WOMEN INSIDE AND OUT:
PRISONERS' PARTNERS, WOMEN IN PRISON AND THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

HELEN CODD[*]

Abstract

Although a substantial body of research has been published in the UK documenting the challenges faced by the female partners of male prisoners, little of this research has been feminist in its aims or methods. In addition, there has been little cross-pollination of ideas between feminist research on imprisoned women and research into the experiences of women in relationships with imprisoned men. This article argues that, from a feminist perspective, there are certain commonalities between these two aspects of women's interactions with imprisonment. Through an analysis of one issue, that is, the struggle for identity, the author argues that women in prison and the female partners of imprisoned men have more in common than has previously been explored in the published literature.

INTRODUCTION

Since the pioneering research of Pauline Morris during the 1960's, a substantial body of research has emerged documenting the challenges faced by prisoners' families in the United Kingdom. This has tended to focus on a 'traditional' definition of family, usually focusing on the heterosexual female partners of male inmates: however, when

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[*] Senior Lecturer in Law, Lancashire Law School, University of Central Lancashire, Preston

researchers have tried to explore other relationships, including same-sex couples and those of men in relationships with female inmates, they have often been unsuccessful (Devlin, 2002 and Codd, 2000). Despite official recognition that the maintenance of family relationships can contribute to a reduced risk of re-offending by ex-prisoners (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002), the literature documenting the multiple difficulties experienced by the female partners of imprisoned men is extensive (Morris, 1965: Caddle & Crisp, 1996: Davies, 1980: Davis, 1992: Hardwick, 1986: Light, 1989: Light, 1992: Light, 1995: McDermott & King, 1992: Neate, 1990: Noble, 1996: Paylor & Smith, 1994: Peelo, M. et al, 1991: Shaw, 1987 Shaw, 1992).   Throughout the literature, there are accounts of problems with visiting; supplying clothes and personal or educational items; capricious and inconsistent application of institutional rules and a lack of privacy or opportunities for intimacy. In contrast with many other jurisdictions, in the United Kingdom there is no provision for private or conjugal visits, although some inmates many be allowed brief periods of home leave. Women visiting offenders may face abuse and hostility from prison officers or be subject to intimate searches. Poor public transport can make visiting difficult, and lack of provision for visitors can make it especially hard for women visiting with children. That is not to say the experience of visiting is negative across all prisons: some institutions clearly welcome family members and are to be commended for good practice (Boswell & Wedge, 2001), whilst others seem less welcoming towards families (Codd, 1998). The negotiation of the balance between security and respect for family members is negotiated differently from prison to prison. For example, at one prison a child's teddy bear was pulled apart in front of the child in order to ensure that no contraband was being smuggled in, whereas in a different prison, an officer took a similar toy away for examination and returned it to the child several minutes

later, wearing a sling made out of a handkerchief, and told the child that the bear had needed an X-ray examination because he had injured his arm, but would be better in a few days' time (Aftermath, 1996: personal communication). The problems of poverty, loneliness and stigmatisation experienced by many prisoners' partners are exacerbated by poor communication with official agencies, and a lack of support services. As a consequence, voluntary sector agencies and self-help groups have to help meet this need, frequently providing and staffing visitors' centres, help-lines, counselling sessions and information and advice services. At a community level, the female partners of imprisoned men experience high levels of fear of stigmatisation, and sometimes abuse, violence and harassment.

Much of the published research has been explicitly policy-focused, emerging from an emphasis on social work issues and stressing that supporting a prisoner is often difficult. Whilst some writers have linked these issues to broader debates in penal policy and changes in the penal landscape during the last twenty years (see Boswell and Wedge, 2001), the UK research has not, on the whole, been theoretically contextualised. In particular, despite the expansion of feminist research into women's imprisonment during the last twenty years, this has not been matched by a similar expansion in feminist research into the experiences of prisoners' families. Until recently little of the research into the female partners of male prisoners has been explicitly feminist in its aims and methods, although outside the United Kingdom several influential feminist texts have emerged, notably those by Ann Aungles (1994), Lori Girshick (1996) and Susan Fishman (1990). In addition, there has been little cross-pollination of ideas between research into imprisoned women, and research into the experiences of the female partners of imprisoned men.

