual's self-report of maintenance behaviors enacted during the separation. An open-ended approach was utilized because of the exploratory nature and focus of the study. Participants responded to how they maintain feelings of connectedness while separated (e.g., "In what ways do you maintain a feeling of connectedness with your partner?"). They also recalled a time in which they felt emotionally disconnected (e.g., "When you feel emotionally disconnected from your partner, what do you do or say to feel connected again?"). Finally, participants identified the most significant challenges they faced when maintaining a committed relationship during incarceration.

Data analysis

The open-ended responses were analyzed using a multi-step induction method to allow themes to naturally emerge. The first step involved a comprehensive read through of the responses in their entirety to gain familiarity with the data and insight into potential emergent categories of maintenance behavior. In this step responses that were incoherent or incomplete were not included in the inductive analysis. Overall 97 responses were usable for analysis.

Next, the constant comparative method was used to continually define and refine emergent themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This study includes sensitizing concepts along with emergent themes labeled in accordance with relational maintenance behaviors from existing typologies and models (i.e., Canary & Stafford, 1992; Merolla, 2012; Merolla & Steinberg, 2007; Stafford, 2011; Stafford & Canary, 1991). The themes were categorized based on the interactional character of intrapersonal considerations (i.e., the cognitions and behaviors occurring outside direct partner interaction), dyadic considerations (i.e., the partners' communication and interaction with each other), and network considerations (i.e., how the individuals communicated activities with family, friends, and community members; Merolla, 2010b, 2012).

A trained coder independently analyzed the data set to ensure the identified themes accurately represented the data. Theme discrepancies were discussed until a unified coding scheme was agreed upon. Next coders used the unified coding scheme to code the presence or absence of each theme. To measure inter-coder reliability, the PI and trained coder independently coded all participant responses. Discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion, and then a repeated round of coding until a Kappa reliability estimate for all categories were above .70. Perfect reliability was achieved for 89% of the categories (see Table 1).

Results

The inductive analysis yielded twelve maintenance behaviors and seven barriers. The maintenance behaviors were organized as intrapersonal (cognitive activities that promote a sense of connection), dyadic, and network and are discussed in order of frequency with participant quotes reflecting each behavior and barrier.

Intrapersonal maintenance behaviors

Sensory objects

During incarceration non-incarcerated women talked about how they would find comfort in objects connected to their incarcerated partners, including photos, clothing, drawings, poems, books, and previously exchanged items such as handmade crafts (e.g., bracelets or photo frames). These objects are meaningful for feeling connected and reflecting about the absent partner, as expressed by one participant, "When I find myself missing him more than usual, I re-read his letters and look at pictures." In regards to photos, many of the non-incarcerated women gave boudoir photos to their incarcerated other, as one respondent explained, "I had boudoir photos taken for him. They were

Table 1. Introspective maintenance behaviors and barriers.

Emergent Theme	Kappa (<i>K</i>)	Frequency <i>N</i> (%)
Intrapersonal		
Sensory Objects	1.0	60 (61.9%)
Positive Thinking	1.0	25 (25.8%)
Future Thinking	1.0	10 (10.3%)
Dyadic		
Self-disclosure	1.0	94 (94.8%)
Assurances	1.0	90 (92.8%)
Future Planning	1.0	78 (80.4%)
Positivity	1.0	47 (48.5%)
Sexual Fantasy	1.0	39 (40.2%)
Tasks & Shared Experiences	1.0	36 (37.1%)
Physical Touch	1.0	34 (35.1%)
Purposeful Concealment	1.0	17 (17.5%)
Network Activities		
Involvement with Self & Others	1.0	6 (6.2%)
Perceived Barriers		
Lack of Intimacy	1.0	59 (60.8%)
Lack of Communication	1.0	38 (39.2%)
Distance	1.0	29 (29.9%)
Loneliness	0.865	25 (25.8%)
Prison Restrictions	1.0	22 (22.7%)
Emotional Disconnect	0.715	19 (19.6%)
Stigma	1.0	7 (7.2%)

tasteful photos, yet sexy. He knows I am very modest so this was exciting for him.” In the minds of these women, photos such as these help to create a sense of intimacy between them and their relational partners when physical intimacy is unavailable.

Positive thinking

The un-incarcerated women also used positive thinking as an individual-level maintenance activity by thinking about their incarcerated partners and/or relationships in positive ways. Respondents expressed positive thinking toward their relationship and trying to maintain a positive mindset in regards to the separation, “I try to remind myself that this is only temporary and that this wait is going to be completely worth it.”

