

How prisoners and their partners experience the maintenance of their relationship during a prison sentence

Abstract

Research shows that intimate relationships, and their maintenance via prison visits, have a positive impact on factors associated with prisoner well-being and reduced likelihood of recidivism. It is therefore in the interest of corrections, government, and wider society to enable prisoners to maintain healthy relationships with their family and intimate partners throughout their prison sentence. Despite this evidence, little is known about how prisoners experience the maintenance of a significant intimate relationship in prison. This study aims to explore heterosexual couples' experiences in maintaining their well-established intimate relationships, whilst the male partner is incarcerated. Four main themes were identified, namely: how they experienced *having a special connection* that they were motivated to maintain; *coping with challenges and threats* to that connection; *developing reciprocal behaviours* to meet those challenges; and *maintaining a belief in the future*. Implications for how the relational context of rehabilitation can best be supported is considered.

Introduction

Current methodologically sound evidence suggests that strong intimate relationships improve wellbeing and reduce the likelihood of antisocial behaviour, including criminal recidivism on release into the community. For example, longitudinal research with 500 young men (Sampson, Laub, & Wimer, 2006) found that marriage was associated with a 35% reduction in the odds of engagement in crime via four mechanisms: social obligations that increase the costs of crime; changes in associations and routines; exertion of direct social control by the partner; and changes in self-identity. Indeed, the positive effects of prison visits

in maintaining relationships and improving later recidivism on release into the community has been noted (De Claire & Dixon, 2015). However, not all research has found positive effects. Rhule-Louie and McMahon, (2007) found that individuals choose partners that support each other's anti-social and criminal behaviours, which may serve to reinforce offending behaviour. Zamble and Quinsey (1997) highlighted the importance of the characteristics of relationships, identifying relationship conflict as instrumental in recidivism. Whilst Andersen, Andersen, and Skov (2015) found that marriage reduced re-offending, but only when married to a non-offending partner.

The prisoner rehabilitation literature has therefore stressed the importance of developing or maintaining 'good relationships' during prison sentences in order to reduce recidivism (Hairston, 1988; 1991). Within the literature 'good relationships' are characterised by being able to talk to each other, wanting to spend time together, seeking support and advice from each other and understanding each other's problems (La Vigne, Naser, Brooks, & Castro, 2005). Indeed, La Vigne, et al. (2005) found that the maintenance of 'good quality' relationships during a sentence is related to the successful development of the relationship post release and that maintenance of 'poor quality' relationships has the opposite effect. Maintenance of good relationships can also improve prisoner behaviour and well-being during a sentence. Within the prison environment Jiang and Winfree (2006) found that married men were 23% less likely to engage in rule-breaking behaviour suggesting continued influence even when partners are separated from each other. Segrin and Flora (2001) identified a possible mechanism for this relationship, that possessing a satisfying and committed marriage reduced feelings of loneliness during incarceration. Indeed, Carcedo, et al. (2011) compared prisoners without a partner, those with a partner outside the prison, and those with a partner inside the prison and found a lower level of romantic loneliness and a higher level of sexual satisfaction

and global, psychological, and environmental quality of life for the group of prisoners with a heterosexual partner inside prison. This suggests time spent together is an important factor.

On the contrary, research tends to show that women in intimate relationships in prison have reduced well-being and poorer prison behaviour (Beer, Morgan, Garland, & Spanierman, 2007), compared to those who are not in relationships. Bales and Mears (2010) also discovered that the positive effects of relationship maintenance associated with male prisoner future recidivism was not held true for women prisoners. This gender difference suggests that investigations into male and female experiences need to be conducted separately.