This article argues that, from a feminist perspective, there are certain commonalities between these two aspects of women's interactions with imprisonment. The article takes one aspect, that is, the struggle for identity, as a thematic case study, exploring the experiences of the female partners of male inmates as documented in the research literature and qualitative fieldwork interviews. Through an analysis of the struggle for identity, the gendered nature of the experiences of the female partners of imprisoned men becomes more clearly visible. These social and personal identity battles are influenced by broader societal and familial obligations that construct women as care-givers, and problems arise when these ideological obligations conflict with the stigma which is transmitted to women through their association with an inmate. After discussing how identity is negotiated in this context, it is suggested that women in prison and the female partners of imprisoned men have more in common than has previously been explored in the published literature.

THE QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

This article draws on qualitative fieldwork funded by the University of Central Lancashire. In-depth tape-recorded semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven female interviewees who were contacted via self-help groups or who had responded to notices displayed in prison visiting areas. The women interviewed were older than those whose experiences currently dominate the published research literature, the youngest being thirty-eight and the oldest in her mid-sixties (Codd, 2000).[1] The age profile of the respondents allowed for exploration of the impact of imprisonment on the family, going beyond the emphasis on the experiences of young women caring for young children which to date has dominated the literature (Paylor

& Smith, 1994). The participants' age profile also reflects the growing awareness in criminological research of intersections between age and gender.[2]

The women were all in heterosexual marital relationships with men and described their ethnic origin as 'white': however, it is important to stress that this was a consequence of the self-selection process and the voluntary nature of the interviewees' participation.[3] Their imprisoned male partners were serving sentences from six months to life, for offences ranging from murder to deception and property crimes. Two of the women had married their husbands during the period of incarceration, one of these having previously been his pen friend. The husbands of two of the women were released whilst the study was in progress.

The semi-structured interviews covered a range of topics and drew on the interview framework initially developed by Aungles (1994). The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for the discussion of key issues, such as experiences of visiting; financial and housing implications; the impact on relationships and the effects on children. The framework was flexible enough, however, to allow for free-flowing discussion of other issues relevant in the circumstances, such as sources of help and support; attitudes of family and friends, and, in two cases, the consequences of a prisoner's release. One of the most significant questions involved asking the interviewee to talk the interviewer through the day of a visit: this encouraged the women to talk freely about every aspect of their visits and provided insights into differences in visiting facilities and procedures depending on the prison establishment. It also allowed the women to discuss their feelings about visiting their incarcerated partners.

ASPECTS OF THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT: THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

Discussion of 'identity politics' has become a tool for conceptualising and analysing power relationships in a range of contexts (Bosworth, 1999: Young, 1990). Identity is not fixed, but constituted by the intersection between socio-economic and cultural factors and the ways in which individuals perceive themselves. An analysis of identity issues can be valuable in understanding the experiences of imprisoned women, and also prisoners' partners. Concepts of identity and agency are central to Mary Bosworth's study of women's imprisonment in England (Bosworth, 1999): she argues that "power, in prison, is constantly negotiated on the level of identity" (p.3). She questions how prisoners negotiate social power relations through identity, arguing that examining the prison through concepts of identity and agency illuminates elements of the complex relationship between gender and power both inside and outside the prison (p.7). To paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir (de Beauvoir, 1949) one is not born a prisoner (or a prisoner's partner), one becomes a prisoner (or a prisoner's partner). When women receive prison sentences they are, in the words of Mary Eaton, "both literally and metaphorically 'taken down'." The processes through which a woman is received into the prison, strip-searched and made subject to both the institution's formal rules and regulations and also the informal conduct norms of the prison, all act to redefine the woman not as a woman, a mother, a partner or an employee, but as a prisoner:

> "She is excluded from society, from all that formerly gave her an identity. She becomes a prisoner- depersonalised, degraded, denied any control over her day-t0-day existence. She is defined as subordinate: the lowest in a hierarchy and now totally subject to the authority of others." (Eaton, 1993, 21).