Future thinking

This maintenance behavior includes future-oriented cognitions about reunions and life after incarceration. As one participant stated, “I just look forward to how sweet it will be when I get to be in his arms again.”

Dyadic maintenance behaviors

Self-disclosure

The most common dyadic maintenance behavior identified by the un-incarcerated women was engaging in more self-disclosure practices with their incarcerated relational partners. Respondents indicated the importance of communicating and sharing intimate details about each other’s days and openly sharing thoughts. Regarding the importance of self-disclosure, one respondent stated, “We both try to tell each other about what we are doing every day and what is going on in our lives so we can feel more involved with each other.”

Assurances

Nearly all of the women stressed the importance of assuring their incarcerated partner of their affection and commitment to the relationship (e.g., “I remind him I knew this would not be easy but

I'm committed to making our marriage work"). Assurances for partners with life sentences were consistent with assurances made to those with short term sentences, with the exception of greater emphasis on communicating support and commitment to their incarcerated partner as a way to maintain a positive mental state, as one respondent stated "You don't give up. You continue to show affection and attention by any means possible so they remember they are human." The un-incarcerated women also discussed any insecurities felt by their incarcerated partners as a result of imprisonment and physical absence. One respondent indicated:

I feel it is very important to always reassure your partner about how much they mean to you and how serious you are about the relationship. People incarcerated have all the time in the world to think and I feel that this causes a lot of insecurities and fears that normally wouldn't be an issue.

Future planning

Respondents indicated that they actively communicate about the future and engage in post-prison planning with their incarcerated partners. As one respondent stated, "We constantly talk about our future and our dreams for our future, it helps us stay close and gives us hope to hold onto." Although future plans are similar to traditional relationships, an important distinction is made when the talk involves post-prison release conditions, sobriety, and efforts to reduce recidivism (e.g., "We talk about home coming, employment opportunities, children, buying a home! Everything any other couple does. The only difference is we plan for his sobriety, talk about plans for when he is feeling weak"). It is also important to note that the un-incarcerated women saw discussion of future plans as dependent upon prison sentence length. When an incarcerated partner had an extended or life sentence, the un-incarcerated women tended to focus their discussions on current behavioral efforts of their incarcerated partners so that they could earn more visitation privileges and/or release from segregation in the future.

Positivity

The need for pleasant, upbeat, and joyful interactions were mentioned by respondents, often for the benefit of the incarcerated partner, as indicated in comments such as: "I try to only be positive with him because I know my pain and sadness are nothing compared to what he suffers and I can't cause him more pain, I won't" and "stay positive; it's hard because some things are extremely disheartening and disappointing but the second you allow it to affect your mood it effects theirs. They begin to feel guilty, get angry at themselves, and their mindset changes."

Sexual fantasy

Because physical intimacy is rare for most incarcerated couples, the un-incarcerated women discussed how sexual intimacy was verbally constructed through communication for symbolic intimacy with their incarcerated partners. The women identified how they and their incarcerated partners would express sexual desires during phone sex, in sexual and romantic letters, short stories, reminisce about previous sexual experiences together, and intimate conversations of intended sexual relations post-release.

Tasks and shared experiences

Despite the separation, the un-incarcerated women discussed how they would make an effort to engage in shared tasks and experiences with their incarcerated partners (e.g., watch a show, read a book, learn a new language) and then discuss what they both read or watched separately, together, in follow-up conversations over the phone, in letters, or during their next face-to-face visit. The un-incarcerated women also identified how the timing of phone calls allow for advanced planning in which the incarcerated other can vicariously partake (i.e., calling during a family gathering) or listen in (i.e., child's chorus concert) to important events going on in the life of the family. These behaviors were demonstrated in statements such as: "We have children and he wants to feel as involved as he can throughout this time" and "I am running our farm and I keep him involved with what is going on, let him help with decisions, ask him how to fix things, sometimes I fix things while on the phone with him."

Physical touch

The ability to engage in physical intimacy is extremely restricted, however during face-to-face visits brief hugs, kisses, and hand-holding is allowed. Even the smallest use of touch can be intimate, as expressed by one respondent, “the ways that he touches me that are so innocent yet intimate ... in visits we tend to sneak little touches on each other’s body here and there.” However, respondents also stressed the severe restrictions that exist within the prison facility and the risk of punishment for too much physical contact between them and their incarcerated partners.

