

# Relational Violence and a Culture of Trust among Incarcerated Women

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- In the United States, women's prisons are *violent* places.



- In the United States, women's prisons are *violent* places.
- Not “violence” in the usual sense...



- In the United States, violence in women's prisons is relational.



# Relational Violence

- Relational violence involves gossip, ostracism, and manipulation.
  - The use of relationships to harm others.

# Relational Violence

- Often trivialized in popular culture.
- As well as prison administrators and incarcerated women.
  - “Too much drama” or “It’s what women do”



# Relational Violence

- But the consequences are not trivial...
  - Psychological harm
  - Often grounds for instigating physical violence and property violations
  - Undermines safety
  - Interferes with programming

# New Problem?

- This is old news.
  - For nearly 75 years, research has shown relational violence to be a unique feature of women's prisons.

# Relational Violence

- Why does this happen? Two views...

# Relational Violence

- *Structural perspective* (Skarbek 2020):
  - Enforce "convict code" ('do your own time') by sanctioning those who violate the code.

# Relational Violence

- *Gendered perspective* (Trammell 2009; 2012):
  - Gender socialization and an acceptable form of conflict.
  - Enforce "gender roles".

# Norms?

- Both the *structural* and *gendered* explanation rely on norms:
  - "Convict code", "what women do", "gender roles"
  - Relational violence is a sanction used to enforce these norms.
  - Norms exist, therefore relational violence...

# Really?

- Why do norms exist?
  - Coleman's (1990) consequentialist theory:
    - Harm caused by the behavior of others creates an interest in controlling behavior.
    - Sanctioning harmful behavior deters potential actors.

# Really?

- Is this really the situation in women's prisons?
  - "You should behave this way" is why there is relational violence?
  - Women do not support a "convict code"
  - Women see relational violence as a problem
- My argument: relational violence is not caused by norms.

# A separate explanation...

- Women who enter prison are more likely than men to have histories of trauma, mental health and behavioral health problems, and be separated from family.
- Women seek or demand a means to cope with past and prior trauma and adjust to conditions of confinement.

# A separate explanation...

- *But, they face a supply problem.*
  - Prisons administrators have historically struggled to meet the needs of women.
    - “Partial Justice” (Rafter 1990): less adequate care and funding of programs.
  - *Solution?*
  - Trust relationships solve this problem.

# A separate explanation...

- *But, trust makes you vulnerable...*
  - What if someone shares something private?
  - The dilemma: potential gains of trusting, but unable to enforce agreements

# A separate explanation: Culture of Trust

- Trust in the absence of norms.
  - The consequence is a culture where trust relationships have a shared meaning.
  - This shared meaning shapes how women interact as well as their perceptions about relationships and programming.

# Research Questions

- Question 1: What does it mean to trust someone in prison?
- Question 2: Is there consensus about what trust means among women?
- Question 3: How does cultural embeddedness influence perceptions of community relationships and programming?

# Current Study

- Question 1: What does it mean to trust someone in prison?
- Question 2: Is there consensus about what trust means among women?
- Question 3: How does cultural embeddedness influence perceptions of community relationships and programming?

# Data

- Open-ended interview with incarcerated women.
- Collected in September of 2020 in the only complex for women in Arizona and has approximately 4,000 prisoners.
- Overall, 29 women from two mixed-custody units were interviewed. There were 20 women interviewed from Unit A and 9 women interviewed from Unit B.
- No identifying information was collected on particular respondents.
- Women were recruited using a flyer, posted on the facility yard near the CO4's office, which indicated that a researcher would be conducting interviews about trust.
- Women who were interested in participating indicated so to the CO4 and were placed on a list to schedule interviews.

# Data

- Due to restrictions on facility access for volunteers due to COVID-19, interviews were conducted using videoconferencing.
- Women were placed in front of a computer where the interviewer asked if they were consented and asked whether they felt comfortable discussing their responses in the setting.
- All women agreed to participate in the interview.
- After consenting each respondent and describing the study, the interview asked a variety of questions about the respondent's conceptualization of trust using a semi-structured interview.