Prisons deny inmates many aspects of their 'outside' identities, seeking to substitute the identity of 'prisoner.' This is not purely restricted to those who are incarcerated: prisoners' partners have to negotiate tortuous issues of self-identity and utilise a range of strategies in negotiating this. As Lori Girshick argued in her detailed qualitative study of prisoners' partners in the USA, prisoners' wives exist in a state of "personal social limbo, neither really married, single, widowed or divorced" (Girshick, 1996, 37). In another study carried out in the USA, what made waiting hard for the women was the suspension of their identities (Fishman, 1990, 95): on a day-to-day level they were no longer the de facto wives or partners of inmates. Interaction with the prison, especially during visits, can make family members feel that they too are being reduced to a position of subservience in relation to the prison in the same way as their male partners:

> "Visiting-wise, to start with I think was degrading....I think demoralising...to start with it was awful...I think it's only then that you realise that all their rights have been taken away, you are no longer his wife; I can't do anything for him, I can't help him. He was exactly the same - they took away his rights to be a husband and father and I didn't realise a prison could put you down so much."
>
> [Angela]

Prisoners' partners fight to maintain their identity as 'good' wives, often fighting to project an image of normality despite the incarceration of the male partner. Women often endeavour to include the absent partner in their decision-making and thus reassert the male partner's dominance, emphasising 'wifely submission' (Girshick, 1996, 53). Wives work hard to ensure that the absent male still feels like part of the family (Girshick, 1996,30]: for example, when redecorating it is common for women

to take in carpet samples, wallpaper samples and paint charts, and photographs as the work progresses.[4]

Linked to this is the desire to maintain an identity as a good mother. This can involve encouraging more responsible behaviour in children than that exhibited by the absent parent, or the desire to ensure that children, especially sons, see the consequences of criminal behaviour for families so that in the future they might be deterred from engaging in crime themselves. As one woman, Pamela, said during an interview:

"I thought if I go to pieces and then my girls face something like this in the future they're going to think of this is what you do, you go to pieces, and I'm not having that. And at the same time I was thinking, I want J to realise how hard it is for a wife and a family to be like this, because he's in a position, where he's got a choice when he's older, and he's got a wife and kiddies, all sorts of damn things are going through your mind at that time."

Sometimes maintenance of a positive self-identity involves denial of the offender's responsibility for the offence, through blaming the police, Crown Prosecution Service, lawyers, the victim, or through constructing other accommodations of criminality including so-called 'sad tales' (Fishman, 1987: Fishman, 1990: Codd, 2000]. These justifications can allow women to maintain their beliefs about the basic good character of their partners. To do otherwise would challenge their faith in their own judgement of the character of individuals with whom they have intimate relationships. On other occasions the maintenance of a positive identity requires that the woman sever links with the offender: for example, where the imprisoned partner has committed sexual

offences, especially against children (Codd, 2000). This can be influenced by the woman's own background: Angela ended her marriage to an inmate serving a sentence of seven years for the rape and indecent assault of a child, because as a teenager she had been raped by a stranger, and she felt that she could not remain married to her husband, since she felt she knew how violated his victim felt. In attempting to maintain a positive identity in relation to other people, it is not uncommon for partners to conceal, or lie about, the nature of the prisoner's offence, in an attempt to avoid a negative reaction. For example, Anne concealed the nature of her husband's sexual offence from her family and adult son, and explained that she worried about what people would think: "I'm cautious.. I must admit, because of the nature of the offence: my friend knew, but I'm very wary who knows what, like, because I've got to protect myself ….My family don't know; my sons don't." Implicit in this is both a concern to avoid the negative consequences of social stigmatisation of prisoners' families, and also a determination to preserve a positive self-identity and promote a positive view of the relationship in the eyes of other family members.