Purposeful concealment

Some respondents indicated that at times it is best to not disclose information to the incarcerated partner. This decision is often made on the basis that not telling will spare the incarcerated partner from undue stress, worry, and emotional or mental distress. As one respondent stated, “If it is something he can help with I tell him. If it’s a financial struggle or something he cannot help with and would lead him to further depression and disappointment, I keep it to myself.” Topic avoidance was common among the un-incarcerated women when considering disclosures to an incarcerated partner, particularly when certain topics may cause conflict, as one response stated that ignoring certain topics “keep emotions manageable while reconnecting.”

Network activities

Few of the un-incarcerated women specifically mentioned the involvement of network members as a relational maintenance behavior for connection with their incarcerated partners. This is in stark contrast to previous research, particularly in the context of deployment. Of the few un-incarcerated women who did mention social networks, they indicated connections with their own families (e.g., “I try to strengthen relationships with other loved ones.”) or their partners’ family (e.g., “I spend time with his family to feel a little closer to him”; “I maintain a relationship with his sister, other family members, and keep important friends and family members updated on his situation”) as factoring into relational maintenance behaviors related to an incarcerated partner. Other respondents indicated that they try to keep busy: “I try and keep myself busy during the day. Work. Going out for walks. Just whatever I can to keep me busy” and how “maintaining a life outside of my relationship keeps us connected.” However, when it comes to the involvement of network members, fear of stigma and judgment are a constant concern, as one respondent asked, “where do you tell your coworkers or casual friends he is?” and another stated, “people judge, it’s hard to know who you can turn to for support.”

Perceived barriers to relational maintenance

Lack of intimacy

The majority of the un-incarcerated women reported the lack of intimate relations to be the largest perceived barrier to relational maintenance with their incarcerated partners. Although brief hugs, kisses, and hand-holding are all allowed during face-to-face visits for some couples, respondents indicated that these brief instances are not a compromise for full intimate relations. For others, prison restrictions prohibit any touch or close distance, as one respondent stated, “The fact that even when we have visits, we can’t hold hands or hug each other, or be too close, can’t ever be intimate until he comes home is the hardest.”

Lack of communication

The inability to engage in routine communication and daily small talk is a cause for frustration in the eyes of the un-incarcerated women (i.e., “I hate that I can’t call him, he can only call me”). The cost of phone calls and the delayed feedback (e.g., mail being withheld, phone access blocked) were also mentioned by the un-incarcerated women as barriers. The women also indicated that lack of communication occurred as a result of prison lockdowns, having an incarcerated partner being

locked up in segregation or in solitary, or prison policies that do not require contacting the family about relevant things going on in the prison related to the incarcerated individual. For example, one respondent highlighted the lack of communication during emergencies, in which she had not heard from her partner because “... he had been in the hospital with potential kidney failure. It was scary, because no one contacts you, you just have to wait!”

Distance

Un-incarcerated women identified the distance between where she lived and the location of the prison as a source of great stress on the relationship. In particular, the women discussed the financial difficulties associated with the cost of travel and having to rent hotel rooms near the prison facility as barriers. Prison facilities also differ in the extent to which visitations are allowed on a weekly/monthly basis, with some of the women stating that they required special permission for an extended visit due to distance and travel costs.

Loneliness

The un-incarcerated women indicated feelings of being alone as a hindrance of relational satisfaction and motivation to engage in routine maintenance with their incarcerated partners. This was articulated in statements such as: “We do what we can to help each other, but in the end, we each have to handle our own lives right now. It can be lonely.” Loneliness was also associated with stigma, as expressed by one woman:

Loneliness, on many levels. Not only is my man not here for me, but I have no one to vent to about my man’s time away. People in my life don’t even know we are together because people judge harshly when you love someone in prison. So I feel a loneliness on the outside and on the inside. He’s not here to hold and comfort me, and I have no one to confide in on the emotional level.

Prison restrictions

Strict policies regarding visitations, lack of family visitation options, lack of privacy, and concerns regarding interactions with the corrections staff were identified by un-incarcerated women as barriers to relational maintenance with their relational partners. One un-incarcerated woman highlighted the reorientation of relational needs with her relational partner due to prison, “I do not think our main goal right now is romance ... Our goal is his safety, him getting home to his family, to be the father and husband he is meant to be.” Coupled with this barrier were negative sentiments toward the prison systems’ lack of family-friendly policies that, as the women argued, further complicate familial relationships, negatively affect the inmate’s perceived self-worth, and their hope for positive rehabilitation post-prison. As one woman stated, “the prison system appears to be set up to break families up. Making visits near impossible. Creating less and less conducive recreation times, to where phone calls become few and far between.” Echoing this feeling, another woman stated,

It is already hard enough to have a relationship with an inmate because there are so many obstacles, but also the prison staff make it their job to make it a bit more difficult. I think they want these inmates to be able to make it in the outside world, yet they set them up for failure. They treat the inmates like animals, which puts an even bigger strain on the relationships they have with people in the outside world.

