

Barred From Each Other: Why Normative Husbands Remain Married to Incarcerated Wives—An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

This study explores men's motivation and justification to remain married to their criminal, imprisoned wives. Using semistructured interviews and content-analysis, data were collected and analyzed from eight men who maintain stable marriage relationships with their incarcerated wives. Participants are normative men who describe incarceration as a challenge that enhances mutual responsibility and commitment. They exaggerate the extent to which their partners resemble archetypal romantic ideals. They use motivational accounts to explain the woman's criminal conduct, which is perceived as nonrelevant to her real identity. Physical separation and lack of physical intimacy are perceived as the major difficulties in maintaining their marriage relations. Length of imprisonment and marriage was found to be related to the decision whether to continue or terminate the relationships. Women-inmates' partners experience difficulties and use coping strategies very similar to those cited by other normative spouses facing lengthy separation.

Keywords

marriage, female inmates, normative spouses, incarceration, romantic accounts

Introduction

One of the most significant “pains of imprisonment” for female inmates is the separation from their husbands (Farkas & Rand, 1999; Severance, 2005a, 2005b). This

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disconcerting and frustrating deprivation often negatively affects women's ability to function as wives while in prison and after release (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; Pollock-Byrne, 1990). When a man is imprisoned, the marriage usually remains intact (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; Shapiro, 2003; Travis, McBride, & Solomon, 2003), whereas women incarceration often results in their abandonment by their partners and termination of their marriage (the term *marriage* in this study relates to formally wedded couples and common-law couples; Hairston, 1991; Sergin & Flora, 2005).

The abandonment of women prisoners by their spouses has been recognized by researchers and practitioners as a noteworthy component of women-inmates' subculture (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001) and a significant factor of their rehabilitation and reentry into society (Visher & Travis, 2003). However, relatively few studies have addressed this topic in depth (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; MacKenzie, Robinson, & Campbell, 1995; Sobel, 1982). Furthermore, close examination reveals that prisoners' marital relationships were addressed mainly from the inmates' point of view (Girshick, 1996; Hairston & Addams, 2001) and focused, almost exclusively, on male inmates (Accordino & Guernsey, 1998; Fishman, 1988; Girshick, 1992). In other words, the study of marital relationships between inmates and their spouses neglected women-inmates, and the few studies examining female inmates overlooked 50% of the individuals involved in these relationships and possibly affected by them—the husbands. Thus, in the preliminary research for this paper, we could not find a single empirical study that had focused on the rationale behind men's decision to terminate or maintain their marital relations with incarcerated wives nor on the impact of such a decision on their emotional and behavioral state. The aim of this exploratory study is to fill this literature lacuna and explore the motivations and justification of men to remain married to their criminal wives imprisoned in Neve Tirza prison—the sole prison facility for women in Israel. By examining these topics, the current study seeks to identify and analyze the significance of marital relationships to women-inmates' spouses and to describe the dynamics of marital relationships between men and incarcerated spouses, both from men's perspective, a step that previous research has not taken before.

The following sections will provide information about Neve Tirza prison as well as cover topics relating to marital stability among inmates and offender reentry, drawing on the criminological and correctional literatures.

The Neve Tirza Prison

Neve Tirza prison is the sole women's prison in Israel. The facility is located in the Central District of Israel, next to the city of Ramla in the Tel Aviv Metropolitan Area, the largest metropolitan in Israel. The prison houses 225 criminal (as opposed to security) inmates at full capacity. Yet, at the time of the research, it housed no more than 180 prisoners. Fifty-two percent of the inmates have been previously jailed, and the average incarceration period is 2.7 years ($SD = 2.70$). Approximately, 58% of the prison population are incarcerated for drug-related crimes (substance abuse, drug dealing, and possession), 16% are incarcerated for violent crimes, 16% for bodily crimes, 45% for fiscal crimes, and 13% for other offences (Einat & Chen, 2012).¹

The ethnic ratio of the prison population is 62% Jews and 36% Arabs, who are Israeli nationals, and 2% foreigners. The marital status of the inmates is 63% single ($n = 113$), 32% ($n = 58$) divorced, and 5% ($n = 9$) married (Einat & Chen, 2012)—comparable, albeit not identical, to U.S. and U.K. prisons. In U.S. prisons, 85% of all women in local jails (4% widowed, 13% separated, 20% divorced, 48% never married), 83% in state prisons (6% widowed, 10% separated, 20% divorced, 47% never married), and 71% in federal prisons (6% widowed, 21% separated, 10% divorced, 34% never married) are not married (Greenfeld, & Snell, 2000). In U.K. prisons, 24% of women-inmates are married or lived together with a spouse prior to their imprisonment, 63% are single, and 12% are either widowed, divorced, or separated (Hamlin & Lewis, 2000).

In Israel, 85% of the women-inmates are eligible for a monthly 30-min family visit and a 24/48-hr furlough. Fifteen percent of the prisoners, who are ineligible for home furloughs, are entitled to a monthly, 12-hr conjugal visit (Ben Avraham, 2012). Such furlough/visitation policy differs significantly from other parallel policies in Western and non-Western correctional facilities (for a comprehensive review, see Einat & Rabinovitz, in press).