Identity shifts continually, and can be mediated by race, class, gender, and also by the nature of the prisoner's offence. In the context of community reaction both inside and outside prison, women are usually defined by the status of the imprisoned man, not in relation to their social and emotional circumstances. Women are, after all, meant to be 'good', uncriminal: to be associated with men involved in crime smacks of 'contamination', immorality, of somehow being un-female or un-feminine. In contrast, the partners of men who are viewed in their communities as prisoners of war, including men imprisoned for paramilitary activities, are supported as the partners, wives and mothers of heroes (Fishman, 1991: McEvoy et. al., 1999: Jamieson &

Grounds, 2002). Prisoners operate within an informal hierarchy of respect based on offence type: this hierarchical structure is then passed to offenders' partners by association. This 'courtesy stigma' (Goffman, 1963) is attached to "…those regarded by others as having a spoiled identity because they share a web of affliation with the stigmatized" (Fishman, 1990, 7). Fishman refers to this as "the pall of blame that remains behind after the period of their husband's arrest, conviction and initial incarceration." This leads to feelings of vulnerability and shame, and sometimes stigmatisation within communities (Fishman, 1990, 7).

Hilary, the wife of a man serving a life sentence, summarised the situation, comparing the partners of "little joy-riders", as she put it, with the wives of bank robbers, whom she described as "coming in [to the prison] with … gold and designer bags and false nails and all the rings, they look down on these young girls with a couple of kids, nice and clean." She went on to explain how the prison 'class system' transmits itself to inmates' families:

> "there's a class barrier with prisoners families and there is a class barrier on what kind of sentence they've got. If he's a bank robber, huh, she's going to do all right…..money, money, she's got money, she's doing all right, she's got money, toughness, he's a bank robber. A lot of bank robbers have got life, but you say your husbands a lifer and it's, he killed a kid, that's the first thing they think of, or he killed a woman….. So there is a shelving, do you know what I mean, there is a hierarchy with prisoners families….."

This transmission of the status of the man to the women associated with him is reflected in the reactions of other prisoners' partners, and sometimes the prison officers themselves, and this is clearly visible in the experiences of women visiting sex offenders. Angela explained, comparing two institutions where her experiences could not have been more different[5]:

"At [Prison M] the Rule 43's have got their own prison within the prison which is entirely different: Over at [Prison E.] you're all in one big room together...the Rule 43's are actually kept to one side of the hall which then makes it easy for everybody else to spot who is on Rule 43...We've had times when we've actually come out and we've had people shouting at us, saying 'you're perverts' and 'we're gonna kill you'...some of us actually complained to the governor. Over at [Prison E] if you was visiting a 43 then you'd get called all the names under the sun but when you go to [Prison M] they're all 'let's go and have a cup of tea' or we used to nip across the pub, have a drink there and then come back, and we'd all mix in together! There was never a problem."

Interestingly, when experiencing this situation Angela related the negative attitudes of some fellow visitors to her own identity, never seeking during her interview to hold her partner responsible for the difficulties she was experiencing: as she said, "…..to some of the visitors we were lepers, you know, we were degraded." In contrast, [Prison M] "was nothing like that and it was such a pleasure to actually go on a visit over there..."

Thus prisoners' partners have to balance and negotiate conflicting forces, maintaining a positive identity as a wife or partner, and often also as a mother, and reconciling this with the conflicting negative societal connotations of their status as a prisoner's partner.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

The negotiation and maintenance of a positive self-identity by the female partners of male inmates is played out in the context of broader ideological social expectations. Dominant ideological expectations of appropriate femininity and obligatory caregiving expect that the female partner of an inmate will 'stand by her man' (McDermott & King, 1992). Regardless of the gender of the inmate, the burdens of caring for and supporting inmates through their sentence fall on women: men in prison are visited by their wives and mothers, whereas women in prison are visited by their mothers and sisters (Girshick: 1996, p.25). This reflects powerful societal expectations which link caring "with women and the places women are found" (Girshick,1996: p.25). To be a good wife, partner, or indeed a good woman, involves fulfilling these expectations (Gilligan,1982: Codd, 2002). However, this is not necessarily the case when the male partner's offence attracts societal condemnation or horror, for then any woman associated with the man concerned is expected not to care, and indeed, she may suffer societal condemnation as a consequence of her continued involvement. Thus a good wife, partner or mother is expected to 'stand by her man' within certain set boundaries governed by the nature of the offence, the status or vulnerability of the victim, the circumstances in which the crime took place, or the offender's own attitude and demeanour as witnessed during the trial. For most female partners of male inmates, however, the same strong social pressures operate in