Considering the positive relationship that research has shown between maintenance of good intimate relationships in the community and recidivism and wellbeing, it is beneficial to understand what supports the maintenance of such relationships. Sternberg's (1986), Tripartite theory, states that love is comprised of; intimacy - which promotes closeness; passion - that motivates interactions; and commitment - the decision to stay together. The mutual balance of these areas constitutes relationship success. During the life course of a relationship, including through its challenges, there is likely more to its success than love. Indeed, relationship satisfaction is considered important. Collins and Feeney (2000) found that responsive care giving predicted perceptions of healthy relationship functioning. Campbell, Simpson, Boldry and Kashy (2005), found that perceptions of frequent conflict negatively affected the sense of satisfaction. Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2010) suggest that relationships continue despite fluctuating satisfaction and that commitment may explain continuance through adversity. Hampel and Vangelisti (2008) found couples' expectations of each other to be important in relationship maintenance e.g., "if I am going through a hard time then my partner will support me". However, over time partners are likely to violate expectations in relationships. Karremans and Van Lange (2008) found that individuals view themselves as more closely related to their partner if they can forgive them. This relationship identity (Linardatos & Lydon, 2011) is

functional, predicting spontaneous and pro-relationship responses to threat that help maintain a relationship overtime.

Unfortunately, the separation, which is a main feature of a prison sentence, can have a negative effect on relationship maintenance. Institutional barriers create emotional withdrawal, which can lead to disengagement from close personal relationships (Harman, Smith, & Egan, 2007) and a lack of time to resolve problems through personal contact exacerbates the problems that couples experience (Accordino & Guerney, 1998). Despite this, prisoners and their partners often maintain supportive relationships. Understanding the way couples maintain their relationship despite the difficulties of a prison sentence is important. This knowledge may inform good practice in developing support for prisoners and their partners during prison sentences. Supporting the maintenance of good relationships may help to aid resettlement and reduce recidivism.

Although research has shown positive impacts of prison visits and relationship maintenance for men, little research has examined how prisoners experience relationship maintenance during their prison sentence. This study addresses this gap by exploring the experiences of members of a heterosexual couple in maintaining their well-established intimate relationships, whilst the male partner is incarcerated. A homogenous sample of male participants were recruited from the male prison estate. As previous research suggests male prisoners benefit from maintaining 'good' intimate relationships, it was considered that men with well established relationships during their incarceration would provide a fruitful group of people to learn from. However, as there are two important perspectives to be sought on any given relationship, it was considered that talking to both partners would provide richer information about the mechanisms through which long-term relationships are maintained (Attridge, Berscheid, & Simpson, 1995). Therefore, this study recruited couples where both members agreed they had well established relationships.

Methodological approach

Participants

Male prisoners and their female partners attending a relationships programme in a UK based prison, facilitated by Her Majesty's Prison Service, were invited to take part in the study. Of 12 couples approached to take part, both members of the couple in four couples agreed to the interview, resulting in a sample of eight participants. Participation was not restricted by age, length of relationship, or type of index offence. Table 1 provides information about the sample characteristics.

Table 1 Participant characteristics within each couple (names anonymised)

Male name	Age	Index offence / Sentence length	Stage of sentence	No. previous sentences	Female name	Age	Length of relationship (at time of interview)
Neil	20	Theft 18 months	9 months into sentence	2	Ellen	19	6 years
Craig	23	Drug Supply 4 years 6mths	11 months into sentence	0	Julie	25	2 years
Adam	36	Burglary 2 years	12 months into sentence	9	Laura	25	7 years
Karl	22	Assault 9 months	6 months into sentence	1	Jenny	21	2 years

Procedure

Ethical approval was granted from the University Human Ethics Committee and National Offender Management Service (NOMS) Research Committee. All participants were

screened for a history of violence in relationships and they were fully informed of the nature of the study. Confidentiality issues and the right to withdraw were discussed and a debrief was provided with links to support services.

Following formal ethical approval individual interviews were conducted. The female partners were interviewed first, in their own homes. Each interview with the female partner was followed (within three days) by the interview with their male partner. Interviews with the male partners were conducted in interview rooms in the prison. The interview schedule consisted of six general and open-ended questions to facilitate an inductive approach and allow the voices of this hard to reach group to be heard (Appendix 1). The questions provided the interviewer with a flexible guide to aid a structured conversation. Additional prompts were used to invite participants to reflect upon their experience.