Incarceration, Marital Stability, and Inmates' Reentry

Incarceration prevents meaningful interaction and limits physical and emotional connections among spouses (Booth, Johnson, White, & Edwards, 1984; Sergin & Flora, 2005), and often changes individuals in ways that make them incompatible with their partners (Comfort, 2008; Nurse, 2002; Rindfuss & Stephen, 1990). Physically separated spouses experience deficits of emotional interaction (Hill, 1988), which increases the number of disagreements and lowers marital satisfaction (Booth et al., 1984). In addition, these physical and mental processes negatively affect the emotional status of the inmates inside the prison (Faith, 1993; Jiang & Winfree, 2006; Thompson & Loper, 2005) and harm the likelihood of their successful rehabilitation and reentry into society after release (Gunnison & Helfgott, 2013; Horney, Osgood, & Marshall, 1995; Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998; Vaillant, 1995; Ward, 2001). Ironically, and irrespective of the negative impact of incarceration and separation from spouse on marital stability (Massoglia, Remster, & King, 2011) and of imprisonment and marital dissolution on prisoner reentry (Laub & Sampson, 2001), several enforcement systems raise various barriers that prevent partners (and families) from remaining in contact while a spouse is behind bars. For example, in the United States, more than 60% of state and 80% of federal inmates are imprisoned in facilities located more than 100 miles from home (Mumola, 2000). Wives (as well as other family members) may lack the time and means to travel these long distances with children on a regular basis (Christian, 2005; Christian, Mellow, & Thomas, 2006). Consequently, 57% of male state-prison inmates in the United States had never had a personal visit with their children since their admission to prison and only a quarter of male inmates with families reported weekly contact by phone or postal mail with loved ones (Mumola, 2000). Pelka-Slugocka and Slugocki (1980) qualitatively analyzed female inmates' viewpoints

regarding the relationship between incarceration and marital stability. Most of their research participants (86.3%, $n = 282$) maintained that imprisonment was the sole reason for the destruction of their marriage, whereas 13.7% ($n = 45$) asserted that it was the combination of husbands' personalities and their imprisonment. Moreover, the research revealed that the divorce generated feelings of despair and frustration among the female inmates, and harmed their rehabilitation and successful reentry into society. Hairston's (1991) review concluded that the stress and strain that male imprisonment imposes on family ties are due, mainly, to denial of sexual relations and inability to engage in and share day-to-day interactions and experiences. As time passes, the spouse at home visits the prisoner less frequently and many marriages fail. Similarly, Kiser (1991) found that most male prisoners perceived their separation from their families—alongside the realization that they themselves had brought undeserved hardship to their families—as the most difficult aspect of doing time. Therefore, encouraging inmates and families to maintain relationships would benefit most inmates, their families, and the prisons.

Bobbitt and Nelson (2004) portrayed the positive aspects of various family involvement programs (i.e., *La Bodega de la Familia* and the *Greenlight Family Reintegration Program*) on drug abuse, recidivism rates, family strength, avoidance of illegal activity, possession of jobs, and obtainment of stable housing. The researchers' main conclusion was that

families can be a powerful material and emotional force for positive change for members making the difficult transition from institutional life back to the community . . . and can significantly assist probation and parole officers in their quest to successfully reenter ex-criminals and ex-prisoners to the community. (Bobbitt & Nelson, 2004, p. 8)

In support of that conclusion, Horney et al. (1995) found that living with a normative wife limited significantly convicted felons' involvement in illegal behavior after release from prison.

The importance of marriage to recidivism rates and reentry was discussed in several cornerstone criminal theories. Hirschi's (1969) social control theory assumes that individuals are prevented from engaging in delinquency by four social bonds: involvement, attachment, commitment, and belief. When these bonds are weak, and the appropriate motivations rise, individuals are more likely to engage in delinquency. Individuals with high affection and respect (attachment) are less likely to engage in delinquency because they do not want to harm the approval of people they care about. In their age-graded theory of informal social control, Laub and Sampson (1993) emphasize the importance of quality and strength of current social ties (such as strong bonds of attachment to a partner) in adapting to life transitions more than the occurrence or timing of discrete life events. Hence, marriage by itself may not increase social control, but close emotional ties and mutual investment increase the social bond between individuals and can decrease criminal behavior. Although this issue has been a source of controversy (e.g., Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), Farrington and West (1995) also concluded that a stable marriage was nevertheless related to adult social

conformity, even in adults who were identified at high-risk as children. Whereas these theories emphasize emotional ties and support, the cognitive transformation theory focuses on the conscious transformation of one's identity in the process of desistance from crime (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002). Thus, through associations with a spouse who sees them as noncriminals, inmates are exposed to and receive reinforcement for socially approved attitudes and behaviors (Agnew, 2005) and are likely to receive support for not only avoiding illegal behavior but also developing normative self-perceptions.

In summary, identification of various problems faced by men married to incarcerated spouses with regard to the preservation of marital relationships may significantly promote the understanding of the impact of incarceration on marital continuation/dissolution and assist in developing effective policies directed at their maintenance. Such policies appear to be highly important due to the existence of a (correlative or casual) link between continuation of stable romantic relations among normative men and incarcerated spouses, reduction of the negative effects of various "pains of imprisonment" (Faith, 1993; Jiang & Winfree, 2006; Thompson & Loper, 2005), and inmates' successful reentry and desistance from crime after release (Horney et al., 1995; Ward, 2001).

Method

Research Tool

We used a flexible research design (Briggs, 1986). This methodology enables access to unpredicted subject matter and helps examine it from the perspective of the research sample (Silverman, 1993). Flexible design enabled us to incorporate unexpected contents, accommodating data as they emerged, thereby enhancing the quality and authenticity of the findings (Stake, 1995). The qualitative semistructured interview, based on guidelines that ensure that all interviewees are subject to similar stimuli and create a common basis for data analysis (Maruna, 2001), was found most appropriate for this study. To ensure reliability, all interviews were conducted by the researchers only. While the semistructured interview maintains a subjective framework, it enables the interviewer and the interviewee to correct misunderstandings or vagueness during the course of the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). This flexibility contributes to the quality and credibility of the interview (Briggs, 1986; Suchman & Jordan, 1990).

Each interview began with a similar open-ended broad question: "Could you please tell us about your romantic relationship with your spouse prior to her incarceration?" Only after the interviewees had answered the question, did we initiate a series of questions on the main difficulties of maintaining romantic relationships with an incarcerated spouse and the strategies used to do so: "How would you define your current romantic relationships with your spouse?" "How do you maintain romantic relationships with your incarcerated spouse?" "Does your spouse's conviction and incarceration affect your mutual romantic relations?" "What are/were the main romantic crises you experience/d with her and how do/did you deal with them?" "What is your main

motivation for maintaining marital relationships with your spouse; do you experience moments where you want to end your marriage?" "Do you experience any regrets as regards to your decision to maintain marital relationships with your spouse?"