the context of imprisonment as in the context of other challenging situations within the family or intimate relationships. For example, Oliver (1983) found that in situations of a husband's illness or disability, the man's wife was universally expected to do everything necessary, with no consideration of her own, health, abilities or time. In addition, the women themselves felt that even if the marriage had been failing before the illness, they could not abandon a sick husband. These gendered expectations of care-giving have been appropriated by the penal system: penal policies rely on women providing personal goods, additional clothes, toiletries and phone cards for inmates, women's unpaid caring ameliorating poor prison conditions and low morale amongst inmates (Codd, 2000). Relationships with women outside contribute to the emotional well-being of inmates, romance and relationships providing another method of 'doing time' (Devlin, 2002). However, as has already been discussed, the female partners of male inmates take on the status of the imprisoned men with whom they are in relationships, leading to shared stigmatisation.

AGENCY AND THE EMPOWERMENT DEBATE

Women in relationships with imprisoned men have to negotiate self-identity issues in the context of balancing the negative connotations of being linked with an inmate, with the fulfilment of gendered social expectations that construct women as caregivers. Identity is closely linked to agency, that is, preserving "the ability to negotiate power and resist" (Bosworth, 1999. p.130). Considerations of agency and resistance need not, as has sometimes been argued, deny women's actual experiences of oppression: these are not mutually exclusive (Bosworth, 1999: Worrall, 1990: Shaw, 1992, 1995). Prisoners do not experience their incarceration passively, but actively interpret the legitimacy of their incarceration and the regimes within which they live (Sykes, 1958:

Cohen and Taylor, 1979: Carlen, 1983: Carlen et. al 1985, Peckham, 1985). As Bosworth and Carrabine (2001) point out, "in order to engage actively with the regime and with one another prisoners must successfully construct themselves as agents, despite the restrictions placed upon them". Similarly, prisoner's partners are not passive victims (Girshick): prisoners' partners promote self-images of control and participation, and see themselves as rational, responsible agents, echoing research which has shown that this is how women in prison view themselves (Bosworth, 1999, 143). Aspects of the denial of agency experienced by prison inmates permeate prison walls and affect their non-imprisoned family members. They fight to assert themselves as agents within the confines of power struggles with criminal justice agencies and institutions, social services and other official bodies, and thus the idea of agency is intertwined with strategies of resistance. As Lori Girshick argued in relation to the female partners of male prisoners, "their lives become a form of political resistance": through standing up to the power structure "they are caught up in a web of interlocking institutional constraints and public demands" (Girshick, 121,121). In constructing themselves as agents prisoners must draw on their lived experiences outside the prison (Bosworth & Carrabine, p.502). Similarly, prisoners' partners may draw on their experiences of raising families, previous periods of imprisonment or other forms of absence to reinforce their belief that they can cope (Codd, 1998, 2000, 2002). Sometimes, the maintenance of identity itself becomes a strategy of resistance (Bosworth p.125). Prisoners' partners often feel pressure to end their relationship with an inmate, especially if the nature of the offence is seen as notorious or shocking. However, if the woman ends the relationship then she is failing in her role as a partner or wife, that is, to support her man. It is particularly challenging for women to maintain an identity both as good mothers and as good wives if their partners are

