



Research Publication

The effects of separation on marital relationships of prisoners and their wives

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THE EFFECTS OF SEPARATION ON MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS OF PRISONERS AND THEIR WIVES

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RELATIONSHIPS OF PRISONERS & THEIR WIVES**

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THE EFFECTS OF SEPARATION ON MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS OF PRISONERS & THEIR WIVES

Imprisonment often has devastating effects on the prisoner and his family relationships. It can be the experience which locks the person into a criminal career. Maintaining close contact with the family during incarceration and re-entering a satisfactory role in the family on release appears to prevent many of these effects.

Prison officers in New South Wales prisons have observed, over the years, distinct sequential phases in marital relationships during the long-term incarceration of one partner. These phases include an initial period of mutual support and commitment, followed by a waning of the commitment over time, which is in turn replaced by withdrawal, suspicion and, in many cases, marital breakdown.

On the basis of these observations, the decision was made to conduct an exploratory study(1) to answer the following questions:

- (1) Are there identifiable phases during the term of imprisonment of one partner where marital ties are weakened?
- (2) Are there identifiable factors which may contribute to the *maintenance* of the marital relationship?(2)
- (3) Are there identifiable factors which may contribute to the *breakdown* of the marital relationship?

Evidence from prior research concerning the dysfunctional effects of imprisonment, and the positive effects of maintaining marital ties during imprisonment are reviewed below.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH:

i) Impact of Imprisonment

When a person is sentenced to imprisonment, he is thrust into an environment of monotony, repetition, and total dependency. Once in prison, routinisation "diminishes the necessity and allowability of making decisions about almost everything such as what and when to eat, when to sleep, when to work, etc ..." (Kaslow, 1978). The 'good' prisoner conforms with both prison system and inmate code. Consequently, regression into what may be termed 'institutionalisation'(3) is fostered (Sykes & Messinger, 1970).

For the wife who is left behind, the initial separation, often laden with remorse, recriminations, shock and fear (Kaslow, 1978) leads on to loneliness and despair, as she perceives her husband fusing into the prison system (Merriman, 1979). Furthermore, financial worry, stigma and the childrens' grief for their father will be additional burdens for wives who are in need of support themselves.

The initial disorganisation and distress is very often replaced by even more devastating circumstances for both the prisoner and his family over time. That is, evidence from prison research has shown that the degree to which interaction with the family is affected initially is minor, compared with the emotional and sexual isolation experienced when regular contact with loved ones diminishes over time. (Burstein, 1977).

Evidence suggests that after approximately eighteen months to two years imprisonment, the prisoner very often becomes emotionally inaccessible. Even though wives establish a very high level of contact early in the sentence, they are unable to maintain this level of contact and communication in the face of their husband's withdrawal, their own feelings of insecurity, and thus marital ties weaken (Merriman, 1979).

ii) Effects of Family Contact

It is well documented that the degree of institutionalisation for long-term prisoners is minimised in cases where the prisoner maintains a strong positive relationship with his family (Brodsky, 1975; Schafer, 1977). If, however, his only reference group remains that of other prisoners, his life objectives, frame of reference and value system are likely to become that of the prison sub-culture. That is, continued family contact is important in neutralising the institutionalisation process for prisoners. Furthermore, pre-release anxiety may also decrease with the certain knowledge that a supporting family will be waiting (Schafer, 1977).

iii) Importance of Quality of Prior Relationship

In adjustment to stress of separation due to war, a relatively predictable roller-coaster pattern of adjustment can be identified involving initial disorganisation, recovery and reorganisation (Hill, 1949). The recovery is very often difficult for isolated families with a history of intense mutual involvement and high geographic mobility, and for families characterised by tenuous relationships with relatives and neighbours. Both of these types of family lack the essential supportiveness from friends and relatives. Consequently they find adjustment very slow and difficult. They tend to withdraw into anonymity to fester inwardly rather than risk being rejected (Hill, 1949).