Participants

Out of 180 prisoners incarcerated in the single Israeli female incarceration facility, Neve Tirza Prison, only 9 (5%, of whom 8%-4.4% agreed to take part in the study) maintained stable romantic relationships longer than 3 years. One male partner declined to participate in the study after being informed by his incarcerated spouse about the purpose of the study and its procedures, resulting in a final sample size of eight men and a response rate of 88.9%. Thus, the research sample includes almost all partners of female inmates who maintained stable romantic relationships for 3 years and more in Israel.

The participants were eight husbands—six were married to prisoners and two kept stable, romantic—although nonmarital—relations with their imprisoned spouses for more than 3 years (years of relationships range—3.5-35; $M = 17.06$, $SD = 10.14$, median = 17.5). Hence, the latter were acknowledged by the Israeli Prison Service (IPS) and by the Israeli ruling as common-law husbands (Israel Prison Service, 2012). Six of the eight couples had mutual children (compared with 61% of the prison population; Einat & Chen, 2012).

The ethnic distribution of the research sample (as well as the participants' incarcerated spouses) was 75% ($n = 6$) Jews and 25% ($n = 2$) Muslim-Arab, all of whom were Israeli citizens. This ratio resembles the ethnic distribution of the general Israeli female inmates' population (62% Jews; 36% Arabs; Einat & Chen, 2012). Participants had a mean of 9.6 years of education ($SD = 1.4$); the mean age of the participants is 48.9 ($SD = 9.0$). The distribution of the socioeconomic status of the research participants—as perceived and described by them—is high (37.5%; $n = 3$), moderate (12.5%; $n = 1$), and poor (50%; $n = 4$). Eighty-seven percent ($n = 7$) of the participants had no criminal record and 12.5% ($n = 1$) have been jailed. All participants were legally employed and maintained secured normative housekeeping. The women whose husbands we interviewed have been incarcerated for 21.8 months (M ; $SD = 9.42$, compared with 27 months in the general prison population) and convicted to serve 41.4 months (M ; $SD = 43.1$, compared with 31 of the prison population; *Ibid*). Twenty-five percent of the women have been previously jailed (compared with 52% of the prison population; *Ibid*), and 25% were drug abusers (as opposed to 65% drug abusing inmates out of Neve Tirza Prison's general population). Hence the women whose husbands participated in this study differ substantially from the general female inmate population. Demographic background data for participants and their incarcerated wives are detailed in Table 1.

Procedure

The first stage of the research was conducted at Neve Tirza prison—a maximum-security prison built and run to provide round-the-clock surveillance (Einat & Chen,

Table 1. Participants' and Inmates' Socio-Demographic Profile.

Participant (age)	Education (years)	Criminal records			Mutual children	Inmates' drug use	Inmates' months of incarceration in time of study (and total sentence)	Type of inmates' offense
		Participant	Spouse (prior to present sentence)	Years of marriage/common-law relationships				
A (53)	10	0	0	25	1	No	32 (out of 144)	Attempted murder
C (37)	9	2	1	3.5	1	Yes	13 (out of 18)	Possession and use of drugs
Y (60)	12	0	0	35	3	No	36 (out of 48)	Fraud
S (53)	11	0	0	20	2	No	20 (out of 27)	Embezzlement
D (34)	8	0	0	9 (common-law)	0	No	24 (out of 37)	Fraud
Z (55)	8	0	0	20	0	No	26 (out of 29)	Embezzlement
I (47)	10	0	0	15	2	No	11 (out of 14)	Embezzlement
T (52)	9	0	0	8 (common-law)	1	Yes	12 (out of 14)	Possession of drugs

2010). The researchers requested the assistance of the staff in notifying all eligible females about the study. The nine inmates were met by the researchers at the prison facility, received brief description of the research objectives, and were asked to request their spouses to participate in the study. In the week that followed, the researchers contacted all eight spouses who agreed to participate, briefly explained the objectives of the study, and scheduled personal meetings. The study was approved by the Ethics Review Board at the Department of Criminology, Bar-Ilan University and by the Research Authority of IPS. The confidentiality of the interviews was ensured, and all participants signed an official informed consent form, provided by the university's ethics committee.

In the 2 months that followed, in-depth semistructured interviews with the eight participants were held in their apartments, each session lasting approximately 4 hr. All interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the interviewees.

The findings underwent content analysis (Pogrebin, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Weber, 2001). Because the interviews were transcribed verbatim simultaneously with data collection, categorization of themes were developed as the interviews proceeded and the resulting transcriptions were completed (Bradley, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Neuendorf, 2001; Tesch, 1990).

Reliability and Validity

To ensure reliability and validity (trustworthiness) of the findings (Golafshani, 2003) and, thus, maximize the quality of the research (Stenbacka, 2001), two methods were exploited:

1. Engagement of multiple methods—The researchers gathered data by occupying two approaches: interviews and recording (Johnson, 1997) and

2. Triangulation (in accordance with the Constructivist paradigm)—Data were interpreted and analyzed by the researchers at different times and location (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Findings

Content analysis revealed five major themes about marital relationships between normative men and their incarcerated wives: (a) perceptions of marital relations with incarcerated wife, (b) perceptions of wife's criminal conduct, (c) difficulties in marital relationships with incarcerated wife, (d) preconditions for the continuation of marital relationships between normative men and incarcerated wives, (e) ways of preserving the marital relationships with incarcerated wives.