convicted of sexual offences, because sometimes if the man is allowed to return to the home upon release, then any children will be taken into care. In order to resist this, some women seek their own independent legal advice; teach themselves the relevant law and challenge official decisions. Idealized femininity, and stereotypical expectations of female behaviour, can be appropriated and transformed to become tools of resistance, as demonstrated in Mary Bosworth's account of a long-running argument between inmates and staff involving the quality of toilet paper (Bosworth, 1999, p.125 and p.145). Central to Bosworth's analysis is the role of cultural stereotypes of idealized femininity, especially motherhood, which, whilst being utilised by the prison authorities to control women, can also be appropriated by women themselves as a tool of resistance. The same strategies can be utilised by prisoners' partners: for example, one woman (Wendy) joined the Prison Fellowship group closest to the prison in which her husband was incarcerated, which enabled her to spend extra time with her husband during weekly chapel services when members of the group went into the prison to lead Christian worship.[6] She thus appropriated the ideal of the 'dutiful religious wife' and subverted this to achieve her own aim of gaining more time with her husband.

Others find support, assistance and empathy in self-help groups, and it is tempting to argue that the membership of such groups, run by and for the families of inmates, is empowering for those involved. However, as Iris Marion Young wrote (Young, 1994, p.89), "empowerment is like democracy: everyone is for it but rarely do they mean the same thing by it." Empowerment strategies have been widely accepted in a range of contexts in relation to a variety of individuals and groups, traditional concepts of empowerment viewing it as giving power and a voice back to those who are weak and

silenced. In recent years, however, the idea of empowerment has been co-opted by the state into penal programmes and philosophies, developing multiple and fluid meanings, meaning "whatever the user chooses it to mean" (Townsend, 1999, p. 21: Hannah-Moffat, 2000 p.519) and losing its conflictual characteristics and radical political nature in the process. It is, in the words of Kelly Hannah-Moffat, "as easily embraced by the state as by reformers" (Hannah-Moffat, 2000). This is clearly visible in relation to imprisoned women (Hannah-Moffat, 2001,166 & 273), the governance of women prisoners being no longer viewed as solely the responsibility of the federal government but also as the collective responsibility of the community and the individual responsibility of the offender (Hannah-Moffat, 2001,166). Thus, women in prison are required to take responsibility for their actions so as to satisfy not their own objectives but those of the authorities (Hannah-Moffat, 2001,173), the choices which incarcerated women are empowered to make being predetermined by the penal structure. Where prisoners' partners are concerned, self-help groups are often identified in the research literature as empowering women, through providing information, practical and emotional support, and promoting confidence and skills (Howarth & Rock, 2000: Peelo et.al. 1991: Light, 1992, 1993, 1995). It could be argued that, by helping women to maintain relationships with imprisoned men, the groups are helping women become active agents, that is, to maintain their relationships in the face of substantial social and institutional hardship and encouraging women to maintain a positive self-identity. However, as became clear in my interviews with prisoners' partners, and also from time spent more informally with self-help groups, these apparently independent activities, and other 'empowered' activities such as undertaking home maintenance, financial decision-making and so on, were not experienced or interpreted by the women themselves as emancipatory or

empowering. Rather, the women were concerned to survive the term of imprisonment and to hand these roles back to their husbands after their release. As has been argued elsewhere (Codd, 2002), women experience strong ideological pressures to act as caregivers. By offering assistance to women in continuing to care for their imprisoned male partners, these groups may be perpetuating and reinforcing gendered expectations of appropriate female behaviour, that is, that women should act as caregivers. In addition, the women who are members not only support incarcerated men but also support other women in the same position as themselves. To interpret the role of self-help groups as empowering may obscure the fact that the state and penal institutions rely on women to continue to maintain their relationships with inmates, both during the sentence and afterwards. Preservation of the relationship and the linked struggles can appear to be an empowered choice on the part of the women, entailing resistance and determination to maintain a positive self-identity. However, when empowerment of prisoner's partners is utilised by the state and harnessed to traditional gender role expectations, prisoners partners who feel 'empowered' by self-help groups may actually be more powerless than they realise.