Analytic Strategy

The audiotaped interviews were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) is an approach used extensively in applied psychological research, which identifies patterns of meaning from in-depth qualitative data. This method is apposite for interpreting the experience of individuals' relationships, because it draws on a phenomenological literature, which sees experience as fundamentally relational and contextual (e.g. see Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn 2011). Analysis involves detailed coding of transcribed data and subsequent development of themes within those codes. This is conducted with a dual focus, which Larkin and Thompson (2012) describe as '*giving voice*', and '*making sense*' of participants' concerns through rigorous description *and* psychological interpretation. In the case of this study, engaging participants who are difficult to access and often not listened to an opportunity to explain their experiences and strengths in a way that may influence future policy, is the element of '*giving voice*'. IPA has a commitment to an

idiographic level of analysis and is most appropriate when trying to explore experience within specific small samples and develop knowledge from a ‘bottom-up’ approach. In this case, the study is trying to understand the participants’ individual relationship experience, from their perspective and within the context of the prison sentence. The IPA approach benefits from the depth and richness of the data. The small sample size allows for the interpretation of the participants’ experiences that whilst grounded in their accounts goes beyond their understanding therefore ‘*makes sense*’ of their experience.

The data was coded on a line-by-line basis, these codes were clustered and analysed. The codes referred to each participant’s experiences. This experiential material was explored on a single case basis to identify emergent themes. Interpretive exploration of what the experiences might mean to the participants continued throughout this process. The emergent themes were established through triangulation between the three authors and descriptions developed, which allowed exploration of the themes in relation to each other and the emergence of the major themes. The detailed analysis required to ‘*make sense*’ of this very specific cohorts experience sacrifices breadth for depth. Therefore, when employing IPA developing generalisations requires caution. Rather, the method allows the reader to consider the finding in relation to their existing professional and experiential knowledge (Smith, et al. 2009).

Results

Table 2 outlines the themes and subthemes identified by the researchers. The quotes expressed in this section give a flavour of the themes.

Table 2: Super-ordinate themes and sub-themes identified from interpretative phenomenological analysis

Super-ordinate Themes	Having a special connection	Coping with challenges and threats	Developing reciprocal behaviours	Maintaining a belief in the future
Sub-themes	Unique bond	Isolation/Loneliness	Commitment	Hope v Fear
	Knowing each other	Restriction Guilt/Shame/Responsibility	Feeling valued/valuing each other	Explanations of behaviour
	Relationship journey	Powerlessness	Reassurance	Involvement of others
	Positive shared Identity	Insecurity Loss	Managing conflict	
	Protection		Influence	
	Security/Stability		Coping	

Having a Special Connection

This theme was evident in all of the participants' accounts. They highlighted the strength and uniqueness of their bond, the positive identity and security it brought them, and the desire to care for and protect each other. They described an instant emotional and physical *connection* that grew into something unique. This occurred during a *relationship journey*, developing through *knowing each other*, into a *shared and positive identity*, and producing a feeling of *protection* and *security/stability*.

Karl: I thought she was beautiful straight away and she was just, it was just her personality and that she was cool, like we got on straight away she's like a girl version of me really so I just liked everything about her like/Yes, from the start we clicked like that like, mad, and just kept getting stronger and stronger and just got closer and closer, and I don't know it's like my love just keeps growing for her and she's told me she said

she didn't think it was possible to love me any more, but she said she just loves me more and more everyday like and that makes me feel good as well, that's the exact same way I feel about her.

This was common to each participant, with each appraising the *connection* in their relationship.

Julie: I just know he's the one I think, it's just different I don't know we just really bond you know we just there's something there/we just bonded really you know strong (pause) the bond is strong.

Often the connection seemed hard-to-define for participants, but there were common reference points. The way they experienced the *connection* emerges through minor themes, which converge to create a fuller explanation. For example, some described the experience through the *shared identity* of humour or *knowing each other*.

Each participant emphasised a connection, describing how it manifested in a positive view of themselves and their partner. In the accounts, the strong connection was associated with *stability* and a *positive identity* for the relationship which they extended to themselves and this provided hope for the future. Neil explains how Ellen makes him feel:

Neil: It's trying to find stability, it's like that a relationship to have some sort of stability in our lives, to um know that someone out there that cares, like you know, I had my girlfriend. I had someone who loved me, she did make me feel special, she did make me feel like yes I've something good. I've got something going for myself someone's still with me and I've obviously still got something, like you need that to carry on/ I think it is helping me to maintain a stable relationship well maintain a stable relationship with myself.