Perceptions of Marital Relations With Incarcerated Wives

Commitment and motivation. Research has repeatedly shown that commitment and motivation are the basis for a good and stable marriage, one which successfully tackles situations of crisis (Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Wiloughby, 2004; Mace, 1982; Sabatelli & Cecil-Pigo, 1985). Commitment and motivation, which reflect the mutual responsibility of the couple to the preservation of their marriage (Clements & Swensen, 2000), are also identified as the best predictors of the quality of such relationships (Sabatelli & Cecil-Pigo, 1985; Surra, Arizzi, & Asmussen, 1988). Similarly, the findings of the present study indicate that the incarceration of their partners led the participants to recognize their obligation to the women and to their marital relations:

All in all, it [the wife's imprisonment] connected us together as a couple and united our family. That's the way we behave in our family—when there's a problem we become united. (I., a 47-year-old Muslim husband, married to an inmate sentenced to 14 months)

During the incarceration, I felt as if I become a part of her, as if we became one. During this time, our romantic relationships grew stronger and stronger. We went through hell and it made us stronger. It intensified our love. (D., a 34-year-old Jewish common-law husband, romantically-related to a prisoner sentenced to a period of 3.1 years)

We overcame all our problems together, and we will overcome all obstacles, including the incarceration, together. It [the imprisonment] even made our romantic relationships grow stronger, made us show how committed we are to each other. (C., a 37-year-old Muslim husband, married to an inmate sentenced to 1.5 years prison)

Nonetheless, and somewhat in contrast to these statements, our findings also suggest that the imprisonment of female spouses generated major dyadic crisis, which, at least temporarily, destabilized the romantic relations. Specifically, all participants noted that the incarceration raised frustration, tension, and lack of trust, which led them to consider and reconsider their motivation to preserve the marital relationship:

There was a lot of tension and pressure the moment they arrested her. We had lots of arguments, did a lot of shouting and cursing. (T., a 52-year-old Jewish husband, married to an ex-addict sentenced to prison for 14 months)

I love her very much and can't deny it. But her arrest caused a lot of chaos between us, a lot of stress and arguments. I even remember a moment where I wanted to hit her. (A., a 53-year-old Jewish husband, married to an inmate sentenced to a period of 12 years)

I. expressed a similar viewpoint:

I was quiet disappointed and I stopped trusting her. The fact that she did not share her behavior with me was more disappointing than the acts themselves. I can't say that she betrayed me . . . after all she did it for the sake of both of us so it's not a matter of unfaithfulness. But she didn't tell me right at the beginning, and this is a shame.

Love. Love is one of the most significant elements in the preservation of and long-lasting marital relationships (Mackey & O'Brien, 1995; Sharlin, 1996) and is attributed greatly to successfully dealing with short- or long-term romantic crises. Love is also a meaningful element in partners' mutual acceptance and support (Meeks, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1998; Sokolski & Hendrick, 1999). In accordance, the findings of this study reveal that the participants perceive love as a noteworthy character of their marriage and an important factor in their decision to preserve marriage relationships:

You've got to understand, what we're talking about here is great love. That's the whole story. The idea of leaving her never came up. It was never mentioned or discussed. Our romantic cell could never be dismantled just because one of us did something wrong. Separation is totally irrelevant. [After exposing her crime] I never felt as if I don't love her or want her less. It's all a matter of pure commitment—built on pure love—and this is something you do not abandon. (A., 53)

I decided to stay with her for two reasons: great love and great commitment. I swear that [after her incarceration] it never crossed my mind to leave her. I'm with her until the end. Our love is priceless. I don't care for other women; I'm just waiting for her. I always knew from the second I met her that we will be together until death. I will not desert her regardless of the situation. She is the best thing that ever happened to me. (D., 34)

I told myself, you're not going to leave her no matter what happens. We've been together since we're 17, we love each other a lot and we're committed to each other. Let it be clear—I decided to stay with her just because of us, and not because of the kids and the house. I love her very much. She is the love of my life and my best friend and I'm staying with her no matter what happens. (S., a 53-year-old Jewish husband, married to an inmate sentenced to a period of 27 months in prison, continues in the same vein)

Interestingly, in addition to the decisive description of all research participants of their marriage in terms of love and devotion, six participants related to these relations and their spouses in adorable and admirable ways. These participants perceive their women partners as being unique and exceptional, each a veritable *femme fatale*, and describe the relations with them in various flattering and admirable ways.

She is everything to me. When I look to the right—I see her. When I look to the left—I see her. I see her and no one else but her. I admire her. She is pure gold. There is no one like her in the world and that's why our love is so strong. (Y., a 60-year-old Jewish husband, married to a first-timer sentenced to 4 years)

And this sentiment is echoed in two other statements:

I admire my wife. She is bigger than life itself. I can only thank God that she's mine/that I have her. (S., 53)

She is a very special woman and a friend. She is special, not like any other woman. (A., 53)

While these quotations illustrate the high appreciation and admiration of the women spouses, the next ones portray the specific personal characteristics that make the women so admirable:

She is the most clever, intelligent, and lovely woman in the world. She is energetic, active, and dominant. An amazing woman. (T., 52)

She is a good soul. She is warm and emphatic, [mentally] stronger than any man I know, very reliable. She has so many virtues: understandable, intelligent, supportive, funny, and very ethical. (D., 34)

She is [mentally] a very strong woman. She is remarkable . . . outstanding. She knows everything—regardless of the fact that she's in prison. (Z., 55)

She is a good human-being: She takes care of everyone . . . pays attention to everyone . . . she loves to help people. (A., 53)

All the participants love and admire their partners and perceive them as an attached and inherent part of their past, present, and future married lives. These statements clearly demonstrate that love is perceived as an essential component for the preservation of good marital relations—in general and in times of crisis.

Moreover, regardless of female-spouses' criminal conduct and imprisonment, most partners describe them as ideal and wonderful women, using words of admiration. As such, continuation of the marriage to them may be perceived as an obvious and rational act.

Perception of Wife's Criminal Conduct

Numerous studies have argued that most female inmates are abandoned by their male counterparts, be it because of the forced disengagement and/or the shame in their "betrayal" of the law, their families, and their "traditional gender roles" (McGowan & Blumenthal, 1978; Stanton, 1980). Evidently, such desertion is solely dependent on men's discretion, irrespective of the female-inmates' desires (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; Pelka-Slugocka & Slugocki, 1980).