CONCLUSIONS: WOMEN INSIDE AND OUT

Several themes resonate between recent research on women's imprisonment such as that by Mary Bosworth (1989) and Kelly Hannah-Moffat (2000, 2001), and feminist research on prisoners' partners (Fishman, 1990: Girshick, 1996: Codd, 2002). It is tempting to firmly demarcate between issues of women's imprisonment and concerns linked to the female partners of inmates, based on the obvious premise that one group of women is in prison and the other is not: however, this could be too simplistic. At first glance, women in prison experience a profound lack of liberty and autonomy as a

consequence of their legally sanctioned incarceration, which can be contrasted with the apparent legal "freedom" of prisoner's partners. However, the female partners of male prisoners exist somewhere <u>between</u> the two, technically and legally free and autonomous but enmeshed in the power of the penal system. They walk a difficult tightrope, torn between powerful gendered ideological expectations that construct women as caregivers for their partners and children (Girshick, 1996: Codd, 2002), whilst facing negative social attitudes and policies that make the fulfilment of these expectations difficult (Morris, 1965: Light, 1989: Smith, 1986: Light, 1992: Shaw, 1992: Peelo et al, 1991). Strong gendered social and familial expectations operate to suggest that a woman should 'stand by her man' when he is imprisoned (McDermott & King, 1992), this expectation being reinforced by penal policies that rely implicitly on women's informal care-giving (Codd, 2002). Women who maintain relationships with imprisoned men must cooperate with the prison establishment, and are affected by changes in rules, régimes and visiting policies (Light, 1989: Light, 1992: McDermott & King, 1992). Their interactions with their partners are controlled by prison rules, for example, controlling seating in visiting areas; suspicion of and limitations on intimate contact; and geographical factors in the prison's location. Collateral to this are the financial, emotional and social issues to be negotiated in maintaining a relationship with an inmate (Codd, 1998). Therefore, although the female partners of imprisoned men are legally 'free' they have to negotiate social expectations that they support their incarcerated men, at the same time as often facing negative social reaction, stigma and villification at the hands of the media and their communities due to their association with a convicted criminal (Devlin, 2002).

At all times, the female partners of male inmates are affected by, and have to develop strategies to cope with, the power of the prison, which does not stop at the prison gate. Thus, the boundary between the imprisoned and the non-imprisoned is not as clear as it would appear, female prisoners' partners being caught up in negotiating with the power of the penal system and having some experiences in common with women who are themselves incarcerated. Whilst discussion of the experiences of the female partners of imprisoned men has been recognised as a legitimate focus of feminist penological research (Aungles, 1994: Carlen, 1990: Girshick, 1996: Bosworth, 1999: Hannah-Moffat, 2000, 2001, 2002: Carlen, 2002), these two areas of research have developed largely separately.[7] It is to be hoped that the brief discussion of identity issues in this article has illustrated the possible links between women's experiences of imprisonment both inside and outside the prison: future feminist research could explore these issues in greater depth.

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NOTES

[1] The interviews were conducted between September 1996 and October 1997. For a table summarising the circumstances of the interviewees, see Codd (2000).

[2] The importance of age and cohort is increasingly recognised in social research and in relation to crime and criminal justice (Pain 1997: Codd 1998a). In this context, further research is needed to clarify the relevance of age and cohort to the benefits of self-help group membership. Whilst older women are more committed to traditional ideas of appropriate gender roles and behaviour than younger women whose attitudes are more liberal and egalitarian, the linkage between these gendered assumptions and self-help group membership would benefit from clarification (Witherspoon 1985: Finch & Mason 1993: Finch 1989: Pilcher, 1995: Pilcher, 1998: Bornat, Dimmock, Jones & Peace 1999).

[3] Further research is needed to develop an understanding of the experiences of other women, including lesbians, members of minority ethnic groups, and disabled women.

[4] See Codd (2000): Wendy, who was one of the interviewees, took carpet samples into the prison to discuss with her husband.

[5] The names of the prisons have been changed to Prison E and Prison M, for reasons of confidentiality.

[6] see Codd (2000) for further details of her circumstances.

[7] It is interesting to note, however, that after publishing a book on prisoners' partners (Girshick, 1996) the US-based academic Lori Girshick subsequently wrote a book on the experiences of women in prison (Girshick, 2000).