Respondents describe *feeling protective* towards each other. There is a sense that this connection *protects* participants, allowing them to feel *safe*. For example, Ellen describes initially *feeling rescued* by her partner and how this is still the case:

Ellen: ... he was just like my knight in shining armour, kind of thing, so he was just everything basically which he still is now.

In essence the special relationship stimulates participants to want to protect each other and the positive view of themselves that the relationship provides. There is a drive to maintain the relationship.

Craig: To be able to come into prison and do a 4 ½ year sentence which is 2 years 3 months and still be strong you know even though you can't physically you know be in contact with each other, but you can only talk. It's a lot harder that way but I still think we're strong, stronger than ever definitely/ if I'd come in and thought it was going to break down, I would never have stayed with her this long anyway even if she wanted to, I wouldn't (pause) put her through all this you know/obviously we love each other anyway and you know, she all the good times we've had together she remembers them and that's why she wants to be with me.

Coping with Challenges and Threats

Although participants believe their relationship is solid, it is threatened by imprisonment. This theme is concerned with the difficulties of the sentence and the offending that could harm the maintenance of the relationship. The super-ordinate theme of coping with challenges and threats reflects the feelings of *isolation*, *loneliness*, *restriction*, *guilt*, *shame*, *responsibility*, *powerlessness*, *insecurity*, and *loss* that participants experienced.

For the male participants, *insecurity* may be part of their character, but they describe this as having become worse during the prison sentence.

Karl: I know how close we are together, but this place just makes me think she's going to leave me and stuff like. I'm always asking her, but I know she won't, but I know she's going to be there, it's just scary that I think she won't, like.

For Ellen, Neil's *insecurity* leads to her feeling *powerless* to cope with his emotions. This creates *restrictions* in her life even though she is not in prison, adding to her anger and frustration through the experience.

Ellen: But now he'll ring me the next day. Who did you see? Did any boys look at you? Did any boys touch you? Did any boys do whatever? Just over the top and I'd say I probably get more attention walking down the street by a white van man beeping the horn. /He talks about the impact on him, but obviously you know, it's horrible being stuck in there whatever. We mainly talk about when I want to go out or I go out or something then he would say how hard it is, you know for him to be like that and I'm like it is hard on me when I am actually out, because I'm still restricted in what I do and everything and everything I do, I got to think about you when you're not here and everything else.

This *restriction* is also practical. Laura is alone with her children and the sentence means that she cannot work. For her, there is a sense of *isolation* attached to *loss*. Laura illustrated this through her explanation of having to do everything alone:

Laura: 'I miss him and he's not here um, for the fact that were not together and that we're not doing things like we used to, for the fact that I not only have to do everything

on my own and do everything for the children and keep the house going and everything, whereas we've always done things together.'

All of these subthemes are important in the experience but what underlies them is a sense of *loss*. Jenny best illustrated how this plays out during a week:

Jenny: 'We see each other on a Monday and we'll be buzzing all day, really happy, and then Tuesday we would be a little bit happy, Wednesday would be alright, but Thursday would be quite down and Friday quite depressed; by Sunday I'm crying and ripping my hair out because I'm so depressed. Then on Sunday night then I get butterflies and feel sick and shaky I can't sleep.'

The men expressed their experience of *powerlessness*. Craig experiences being unable to help his partner and to influence the upbringing of his child.

Craig: Yes, you worry about a lot of things there's nothing you can control I can't control anything I'm a controller, not that I control anything anyway because Julie was the boss, but it's a lot harder now because you want to be out there you want to help, you want the baby to be raised the way you want him to be raised and at the moment now he's being raised the way her parents raised her, so by the time I get out there's nothing that I can do.

While Adam worries about how Laura copes without him:

Adam: She's decided now to get them a bike, a bike each for Christmas, and I said to her, what you've got to realise is they are going to want to go on these bikes at the same time/and there's no way she's going to be able to control two kids at the same time, one of them is going to want to go that way and the other one going to want to go that way.

When interviewing the male partners there is a sense of underlying *guilt and shame* related to having put their partner in this situation.

Neil: I'm very lucky to have someone like Ellen, and you hear all the time on movies and this and that, but I'm really lucky because obviously I've been in jail twice. I've put her through things she shouldn't have gone through shouldn't have had to go through.