Somewhat in contrast to these studies, our findings indicate that although all participants acknowledge that their spouses committed various criminal offenses and morally reject it, they do not perceive them and their criminal conduct as shameful and disgraceful. Specifically, the participants (deliberately or unintentionally) describe their spouses' criminal behaviors in a forgiving manner, explaining it as a "sad tale" (i.e., an outcome of harsh and complicated life-story; Scott & Lyman, 1968). By doing so, they invalidate the female inmates' moral and criminal responsibilities, detach their criminal conduct from their character, and defend their dignity and importance:

My wife did not do all these things. She meant to do no bad. I know that she doesn't act out of evilness . . . she is a good person . . . a victim of herself. She didn't really want to kill me . . . It is not her fault . . . her friends are bad . . . they pushed her to act this way. I can't believe and I don't believe that she did what she did independently. (A., 53)

They [the police] found some financial inconsistencies in the bank and instead of exposing the truth and framing her brother, she took responsibility. I knew she did everything in order to save her brother. She is a good soul and her family members abused her. All she did was done in order to protect her family and not because she's bad. She is a good soul . . . a queen who made a mistake in order to save her brother. (S., 53)

She did not take it [the money] for herself . . . She gave it to her family. She has a big family and someone had to take care of them. Looking back, I think she had no choice. (I., 47)

Six participants use neutralization techniques (Sykes & Matza, 1957) to support their contention of their partners' morality. The men resort to "denial of injury" and "denial of responsibility." In their simplest form, the former technique suggests that this was a no-victim crime and the latter proposes that the criminal actions were caused by forces beyond the perpetrator's control (Enticott, 2011).

After all, what did she do? What crime had she committed? It's not that she enjoyed the money. It's not that she is walking around wearing lots of jewelry. She's a modest individual and all in all she did not take big sums of money. Maybe they [justice system] can define her as an offender, but for me she is P., my beloved wife, and that's that. (C., 37)

In fact, what did she do? She got involved with the gray market, something that could happen to anyone, and they forced her to do what she did. It could happen to me, to you, to anyone. She made a mistake but she is only human. But it's not a crime and she's not a criminal. (Z., 55)

No! My wife is not a criminal. She didn't break the law. In my opinion, all she did was make a single mistake. The fact that she's in prison does not make her a criminal. (I., 47)

Difficulties in Marital Relationships With Incarcerated Wife

Numerous studies have repeatedly argued that three factors underlie most crises in marital relationships: diminished (or extinguished) love, reduced (or lack of) intimacy, and weakened (or nonexistent) commitment (Mace, 1982; Sabatelli & Cecil-Pigo, 1985; Sharlin, 1996; Sokolski & Hendrick, 1999; Surra et al., 1988). Our findings deviate somewhat and indicate that regardless of lengths of imprisonment and/or marriage, the major difficulty experienced by most ($n = 7$) participants relates to lack of physical intimacy. All other inconveniences and difficulties characterizing marital relationships in crisis (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001) appear to be irrelevant to the interviewees:

During the last six months [time of spouse's incarceration] everything has obviously changed, because of her physical absence. We meet once a month [conjugal visits] and it is not enough. I miss the physical intimacy, the physical togetherness. I miss it. It is difficult. I currently and practically live with no romantic relationships. I miss her body and her smell. (I., 47)

I miss her smell. She has amazing smells, nothing I experienced with other women. I miss having sex with her. I miss being hugged by her, feeling her head on my shoulder. (D., 34)

[You can't believe] how much I miss her. I miss her hugs, I miss the physical contact with her, I miss going to sleep with her. (T., 52)

An additional difficulty, raised by six (75%) participants, relates to lack of support by family members, friends, and acquaintances. In some cases, participants report that people totally ignored or terminated relationships after the incarceration. The participants view this kind of behavior as an outcome of shame and/or disappointment:

It wasn't easy with my family [because] they wanted me to divorce her. They didn't understand how she could do that and didn't accept her. They were really furious. They decided to break off relations with her. My reaction, by the way, was to completely break off my relations with my family. (Z., 55)

Some family members and all my neighbors told me that I should be ashamed of my wife. In school, my children suffered daily harassments from other children, from the teachers, and even from the headmaster. All of them wanted us to forget her as if she were dead. They think she should be "dead" . . . deleted! (S., 53)

Two very close friends of ours were informed [by us] about the trial and the offense. It was very embarrassing. Yet, their reaction was even more embarrassing and made us want to bury ourselves deep in the ground: In the most difficult moment of our life, they deserted us. They

had a very dramatic discussion with my wife on the phone with lots of shouting and yelling and then, decided to stop talking to us. These people are not human-beings. You cannot call them friends. (Y., 60)

None of her friends called or asked us how we feel. None of our friends came to visit her in prison. Is this friendship? This is disgusting. It's very difficult to live with the notion that suddenly, when you are in trouble, everyone disappears. Suddenly, no-one wishes to be your friend. (A., 53)

Preconditions for the Continuation of Marital Relationships Between Normative Men and Incarcerated Wives

All research participants have pointed out two central factors that could have had a negative effect on the marriage, perhaps even leading to their termination of this relationship: (a) length of prison sentence and (b) length of marriage prior to the imprisonment.

Length of prison sentence. Most ($n = 7$) participants assert that because their spouses were sentenced to relatively short terms of imprisonment, they did not consider leaving them. However, they also state that if the sentence had been longer, they may have considered terminating the marriage and finding a new relationship:

I don't know what would have happened to our romantic relationships if she'd been imprisoned for, let's say, 20 years. I believe I would have separated from her. It's like disappearing from someone's life for a very long time. Time is definitely a significant factor. (I., 47)

On the day of the verdict, when the judge said "4 years," I felt as if my hands were freezing. If it were 10 or 15 years, then I'd probably acted differently. I doubt if I would have stayed with her . . . with all due respect to love. (Z., 55)

These findings strengthen previous findings (Holt & Miller, 1972; Walker, 1983) revealing a decline in visiting patterns among wives of long-term prisoners compared with wives of short-termers, as well as deterioration of marriages over long periods of incarceration.