# Approach

- For each set of open-ended responses, key words or phrases were underlined.
- Each of these words or phrases was then categorized as belonging to a theme.

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study_id	q3a	q3bi
2	I can <u>confide</u> in them.	NA
3	<u>Loyalty</u> and confidence. They have to have shown those things.	NA
5	NA	I knew her on the outside. We are very good friends.) M&C
7	I don't know. Her actions. You just have that feeling. I got her back and she has mine.) M&C.	NA
8	NA	She is very easy to talk to. She gives <u>awesome feedback</u> . I don't feel <u>hesitant sharing</u> things with her. Even if I am negative she is positive.

# Results

# Themes

- Women were asked:
  - "Think of someone on this unit who you trust. What are the things that make that person trustworthy? Now, let's list those things. We can list as many or as few things as you want. You can also use sentences to describe what you mean."
  - Of the 29 women interviewed, 4 (13%) did not provide a response to this question as they indicated that there were no women on the unit whom they trusted.
  - Three themes identified.

## Themes

"What are the things  
that make this person  
trustworthy?"

### *Trust Themes*

Talk with about personal/emotional content	24%
Not share confidential information or gossip	52%
Be honest and non-judgemental in conversation with me	48%
Misc.	16%
Cases with single theme identified	64%

## Themes

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- Someone to talk with about personal information and/or emotional content
  - "I can confide in them"
  - "I trust them to provide emotional help. I can trust them with what I am going through."
- This theme appeared in 24% of the responses.

## Themes

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- Will not share confidential information or gossip.
  - "I have been able to open up to her about certain things...I have not heard things repeated."
  - This theme appeared in 52% of the responses.

## Themes

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- **Being honest in discussions and non-judgmental.**
  - "Non-judgmental, someone who you trust doesn't judge you for what you are saying"
  - "Speaks thoughts honestly whether positive or negative or whether we agree."
  - This theme appeared in 48% of the responses.

# Themes

- Women were then asked:
  - "Think of someone on this unit who you do not trust. What are the things that make that person untrustworthy? Now, let's list those things. We can list as many or as few things as you want. You can also use sentences to describe what you mean."
  - Of the 29 women interviewed, all provide a response to this question.
  - Four themes identified.

## Themes

"What are the things  
that make this person  
untrustworthy?"

### *Distrust Themes*

Manipulative/Exploitative	31%
Spread confidential information or gossip	48%
Liar, dishonest, or judgmental	34%
Steals	10%
Misc.	14%
Cases with single theme identified	69%

"What are the things  
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## Themes

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- Manipulative or exploitative
  - "You don't know what their thoughts or intentions are. What is behind their faces. Everyone has an agenda"
  - "Un-loyal and scandalous. Malicious."
  - This theme appeared in 31% of the responses and emphasized that there are women who actively seek to hurt other women and that they should be avoided.

"What are the things  
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## Themes

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Steals	10%
Misc.	14%
Cases with single theme identified	69%

- Women emphasized that they did not trust women who spread confidential information or gossip about them or others.
  - "Talking behind your back. Spreading rumors."
  - "Saying things and they come back...They try to gain your confidence and you tell them things and then they go and tell people."
- This theme appeared in 48% of the responses.

## Themes

"What are the things  
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Cases with single theme identified	69%

- Women indicated that they did not trust women because they were liars, dishonest, or judgmental of them.
  - "Being shady, fake, someone that is a hypocrite"
  - "That is easy for me. Somebody who says one thing but does another."
  - This theme appeared in 34% of the responses.

"What are the things  
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## Themes

### *Distrust Themes*

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Liar, dishonest, or judgmental	34%
Steals	10%
Misc.	14%
Cases with single theme identified	69%

- A fourth theme focused on theft.
- In 10% of the responses, women emphasized that they did not trust someone because they steal.