Craig's partner Julie understands and tries not to make this worse.

Julie: Oh, he was devastated, he knew he'd let me down and the baby and he was just beside himself really at the time/he felt he'd let me down and the baby everyone really, you know his friends, his family.

This understanding and the way they manage the difficulties links into the next theme.

Developing Reciprocal Behaviours

This theme has many subthemes and is complex within the interviews but seems to represent the behaviours, that have developed throughout the relationship. These behaviours have been strengthened during the prison sentence and have enabled the maintenance of the relationship. The sub-themes relate to *commitment, feeling valued and valuing each other, reassurance, managing conflict, influence, and coping*.

Sometimes *commitment* was formalised *before* the prison sentence, with mutual *commitment* helping to maintain the relationship. For example:

Jenny: we went on holiday with all my family and a lot of friends in a big big bus to a caravan park and it was heaving in there. We went in the clubhouse and he got on the

karaoke and he sang our song, Aerosmith I don't want to miss a thing, and he proposed to me and he had the ring and I didn't know, so that was lovely.

Ellen explains the *commitment* she made and the way in which she changes her behaviour to *reassure* her partner of her *commitment* to him while he is in prison by ensuring that he knows everything about her life. Later comments from Ellen make it clear that she will only alter her behaviour while he is in prison suggesting some temporary willingness to do things that she would otherwise view as unreasonable.

Ellen: Sometimes I don't want to go out, anyway sometimes it would be because he didn't want me, well most of the time it was because he didn't want me to, but I would think to myself and I would say to them I have made the decision to be with him while he's in prison, so I have to deal with what he does/I'd prefer him to be happy in there than be constantly paranoid. Yes, just things like that really, just talk to him every day and whatever and see him when you can and everything really, you obviously can't be, um, vague about things either you have to, you know, they make sure they know everything like what you doing or like. If I said now what you been doing today and I said nothing he'd have to know what nothing means, you know, I think it is understandable, what other people think that's a bit possessive, but I think yes its possessive if he was here and he was like that, but when he's in prison/because I think, well I've stayed with him so if I am going to stay with I him, then I'm going to have to deal whatever's happening really.

The couples continually found ways to *value each other*. *Feeling valued* through their partner's words and behaviour helps them to maintain their connection. For all the participants contact was *reassuring*. For Adam, the *reassurance* comes from Laura's response to his fears and for Laura it comes from visiting him.

Adam: ‘Robert’s just been sentenced for 7 years, been married to his wife for 10 years, she’s just basically sent him a Dear John, and every time a thought comes into my head like that I go on the phone and talk to Laura... every time she writes a letter to me. ‘Adam my darling, me and you are forever’ ... that just makes me feel all warm inside I suppose, safe, secure, and happy.’

Laura: It’s seeing that he’s OK its seeing him that he’s fit and well more than anything/ because we miss him just as much as he misses us and I think visits are very important.

The participants are realistic about how they manage the relationship. They do not only *reassure*, they also take time to *re-evaluate*, put the offending in the past and *influence* change. Julie was pragmatic; she described accepting what had happened and wanting to move on. This appeared to help her to *cope*. She re-evaluated how she and Craig used to communicate and began to *influence* him to become more open with her about his feelings. For some participants, this *influencing* extended to setting an ultimatum to change. Ellen described how she and Neil had learned important lessons about *managing conflict*, but also noted that she had ‘reached a limit’ and would leave if he did not stop gambling. They are not the only couple who have reached this point in their relationship. Laura and Adam reached this point before and Adam has worked hard to manage his substance use.

Complex communication arrangements help participants to *cope* through the sentence. Craig explained a series of phone calls he made to remain connected to Julie’s day, but also to help her manage their child alone, and show her he was opening up about his feelings.

Craig: ... well she hates me keeping it all inside, you know, she’d rather me tell her what I think and I have told her that I’m going to be more you know, I told what I thought when I came in and I’ve been more open than I was when I was out there.

This routine was *reassuring* for them both. Jenny provides a clear example of how being there for each other helped her and Karl *cope* throughout the sentence:

Jenny: ‘When he’s on the phone telling me I’m doing well and he’s proud of me, he makes me feel like I’m doing well and I do it, so he’s keeping me strong even though he’s inside.’