Length of marriage prior to incarceration. The men's decision to remain married was determined, to a significant degree, to the duration of the relationship prior to the woman's incarceration. Our findings show that all participants perceive the total length of the relationship prior to spouses' incarceration to be positively correlated to their decision to remain married:

If we'd been married for a year and then she'd begun committing crimes, I would have separated from her. But now, after so many years of marriage, there is no way I would leave

her. The length of our romantic relationships is a critical factor. That's why I couldn't see any option of leaving her. (I., 47)

Please don't forget that I didn't meet her yesterday, we've been together for almost 10 years. We went through many things together. It's a lot of time and obviously, I won't leave her. (D., 34)

Ways of Preserving the Marital Relationships With Incarcerated Wives

All participants ($N = 8$) report that to deal with their pain of separation and maintain marital relationships, they use two tactics—frequent phone calls and making all visits that the prison allows.

The men receive four or five phone calls a day from their imprisoned partners. Both partners await these phone calls and cherish them, as the frequent and continuous delivery and receipt of information create a semblance of the exchange of information that occurs when living under the same roof. Symbolically, the ongoing communication, and hearing the partner's voice, signifies a continuation of everyday [dyadic and nondyadic] normal life:

We constantly maintain telephone contact. I'm like a child, again and again waiting for her phone calls. It doesn't matter whether I am with friends, at work, or at a restaurant, I wait for her to call me all the time. She calls me three times a day, in the morning, noon, and in the evening hours. (T., 52)

We talk on the phone all day and every day. We actually do everything through the phone: We talk about her feelings, what happened to her in prison during the day, what happened to me at work, and how we miss each other. That's basically it. (D., 34)

I love it when she calls me. I look forward to her phone calls. That's how I really know what is going on with her in prison. (S., 53)

The second tactic is routinely coming for the bi-weekly 30-min visits to which all prisoners are entitled, whether or not they are also allowed home furloughs (IPS, 2012). The visits take place on Saturdays and Sundays, and all families gather in a relatively small, closed, and sealed space. There are open visits in which the inmate can be in physical touch with the visitors and closed visits, conducted through an armored-glass division. All participants welcome the visits, perceive them as the best temporary way of realizing their marriage, and look forward to them:

I visit her every two weeks. Up to now, I haven't missed a single visit. In addition [to the bi-weekly visits], we talk on the phone four times a day. I wait for these calls because I love talking to her. We talk about her day, about my day, about things that happened to both of us at work. (A., 53)

I visit her every two weeks, sometimes with her parents and sometimes alone. We sit together, talk, laugh, and try to make use of our [joint] time. (Y., 60)

I come to visit her every two weeks. I never missed a single visit. Occasionally, I bring our son with me. We wake up at 5 in the morning and drive 4 hours just to see her for 30 minutes. And then we have to drive 4 hours back. But I wouldn't have missed it for the world. (C., 37)

Discussion

Incarceration affects all aspects of family life, including the health and well-being of inmates' spouses and children, and the maintenance of family attachments. It can also lead to marital dissolution (Comfort, 2007; Goffman, 2009; Lopoo & Western, 2005; Western & Wildeman, 2009). Most studies concerning the impact of imprisonment on inmates' marriages have focused on the effects of men's incarceration (Chui, 2010; Wildeman, Schnittker, & Turney, 2012), whereas only scarce attention directed at the effects of women's incarceration on their families. This appears to be quiet odd [and disturbing] in light of research findings showing that most incarcerations of men rarely result in marital breakup (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; Travis et al., 2003), whereas most women sentenced to prison are abandoned by their partners and their pre-incarceration romantic relations are terminated (Hairston & Addams, 2001; Sergin & Flora, 2005).

The current study provides important information about the characteristics, motivation, and justifications of men to preserve marital relationships with their imprisoned spouses. Out of 180 prisoners incarcerated in the single Israeli female incarceration facility, Neve Tirza Prison, only nine (of whom eight took part in the study) maintain stable marital relationships longer than 3 years. All these inmates (but 1) had no criminal records prior to current imprisonment and were sentenced to a relatively short time of incarceration ($M = 21.8$ months). Interestingly, all spouses (but one) have no prior criminal record and therefore can be considered normative (i.e., law-abiding).

The interviews yielded five overarching themes: (a) perceptions of marital relations with incarcerated spouse, (b) perceptions of wife's criminal conduct, (c) difficulties in marital relationships with incarcerated spouse, (d) preconditions for the continuation of marital relationships between normative men and incarcerated wives, (e) and ways of preserving the marital relationships with incarcerated partners.

The discovery that the wife had committed a crime, the following arrest, initial stages of incarceration, and mainly the concealment of the crime from family and community members are experienced as stressful crises. Yet, participants describe incarceration as a challenge that brought the couple even closer, enhancing mutual responsibility and commitment.

This study elucidates the shock and devastation that comes with the discovery that one's wife had committed a crime, and then with the following arrest and the initial stages of incarceration. The psychosocial effects of finding out about the crime linger well beyond the time of initial shock. Thus, although four (50%) of the participants were interviewed 2 years or more after they had first learned of their wives' criminal actions, they still referred to the great difficulty of discovery and its long-lasting negative impact. Specifically, all participants testified that the incarceration of their female partners raised frustrations, tension, and lack of trust that led them to reconsider their

motivation to preserve their marriages. They clearly described the disruption the revelation caused and the resulting strain on their marital relationship.

Although the romantic relationship was undoubtedly stressed by the discovery of the crime, the arrest, and the incarceration, all participants seemed to have had the resources to meet this challenge or found appropriate support to do so. Our findings indicate that the incarceration led the husbands to recognize their obligation to their partners and to their relationship. Similarly, clinical experience and several empirical studies suggest that some couples facing hospitalization, critical illness, or serious injuries perceive their marital relationship to be improved since the medical episode (e. g., Dorval et al., 2005). The trauma often creates a powerful intensified family bond and feeling of mutual empathy (Eggenberger & Nelms, 2007) and intensifies the desire to protect each other (Burr, 1998). Whether this kind of interaction may stabilize and strengthen a relationship after arrest is to be determined in future research.