## Themes for Trust and Distrust Open-Ended Narratives

Themes	"What are the things that make this person trustworthy?"	"What are the things that make this person untrustworthy?"
<i>Trust Themes</i>		
Talk with about personal/emotional content	24%	---
Not share confidential information or gossip	52%	---
Be honest and non-judgemental in conversation with me	48%	---
Misc.	16%	---
Cases with single theme identified	64%	
<i>Distrust Themes</i>		
Manipulative/Exploitative	---	31%
Spread confidential information or gossip	---	48%
Liar, dishonest, or judgemental	---	34%
Steals	---	10%
Misc.	---	14%
Cases with single theme identified	---	69%

- Some overlap, but a great deal of focus on a single theme for each respondent.

## Themes for Trust and Distrust Open-Ended Narratives

Themes	"What are the things that make this person trustworthy?"	"What are the things that make this person untrustworthy?"
<i>Trust Themes</i>		
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Cases with single theme identified	64%	
<i>Distrust Themes</i>		
Manipulative/Exploitative	---	31%
Spread confidential information or gossip	---	48%
Liar, dishonest, or judgemental	---	34%
Steals	---	10%
Misc.	---	14%
Cases with single theme identified	---	69%

- Overall, a focus on sharing personal information to someone who will not spread it or judge you.

# Themes

- Women were asked:
  - "What are the best things about having a trusting relationship with other women on the unit?"
  - Three themes were identified.

## *Benefits Themes*

Talk with about personal/emotional content	79%
Not share confidential information or gossip	21%
Be honest and non-judgemental in conversation with me	14%
Misc.	17%
Cases with single theme identified	72%

## *Benefits Themes*

Talk with about personal/emotional content	79%
Not share confidential information or gossip	21%
Be honest and non-judgemental in conversation with me	14%
Misc.	17%
Cases with single theme identified	72%

- The relationship provides someone to talk with about personal and emotional content.
  - "Being able to do your time. Having friends helps you get through every day...I can talk and vent with them"
  - "It is nice to have someone you can go to when you are having a bad day or when you are feeling down. A shoulder to lean on."
  - This theme appeared in nearly 80% of the responses.

## *Benefits Themes*

Talk with about personal/emotional content	79%
Not share confidential information or gossip	21%
Be honest and non-judgemental in conversation with me	14%
Misc.	17%
Cases with single theme identified	72%

- Other themes:
  - Not sharing personal information.
  - Being honest and non-judgmental.

# Themes

- Women were then asked:
  - "What risks would you say are involved with trusting other women on the unit?"
  - Three themes were identified.

## *Risks Themes*

---

Vulnerable to exploitation	41%
Spread confidential information or gossip	48%
Loss of emotional connection or being let down	31%
Misc.	10%
Cases with single theme identified	72%

## Risks Themes

Vulnerable to exploitation	41%
Spread confidential information or gossip	48%
Loss of emotional connection or being let down	31%
Misc.	10%
Cases with single theme identified	72%

- Making oneself vulnerable to exploitation appeared in 41% of the responses.
  - "Being taken advantage of. Put into drama that is unnecessary. Fighting."

## Risks Themes

Vulnerable to exploitation	41%
Spread confidential information or gossip	48%
Loss of emotional connection or being let down	31%
Misc.	10%
Cases with single theme identified	72%

- The risk of having someone spread privately shared information and being susceptible to gossip.
  - "Them turning around and stabbing you in the back. Telling other people your business."
  - "People knowing things that you don't want everyone to know."

## Risks Themes

Vulnerable to exploitation	41%
Spread confidential information or gossip	48%
Loss of emotional connection or being let down	31%
Misc.	10%
Cases with single theme identified	72%

- The risk of losing an emotional connection or being let down.
- "Losing that trust. Doing something that is out of character. If someone doesn't live up to your expectations."
- "Getting moved to a different unit and losing that relationship."

# Summary of Findings

- Question: What does it mean to trust someone in prison?
  - Focus on being able to share information, have it not repeated or used against you, and not judged.
  - Gaining the emotional connection of another person.
  - Putting yourself at risk.

# Next Steps

- Address next set of research questions.
  - Question 2: Is there consensus about what trust means among women?
  - Question 3: How does cultural embeddedness influence perceptions of community relationships and programming?