This theme best illustrates the complexity of adaptation in long-term adult relationships.

Maintaining a Belief in the Future

In this theme, the experience of *hope and fear* for the future was bolstered by *explanations for the offending behaviour* that helped partners believe it would not recur, and the *involvement of others* and the way they support the couple or not. The participants sought evidence that supported their desire to have faith in the future.

The female participants found ways of explaining their partners’ behaviour that made sense to them. For Ellen there is sense that if her partner made excuses, she would find it difficult to respect him in the same way. She is clear that his past has led to his offending and this helps her to be the compassionate person in his life that he needs.

Ellen: ‘When I say to him, ‘You do this because this has happened in the past,’ it makes sense to me, some people make excuses for everything, he doesn’t make excuses for anything.’

Julie explained her partner’s behaviour as his need to support her and their child:

‘We were just desperate for money and that’s the only way he could see you know of getting it really so it was totally out of character, it’s not who he is at all.’

Jenny suggests a *higher purpose* for the offending and *shares responsibility* herself:

‘I don't think bad of him or blame him for being there because he hit the person sticking up for my younger brother. ‘

For Laura, it is important to believe that her partner is maintaining change to his drug using behaviour, which begun two years previously.

‘I knew it wasn't him, as in if he hadn't been spiked none of this would have happened.’

The carefully constructed beliefs around offending and hopes for the future were affected by their families' views. For Julie her family are supportive, but for Ellen things are more difficult and she has had to remain loyal to her partner while understanding her family's position.

Ellen: ...my dad and step mother, they could not stand him from the first time/they don't understand why am I with him, but there's nothing I can say to explain they've never really seen us together, they don't know anything, so they just see what he's done and that's it really you can't really blame them for, yes but we don't really say anything about that really

There was a sense that if she talked to them about him, she might have to recognise their views, and the careful balance would be difficult to maintain.

The *explanations of the behaviour* and the careful management of the *involvement of others* helped the participants to have *hope*. The female participants looked for evidence that *hope* was not in vain. Ellen's view is that Neil now sees the need to change, although, in her tone there is *fear* that this will not happen.

Ellen: I think he realises, because when we went to his probation and he said to him, his probation worker, that he wanted to get help for his gambling, which he has never ever done before.

For Laura, it is the faith that Adam has changed; she could not allow herself to *fear* the alternatives. For Julie and Jenny, *hope* rests on this being their first experience of a prison sentence, their realisation that it has been difficult for their partners and the belief that they now know what they have to lose.

The male participants do not often find *explanations for their behaviour*, perhaps because they do not need to as their partners do this for them. Their expressions of *hope* varied. Adam, who was older than the others were, viewed this as his last chance:

‘I don’t want to be doing this no more ... I’m no spring chicken. This is my last and only chance of becoming the age of 60, 70 and looking at my grandchildren and thinking, ‘Thank god, you got it right in the end.’

Karl’s *hope* rests on the effort he has put into changing.

Karl: ... we are not going down town drinking anymore and just stuff like that, just stuff that’s going to prevent me coming back and doing offences I won’t be doing anything like that, I’m doing a anger management course now, so I won’t be coming back here, she knows that.

For Craig, visualising a shared family life in the future helps him to focus his belief.

This theme brings together all of the other themes in a complex and careful balance of beliefs that the participants continually reinforce and maintain. The female participants need hope that their partner’s will not re-offend and that the future will be different. The male participants are aware things need to change and that they cannot let their partner’s down.

Discussion

This study explores prisoners' and their partners' experiences of their relationships throughout the prison sentence. This is a small idiographic study, where the researchers have tried to learn from a very specific hard-to-reach group of individuals about their experiences. The participant sample is limited in that the couples are heterosexual, the prisoners are male, and the prison sentences are relatively short. Whilst this limits the scope of understanding intimate relationships for a wider range of prisoners, including those serving longer periods of incarceration, IPA studies are not intended to be generalizable to the wider population. Instead, this study provides an opportunity to hear the participants' voices, learn from them, discover what is important about their experiences, and potentially frame future, larger studies that can inform practice. These studies should include non-heterosexual relationships, experiences of female prisoners, and consideration of a wide range of participants experiencing different sentence lengths. Without this area of study there is a risk that we lose the participant's voice, fail to empower them, and make assumptions about their experiences, including what is important to them. The participants engaged fully in the process and provided rich accounts of their relationships. This was particularly evident in the emergence of the first two themes; *having a special connection* and *challenges and threats*. The final themes *developing reciprocal behaviours* and *maintaining a belief in the future* provide insight into the relationship processes that may influence behaviour.