The participants use several cognitive and emotional devices to help them overcome the double difficulty of explaining and coming to terms with their wives' criminal acts, and thereby maintaining their marriage. The first device is the rose-colored prism through which the men were able to see their wives as they did when the romance was young. Through this prism, the men refracted and embellished their partners' characteristics, describing them as archetypal ideals. This finding reveals that the criminal act and the incarceration promoted positive bias typically seen in early stages of intense romantic love (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a, 1996b), although the couples had been in very long and stable relationships ($M = 17.1$ years). The men perceived their partners as unique and exceptional, prototypes of *femme fatale*, and described the relations with them in flattering and admiring terms. Romantic love is often driven by strong emotions and wishful thinking—as “painted blind,” to use Shakespeare's phrase (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010). After “talking the talk” of the early, romantic falling-in-love part of the relationship, “walking the walk”—maintaining a long-term and enduring commitments—seems to be powered by strong biologically based attachment emotions (Maner, Rouby, & Gonzaga, 2008). The device used by the participants, the glorification of their partners, reverts to patterns of the time of first love and courtship, not typical of long-term relationships. Our findings reveal that in times of extreme crisis, this “chivalrous” behavior reappears, even after many years of marriage.

A second device for maintaining romantic relationships with incarcerated spouses is expressing high commitment and devotion. The need for close romantic relationships appears to be exacerbated by confrontations with the fragility of life (Von Fremd, 2006). Incarceration might be perceived as life threatening, as it imposes multiple mental and physical threats to the self (Goffman, 1961). Studies drawing on the terror management theory (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991) indicate that reminders of death increase people's sense of love and closeness to their romantic partners (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003), commitment (i.e., dedication, devotion), desire for intimacy, and love for a romantic partner (Adams & Jones, 1997; Florian, Mikulincer, & Hirschberger, 2002).

A third and final mechanism used by participants to maintain their marital relationships with their incarcerated spouses is to explain their wives' criminal acts by motivational accounts (Scott & Lyman, 1968; Sykes & Matza, 1957). Normative men describe their wives' crimes in ways that allow them to minimize guilt, maintain a positive self- and partner-image, and deflect potential stigma. Thus, normative men's narratives regarding spouses' crimes are similar to offender narratives that may be best understood as social constructions of the criminal event and of their own social and self-identities, instead of fact-based records of what really happened (Bruner, 2003; McAdams, 1985). Although condemning their spouses' illicit behavior, participants used rhetorical and linguistic constructions that made the partners' indiscretions seem inoffensive, reasonable, routine, and sometimes even acceptable. By referring to various excuses and justifications and by using neutralization techniques, participants attempted to construct identities of spouses as being decent, respectable women regardless of their actions. Interestingly, these accounts often drew on themes that described their spouses' actions as consistent with gender expectations and thus emphasized their spouses' femininity. Similar to the justifications used by the men in the current study, female offenders cited in other studies used defense of necessity, denial of responsibility, and appeal to higher loyalties at much higher frequency than male offenders. The women claimed that their actions were borne out of necessity, caused by forces beyond their control or to care for, support, or prevent suffering from family and friends, attesting to the fact that gender constrains the way individuals describe their own crimes (Klenowski, Copes, & Mullins, 2011).

Participants view their partners' criminal acts as not related to their "real character." Maruna (2001) argued that to enable released prisoners to make the transition to the community and adjust to life outside of prison, they are required to consciously reformulate their identities. He observed that those who desisted from crime tended to describe redemption narratives in which they viewed their "real selves" as noncriminals and their previous criminal behaviors as the result of mistakes, bad choices, and negative influences. They separated and differentiated themselves from their previous mistakes, crafted a moral tale from their experiences, and expressed a desire to use their experiences to help others (Bahr, Harris, Fisher, & Armstrong, 2010). The cognitive transformation theory focuses on the conscious transformation of one's identity in the process of desistance from crime (Giordano et al., 2002). Thus, through associations with a spouse who sees them as noncriminals, inmates are exposed to and receive reinforcement for particular attitudes and behaviors (Agnew, 2005), and are likely to receive support for not only avoiding illegal behavior but also developing normative self-perceptions.

Increasingly, studies are considering the consequences of incarceration for family life, almost always documenting negative consequences. Incarceration often involves sharply diminished socioeconomic resources, both during and after a sentence (Geller, Garfinkel, & Western, 2011; Swisher & Waller, 2008). Incarceration also involves considerable stigma (Braman, 2004). Inmates' spouses also suffer from emotional and adjustment problems (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999), reduction in spousal involvement with their children, change in family roles, increased household responsibility, and

increased burnout and depression (Comfort, 2007, 2008; Nurse, 2002; Swisher & Waller, 2008; Turney & Wildeman, 2012). These difficulties were found in qualitative as well as quantitative studies based on male inmates and female spouses. None of these difficulties were mentioned by the current research participants, who referred to physical separation and lack of physical intimacy as *the major difficulty* in maintaining the romantic relationship with incarcerated female spouses. All other inconveniences and difficulties, characterizing marital relationships in crisis (Huston et al., 2001), or relationships between female spouses of incarcerated males, appear to be irrelevant to the interviewees.

The participants of the current study emphasize the importance of physical contact with the inmates, both explicitly and indirectly, when referring to prerequisites to the continuation of the relationships (the duration of the separation) and to ways of preserving the relationships. Out of the three means of maintaining contact available to the normative men and their incarcerated spouses (i.e., visits, letters, and phone calls; see also Boswell & Wedge, 2002; Chui, 2010), the participants adhere to a routine of frequent phone calls and visits, which provides interaction opportunities (Hill, 1988), involvement, and information exchange that enable a gradual accommodation to subtle changes in both partners—inside and outside the prison.