Emotional disconnect

The un-incarcerated women discussed the consequences of their incarcerated partner being separate from the outside world and disconnecting from the incarcerated partner as a result of life in prison. For example, one woman stated, “When he is stressed, I feel like he doesn’t really care about much else other than what is going on in there.” Emotional disconnect can also occur with the outside partner, as one respondent recalled, “Our last video call made me feel very disconnected. I haven’t had much time to grieve [his sentencing], I’ve always held strong just to make sure to be happy when he called.”

Stigma

The women identified that stigma affiliated with loving someone in prison effects their relational maintenance behaviors with an incarcerated partner, relational satisfaction, and involvement in social networks. The un-incarcerated women mentioned feeling judged when they reveal to some people that their relational other is incarcerated (e.g., “Extra scrutiny as people, in general, seem to think because our relationship isn’t traditional and it’s unconventional, they have some sort of right to have an opinion on it”). The stigma felt may result in the un-incarcerated women not disclosing the whereabouts of their incarcerated partner, or not disclosing their relational status altogether. As one woman expressed,

I just think there is so much stigma around incarceration in general. It makes it so difficult. There is so much judgement. I have to live a “double life” so to speak. None of my coworkers know my fiancée’s record, yet they have all met him and loved him. If they knew where he was now they would judge. I hate having to hide the love of my life in some aspects. It’s not an easy life by any means.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore relational maintenance behaviors enacted by un-incarcerated women with their incarcerated relational partners. The findings serve as a first step in illuminating behaviors that women of incarcerated partners take to foster a sense of connectedness within a unique context that often carries barriers traditional partners do not experience. In doing so, this study begins to answer a call for more research on the communicative processes that exist among families experiencing incarceration. Findings indicate a variety of communicative processes employed by un-incarcerated women to strengthen feelings of relational closeness with an incarcerated partner, many of which are consistent with maintenance typologies and behaviors in previous research (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Merolla, 2010a; Merolla & Steinberg, 2007; Stafford, 2011; Stafford & Canary, 1991). Findings also indicate motivations for enacting maintenance behaviors for women with incarcerated partners. Women with incarcerated partners report using assurances, future planning, positivity, and even purposeful concealment as ways to promote positive mental health with their incarcerated partners and achieve greater hope for life after prison. Analyzing the findings in light of previous literature can provide insight into the unique context of incarceration, and in doing so sets up future research to further study specifics within the findings. Findings in relation to previous literature and opportunities for future research are discussed.

Consistent with previous research (Merolla, 2010a), cognitions play a key role for women who have incarcerated partners when thinking about their relational maintenance behaviors with incarcerated partners. For example, positive thinking and using sensory objects to facilitate feelings of connectedness are important aspects of relational maintenance in this context. Whereas loneliness and feelings of disconnect are cognitions that may counter feelings of connectedness for women who have an incarcerated partner. Whether the intrapersonal behaviors are strategically enacted as relational maintenance or are more in line with coping behaviors for stress relief during loneliness is unclear and warrants more study.

Some relational maintenance behaviors may in fact reinforce the separation (Merolla & Steinberg, 2007). The women in this study discussed aspects of their relationship that brought both connection and feelings of disconnect. For example, the un-incarcerated women make active attempts to support their incarcerated partners, yet the un-incarcerated partners must face life events alone (e.g., respondents mentioned a cancer diagnoses, passing of family members, pregnancies, and hospitalizations). All of these kinds of occurrences necessitate strong interpersonal support from a relational partner. These women perceive that support can be provided by their incarcerated partners, but it is often delayed, at a distance, and mediated through phone calls and letters.

Other activities such as planning for the future (e.g., wedding or buying a house), which typically would foster feelings of connection, are discussed together yet the burden of completion often falls on the non-incarcerated partner. Maintenance literature has often utilized an equity framework for

understanding the reciprocity of maintenance and task related behaviors. However, in the context of separation during incarceration, many of the non-incarcerated women of this study indicated an awareness of low equity for completing tasks, given that their partners were incarcerated. Thus, the burden of completing tasks (e.g., raising children, home maintenance, arranging a wedding, etc.) is often the sole responsibility of these non-incarcerated partners. Further, many of these women indicated a strong emotional disconnect immediately after sentencing and during the period of transition into prison. This is significant in that it is consistent with previous research finding that families often identify the transition period where a loved one is incarcerated as an emotionally disruptive time for the entire family (Chui, 2016). These findings highlight the need for more support among women who have an incarcerated partner in order to achieve stronger familial support during the early transition period of incarceration. Such support might help better prepare the families that these women are largely responsible for maintaining while a relational partner is incarcerated.