How do the participants maintain their relationships?

Due to the circumstances of the sentence, the opportunity to practice the key elements shown to contribute to relationship satisfaction (interaction, emotion, expression, clarity and contact; Lessin et al., 2005) is limited. However, the themes of *having a special connection* and *developing reciprocal behaviours* support established indicators of relationship satisfaction (Lessin et al., 2005). Participants describe the 'emotion' component through their instant physical attraction, continued affection, apprehension about seeing each other, and

anguish when they cannot. The 'expression' of how they feel for each other is overt and reciprocated and they have 'clarity' in that they understand what happens between them and the behaviour patterns that motivate them. With regard to 'contact', the participants describe high levels of support. It is reasonable to assume that satisfaction with each other is high within this group. This satisfaction is not necessarily current as the context they find themselves in has negative effects on their relationship experience. However shared past experience and future expectations help them to maintain a level of relationship satisfaction.

The first theme of *'having a special connection'* mirrors the important elements of intimacy and passion, which maintain relationships (Sternberg, 1986). The participants feel linked to their partners through an initially intense emotional and physical connection. Intimacy builds through their special and exclusive knowledge of each other. This develops into an experience of shared identity. They attain a positive self-identity from the relationship, view the relationship as having its own positive identity, or describe a positive identity for their partner. What they are describing is a good relationship and being able to enhance this positive identity is likely to be beneficial in terms of their future behaviour.

The *'challenges and threats'* are underplayed by the participants, in order to maintain a positive outlook to ensure coping throughout the sentence. They have developed adaptive behaviours and they live up to them consistently. However, the challenges are over and above those experienced by most couples. This is evident in the loss, loneliness, and isolation they experience. The participants' occasional insecurities link into the theme of restriction. The female partners engage in 'safety behaviours' to prevent conflict within the relationship. This was more than psychological restriction. Participants are restricted to their homes and from work by the pressures of coping alone. These pressures lead to powerlessness, guilt, and shame. Understanding these threats and challenges is useful for considering the manner in which prisoners and their partners can maintain their relationship through the sentence.

The participants in this study demonstrate real skill in how they adapt to maintain their relationships over time. Adapting their behaviour to maintain relationship satisfaction provides hope for the male participants in terms of behaviour change. As each partner adjusts, the patterns within the relationship become reciprocal. Some of the couples in this study have developed “if-then” contingencies related to offending that may influence change. Perceptions of daily relationship events strongly colour how partner’s motives and intentions are viewed, and this can have consequences for the future (Fincham, 2001). Those who view arguments as leading to the eventual end of the relationship are less happy within it. The participants in this research did report conflict, but not as a major concern, suggesting that they did not view the relationship as being endangered by conflict.

The couples in this study are motivated to support each other as responsive caregiver’s (Feeney & Collins, 2003). The way in which they value each other and their memories of how they have valued each other in the past, helps them perceive the relationship as healthy. It is interesting that research has shown that partners of more anxious individuals disclose less to them (Bradford, Feeney, & Campbell, 2002). While in this research, participants viewed disclosure as important in order to provide reassurance to each other. Maybe this is because they understand the source of the anxiety and have realised that a high level of disclosure is an effective and acceptable strategy.

Some of the participants’ coping strategies involve a positive focus on the future, a sense of wanting to move on. This was evident both in their comments within the interview and their minimising of ‘challenges and threats’. The participants have developed strategies that help them to maintain their belief in the future. They have invested time and effort into the relationship and have built commitment through shared experience. The female partners are making sacrifices to remain in the relationship. To remain compassionate and supportive they need to maintain their belief in themselves as good people and their partners as non-typical

offenders. The evidence they seek exists within the theme of ‘developing reciprocal behaviours’ such as commitment, support, reassurance, and feeling valued, but they need to go one step further to believe not only in the now but in the future. The mechanisms they use are complex.