Finally, our findings indicate that in some respects, inmates' partners experience difficulties and use coping strategies very similar to those cited by spouses facing lengthy separation due to military deployment or life-threatening illness. Identifying commonalities between the problems faced by inmates' spouses and those faced by normative individuals in other social situations might prove fruitful for understanding the impact of ongoing incarceration on marital dissolution and also for developing effective policies directed at reintegration. Almost 40% of marriages of incarcerated males dissolve *after* the incarceration period ended, suggesting that an individual's release from prison and reintroduction to home life produces additional stressors that are detrimental to a marriage (Massoglia et al., 2011). In this line of reasoning, one should acknowledge that reentry is not an event but a process (Maruna & Toch, 2005). Many released prisoners (as well as probationers and parolees) experience various setbacks—such as difficulty in obtaining employment, acquiring housing (Delgado, 2012; Rodriguez & Brown, 2003), stigmatization (Tewksbury, 2005), substance abuse and mental health problems (Petersilia, 2003), and loss of social standings in their communities (Gunnison & Helfgott, 2013)—during the process and may violate parole. For example, 67.5% of ex-prisoners, 43% of felony probationers, and 62% of parolees in the United States were rearrested within 3 years (Beck & Shipley, 1989; Gunnison & Helfgott, 2013; Langan & Cunniff, 1992; Langan & Levin, 2002). Consequently, many researchers and correctional administrators embraced the concept that offender reentry could (and should) be promoted by appropriate support and treatment (Bahr et al., 2010; La Vigne, Visher, & Castro, 2004).

One factor that could contribute to successful adaptation to normative life and reentry is stable marital and familial relations (Kurlychek & Kempinen, 2006). In line with the social control theory, informal monitoring by a spouse and, more significantly, maintenance of cohesive marriage have a preventive effect on crime and assist

individuals in desisting from drug use and other delinquent behaviors (Laub et al., 1998; Laub & Sampson, 2001; Vaillant, 1995). The current study provides a preliminary look at the experiences of men who share long and stable romantic relationships with incarcerated women. They report using coping strategies and describe major difficulties and preconditions, all of which allow a unique insight into spouses' perceptions and motivations to preserve these relationships. Such insights may point to future research direction as well as serve to develop effective policies directed at maintaining stable, long-term romantic relationships with female inmates and, possibly, reducing their chance of recommitting crimes and enhancing successful rehabilitation.

Study Limitations

The limitations of this study are three. One limitation of the study was sample size. Although the study was carried out on almost all husbands or common-law partners maintaining stable romantic relationships with female inmates in Israel for 3 years and more (89% of all the relevant research population), it comprises of only eight participants. Moreover, the female inmates whose spouses were interviewed in this research differ from the general Israeli female inmate population (in length of prison sentence, being parents, drug abuse disorder, etc.). Hence, *generalizability of the research findings is limited*. A larger sample, and studies in various cultural settings, could provide a more universal picture. These studies should include, for example, the relationships between preservation of marital relations and religion, parenthood, and various demographic variables (for example, age of spouses, level of inmates' and spouses' education, etc.). Another limitation of the study was data validity. Data collection was used by qualitative semistructured interviews. Several studies have indicated that such a method could result in under- or over-reporting, bringing into question the credibility of the testimonies (Greer, 2000; Hensley, Tewksbury, & Koscheski, 2002). Therefore, the use of other data-collection techniques—such as ethnographic observation, written self-reports, and interviewing incarcerated spouses—may facilitate detailed or additional data, which have not been obtained by this study. Yet, another limitation of the study was lack of comparison group: This study did not include normative participants who separated from their incarcerated wives while they were serving their prison sentences. Thus, we cannot be certain that the themes found in the current research are not relevant to men who did separate from their imprisoned spouses. Our findings provide a starting point to several future studies, with different design, sampling, and data collection methods, including changes in themes found over time via follow-up of the current study participants after reentry; comparing husbands' and wives' perspectives in couples who stay together and comparing themes of husbands of incarcerated wives with those of wives of incarcerated husbands. A comparative study that compares themes of husbands who remained married with husbands who divorced their incarcerated wives is yet another step needed for understanding marital relationships behind bars.

Despite these limitations, the results of this preliminary and exploratory study add to the existing knowledge base about the difficulties of normative men to preserve

marital relationships with their imprisoned wives and their motivations and justifications to do so. This may provide academicians, criminologists, and prison authorities with a better understanding of such relationship, which are often perceived as significantly decreasing the negative effects of various pains of imprisonment and promoting desistance from crime after release.

As a final note, the research into female-prison romantic relationships with husbands or common-law partners in Israel and worldwide is currently insufficient and fails to adequately address central issues. Thus, as mentioned previously, future research is needed to examine various aspects of such relationships.

Policy Implications

The results of the study reveal that all normative men married to incarcerated spouses suffer from similar difficulties in their effort to preserve marital relationships. Although it could be hypothesized that as a group, these men differ significantly from most of their peers who abandoned their spouses after their imprisonment, the nature of the difficulties represents a challenge to correctional, criminal justice, and social-welfare practitioners and administrators. Therefore, to address the problems and the unique needs of this particular group, and to improve and develop services within and outside the prison service system, we can suggest several recommendations. The first is to reconsider visitation policy. Normative men and their incarcerated spouses, ineligible for home furloughs, should be warranted more conjugal visits. Simultaneously, imprisoned married women, eligible for home leaves, should be entitled to longer and more frequent furloughs. Such visitation/furlough policy would assist in providing relatively stable and reasonable marital relations. Second, this study emphasizes the need to bring marital health to the forefront; a psycho-educational component could be incorporated into the regularly scheduled rehabilitation programs in prison. Couples consisting of normative men and imprisoned women should receive intensive dyadic and familial support. Such assistance and therapy appear to be particularly relevant in cases where the women are incarcerated for long prison terms, when the length of marriage prior to incarceration is relatively short, and in the early stages of imprisonment—when the men are most likely to terminate the marital relations. With enough studies of this nature, policies may eventually be formed that mandate marital therapy training for counselors in prisons and easier access to marital strength initiatives for inmates and spouses on all prisons and within the community as well.

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Note

1. The total number of inmates under “type of crime” exceeds the prison population because some prisoners have committed multiple offenses.

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