Consistent with maintenance during deployment, mediated communication via letters and phone calls can enable dyadic continuity during incarceration. Phone use is associated with great openness and assurances among individuals in LDRs (Dainton & Aylor, 2002). Although openness can be negatively associated with relational satisfaction, the structure of the prison system and hindrance on routine interactions requires a level of openness and self-disclosure between partners in order to create co-presence and continued relational commitment. Incarceration forces committed partners to find alternatives to fulfilling physical intimacy, thereby relying on self-disclosure of daily events, thoughts, and emotions and an openness toward communicating sexual desires. Discussions of sexual fantasies and intimate desires can be challenging for some, but engaging in these dialogs can foster a sense of closeness and intimacy (MacNeil & Byers, 2005). Some of the un-incarcerated women in the study indicated that their reliance on communication to maintain intimacy with an incarcerated partner has cultivated stronger emotional connections and improved relational quality overall. This supports previous research that perceptions of relationship quality can improve from pre-prison to post-prison release (La Vigne, Naser, Brooks, & Castro, 2005).

Other behaviors, such as shared experiences and talking about the future, provide an alternative to imprisoned reality in meeting both short and long-term positive outcomes. Women who engage in shared experiences and discuss future plans with their incarcerated partner feel connected to them through the separation, are able to reduce their relational uncertainty, and provide hope that better days are ahead. These discussions allow the couple as a unit to create shared meaning by defining roles, goals, and values that are meaningful. Women who provide assurances to their incarcerated partners is consistent with research showing that this relational maintenance strategy is also helpful where military deployment separates the partners (Merolla & Steinberg, 2007). A common message among both groups involved is the reassurance that things will be ok and the separation is temporary. Stafford's (2011) typology combines messages of relational commitment and talk about the future under the single behavior of assurances. However, it may be useful for some relationship types (such as the relational partners of incarcerated or deployed individuals) to keep some behaviors separate due to the meanings attached (i.e., assurances to remain committed even while someone is incarcerated and making plans to start anew after a turbulent separation).

Where the parallel between military deployment relational maintenance and incarceration maintenance diverge is in regards to network support. Previous research identifies a community effort in network support for military wives during deployment (Merolla, 2010a; Merolla & Steinberg, 2007). Network involvement may help individuals sustain emotional bonds to their deployed partners and fend off loneliness. However, in stark contrast, network involvement for the women of incarcerated partners was not highly reported as a helpful relational maintenance behavior. In fact, the women of incarcerated partners emphasized strategically not disclosing their relational status to others, their partner's whereabouts, or any other information to social networks because of stigma concerns. Fear of stigma and judgment motivates not involving social networks for women who have incarcerated partners. Affiliated stigma should be explored in future research to identify the extent to which partners of inmates directly experience judgment and how the stigma impacts their relationships with others.

Limitations and conclusion

Several limitations of the current study warrant discussion. First, the sample of respondents included only women and just the perspective of non-incarcerated partners. Therefore, a more exhaustive understanding of maintenance might expand upon this work by including both partners in order to learn from the inmate unique perspectives related to maintaining a level of connectedness in a romantic relationship while incarcerated. Secondly, for the purpose of convenience of access and anonymity, this study utilized a self-report online questionnaire that prevented follow-up questions and the ability to expand more upon an answer. Therefore, future research would benefit from in-depth interviews to gain richer context in data for a more robust understanding of communication in this context.

The present study illuminates how women who have incarcerated partners try to maintain their relationships with implications for family closeness. Several barriers unique to incarceration prevent both relational partners from equally supporting the family in this context. Findings support and extend scholarship on relational maintenance, offering rich avenues for future work for scholars interested in studying issues of family communication in the context of incarceration. Future research might also explore the maintenance behaviors that family members of the incarcerated engage in before, during, and after separation by incarceration and thereby utilizing the full model of long-distance relationship maintenance (Merolla, 2010b, 2012) and the three temporal occurrences (prospective, introspective, and retrospective) in application to not just romantic relationship maintenance but family relationship maintenance. Such research would provide greater depth into how a variety of family members work to maintain relationship with a loved one prior to imprisonment and at reunion upon release.

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