# Thank you!

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# Extra Slides

TABLE #. Descriptive Statistics for Unit A and Unit B

Variables	Unit A (n = 695)					Unit B (n = 685)				
	Mean/ Proportion	Median	SD	Min	Max	Mean/ Proportion	Median	SD	Min	Max
Age	37.41	35.99	10.48	19.11	76.44	38.74	36.34	10.83	19.88	81.75
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>										
White	0.38	----	0.49	0.00	1.00	0.45	----	0.50	0.00	1.00
Black	0.15	----	0.36	0.00	1.00	0.10	----	0.30	0.00	1.00
Hispanic	0.31	----	0.46	0.00	1.00	0.27	----	0.44	0.00	1.00
Native American	0.09	----	0.29	0.00	1.00	0.11	----	0.32	0.00	1.00
Other	0.06	----	0.25	0.00	1.00	0.07	----	0.25	0.00	1.00
<i>Education</i>										
Less than high school	0.60	----	0.49	0.00	1.00	0.54	----	0.50	0.00	1.00
High school	0.30	----	0.46	0.00	1.00	0.33	----	0.47	0.00	1.00
Greater than high school	0.09	----	0.29	0.00	1.00	0.11	----	0.32	0.00	1.00
<i>Marital/Family Status</i>										
Single	0.65	----	0.48	0.00	1.00	0.62	----	0.48	0.00	1.00
Married	0.18	----	0.38	0.00	1.00	0.19	----	0.39	0.00	1.00
Divorced	0.08	----	0.27	0.00	1.00	0.09	----	0.29	0.00	1.00
Has children	0.61	----	0.49	0.00	1.00	0.61	----	0.49	0.00	1.00
<i>Substance Use</i>										
History of substance use	0.89	----	0.31	0.00	1.00	0.91	----	0.28	0.00	1.00
History of methamphetamine use	0.40	----	0.49	0.00	1.00	0.42	----	0.49	0.00	1.00
History of alcohol use	0.24	----	0.43	0.00	1.00	0.23	----	0.42	0.00	1.00
<i>Custody Level</i>										
Close	0.22	----	0.41	0.00	1.00	0.18	----	0.38	0.00	1.00
Medium	0.76	----	0.43	0.00	1.00	0.81	----	0.39	0.00	1.00
Minimum	0.02	----	0.14	0.00	1.00	0.01	----	0.10	0.00	1.00
<i>Offense History</i>										
Age at admission	33.08	31.00	9.65	16.00	74.00	33.90	32.00	9.68	16.00	70.00
Years in prison	3.83	2.28	4.43	0.64	35.33	4.33	2.57	4.82	0.64	32.29
Prior felonies as adult	1.11	0.00	1.60	0.00	13.00	1.08	0.00	1.65	0.00	17.00
Prior prison terms	1.71	1.00	1.05	1.00	7.00	1.68	1.00	1.01	1.00	7.00
<i>Misconduct Violations (in past 6 months)</i>										
Violations	0.31	----	0.46	0.00	1.00	0.24	----	0.43	0.00	1.00
Assault on other prisoner	0.14	----	0.35	0.00	1.00	0.10	----	0.30	0.00	1.00
Assault on staff	0.04	----	0.20	0.00	1.00	0.02	----	0.16	0.00	1.00

# Consensus?

Trust means that if someone tells you something personal, you should keep it between you and them and not share it with others.

You have to be careful sharing personal information with others because they may share it with other people without you knowing.

Trusting someone means that you can tell them something personal and know they will not share it with others.

You shouldn't share personal information with anyone in here because you never know who they will tell it to or what they will do with it.

You shouldn't tell someone anything personal because if they tell someone else, there is little you can do about it.

Trusting someone means you can discuss personal matters and they will not judge you.

Trusting someone means that you can tell them personal information and know it will not be repeated.

Trust means that if you tell someone something personal about yourself, they won't use it to get something from you.

Trust means that you can tell someone something personal and know that they will not judge you.

Trusting someone on this unit means that you can share something personal and know that it will stay with them.

Trust means that if you tell someone something personal about yourself, they won't use it to manipulate you.

Trust means that you can talk to a women on this unit and know she will be honest with you.

You can't talk to women on this unit about personal matters without being judged.

If you tell someone something personal about yourself, they will find a way to use it against you.