Believing in positive relationship outcomes results in positive events. When individuals are motivated towards a goal, they draw closer to others who are instrumental in achieving that goal (Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2009). This is difficult to do when experiencing the effects of the prison sentence and this is especially true if there is evidence of repeated shared goal violation through offending. In order to manage their hope, the female partners have developed explanations of the offending that allow them to believe this is the last time it will happen. When the evidence is more weighted towards it happening again (e.g., where their partners have offended before or have substance misuse issues), they seem to expend more effort on developing the explanations. They provide explanations for behaviour that allows understanding and continued support. The male participants understand that to retain this compassion they cannot excuse their behaviour directly themselves. Both individuals within the couple realise the balance is precarious and this willingness to provide explanations may reach a limit. It would be easy to judge this balancing act as naive and maladaptive, but when considering the relationship satisfaction experienced over the whole course of the relationship and the benefits experienced by the couple, it seems adaptive.

How can practitioners use the couples’ skills to help others?

Although relationships are complex, participants show natural qualities that enable them to cope. These qualities could be encouraged through intervention as protective factors for other couples. Practitioners may find it useful to consider how to avoid negative judgements of prisoners’ descriptions of their relationships. Prisoners who have not committed offences

within their relationships do not have to account for their relationship behaviours. It is important therefore to explore the strengths in the relationship with the couple and build on this. A non-judgemental and compassionate approach (Gilbert, 2010) and a sense that we are building on an already positive base may prove successful. Encouraging the exploration of the positive emotions that prisoners experience is also useful in that positive emotions encourage psychological growth and improve wellbeing over time (Fredrickson, 2001).

Within this study, components of relationship satisfaction were accompanied by many idiosyncratic techniques of maintaining satisfaction in difficult circumstances. Teaching partners the components of relationship satisfaction, exploring their “if-then” contingencies, and discussing individualised ways of maintaining this could be useful for improving relationship quality. Teaching partners to be realistic about conflict; the normality of arguing and not setting expectations that seek to reduce it, but rather changing the threat that it holds, is a more realistic and achievable strategy for many couples under extreme stress who need to express this to each other.

Supporting couples’ patterns of communication is crucial in maintaining this connection. Increasing the opportunities for prisoners and their partners to spend time together is a key factor that would reduce the challenges they face (Carcedo et al. 2011). The prisoner is not the only support-seeker. He may be the only form of emotional support his partner has, making regular phone contact critical. Where possible more relaxed extended visits would be of benefit as physical contact with time for communicating is reassuring and supportive to both partners, countering some of the challenges they face. The participants compensate for the lack of physical contact through increased communication. It may be useful to acknowledge this and support them to build increased communication into future behaviour. Finally, it is important to allow for compassionate strategies that provide explanations for the offending;

this serves an important function in the maintenance of optimism and ultimately the relationship.

Sampson, et al. (2006) suggest that the identity of men who get married may shift toward being a more 'responsible' person. However, this research suggests a more complex shift is evident, that is to a more positive self-identity *and* a shared identity, over and above an increase in feeling protective and responsible for the other person. The prisoners' partners believe in them and present an optimistic view of the future. This hope derives from a compassionate view of the offending, a willingness to look for and give weight to evidence of change, and a willingness to be on their partners' side. Maruna, LeBel, Mitchell, and Naples (2004) suggest that individuals start to believe that they can successfully change when those around them believe that they can.

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Appendix 1

Questions posed to participants

How long have you been together? How did you meet? When did you first make a commitment to each other?

How would other people close to you describe your relationship? What do you like to do together? What do you enjoy about the relationship?

Can you tell me about a really positive time in your relationship? Can you tell me about how you have dealt with difficulties in your relationship? Can you tell me about how your relationship has changed over time?

When you talk about your/their offending with your partner what kinds of things does s/he say? What kind of things do you say? When you talk about this sentence with your partner what kinds of things does s/he say? What kind of things do you say?

How have you kept the relationship going throughout this sentence? How often do you have visits/talk to each other? What do you talk about? How do you talk to each other?

What do you think is going to happen to your relationship in the future? How do you think your relationship will help you in the future?