In a United States prison study, there was clear evidence that wives who coped with marital stress and stigma prior to the husband's imprisonment were able to adjust to the separation, and the re-union after imprisonment. That is, wives who had previously coped well with their marriages were tenacious in their plans to re-unite with their husbands at some time, while wives who had found it very difficult to cope with stress and stigma prior to separation, divorced soon after the husband's sentence commenced (Struckhoff, 1979).

Studies of war separation have demonstrated the same phenomenon found by Struckhoff with imprisoned criminals. Again, retrospective assessment of the quality of marriage prior to separation was identified as an important predictor of family re-integration after re-union (McCubbin, Dahl, Lester & Ross, 1975).

iv) Other Predictors of Marital Survival

Length of marriage and wives' emotional dysfunction during the separation period were also highly significant factors for successful family re-union (McCubbin et al, 1975). Findings indicated that a well established relationship which was perceived by the wife as being stable and enduring prior to the separation was essential for successful re-integration. Research also emphasised the importance of

the wives' emotional health and coping ability in terms of the hardships endured throughout the separation. Wives who did not cope very well could not maintain the marital ties, even though they had perceived their marriage as happy prior to separation.

Maintenance of the father's role in the family during separation also emerged as an important predictor of re-integration. That is, in families where the father's role was left open for re-negotiation, the husband could regain a meaningful place in the marital relationship, which facilitated survival of the family as a unit (Hill, 1949 McCubbin et al, 1975).

In a later study, six coping patterns used by wives of prisoners of war were identified (McCubbin, Dahl, Lester, Benson & Robertson, 1976). These patterns closely parallel Lazarus' (1966) functional and dysfunctional reactions to stress (McCubbin, 1979). Four of these coping methods were direct action patterns that were functional and aimed at strengthening the individual's resources to adapt to stress. These were: maintaining family integrity; seeking resolution and expressing feelings, establishing autonomy and maintaining family ties; and establishing independence through self-development. The two other coping patterns were anxiety reduction patterns that were potentially dysfunctional. These were: reducing anxiety; maintaining the past and a dependence on religion.

AIMS AND HYPOTHESES:

In considering the evidence reviewed above it would be expected that constant family contact experienced during long-term imprisonment would create more opportunities for maintenance of the father's role and his subsequent re-integration into the family structure. 'Contact' here is defined by degrees of interaction with wife and children by phone, mail, visits, contact visits, day leave, week-end leave, etc.

The present study is designed to investigate whether there is a linear relationship between the degree of family contact during the imprisonment of the husband and the quality of the marital relationship, which will be reflected in husbands' and wives' commitment to their marriages. Intervening variables such as wives' retrospective assessment of quality of marriage, coping behaviour and emotional dysfunction during separation, together with the prisoners' degree of 'institutionalisation', will also be investigated in relation to the quality of the marital relationship.

Specifically it is hypothesised that commitment and closeness of marriage are related to the contact between husband and wife so that a high degree of contact during imprisonment will be related to high commitment to marriage and low degree of contact during imprisonment will be related to low commitment to marriage.

This effect will be moderated by the wife's retrospective assessment of the quality of marriage prior to separation, her emotional functioning during the separation, and the husband's degree of institutionalisation. That is, commitment to marriage is related to:

- a) wives' assessment of the marriage prior to separation;
- b) wives' level of emotional functioning during separation;
- c) husbands' level of 'institutionalisation'.

The study will also investigate whether the degree of commitment to the marital relationship wanes over time by comparing prisoners in terms of the actual length of sentence served. Within the time spans of 1 to 12 months, 14 to 31 months, and 33 months to 80 months, groups will be compared in relation to the variables under study.

METHODOLOGY:

Sample

This study was concerned with the problems experienced by long-term prisoners and their wives. The initial population was drawn from index files of all prisoners in New South Wales prisons serving more than three years non-parole period. Data concerning length of sentence, time served, age and marital status were extracted from official records. The only criterion for selection was involvement in a marital relationship at the commencement of imprisonment.

At this stage it was determined that married prisoners were a minority in the long-term prison population, which created some difficulty in obtaining the desired sample size. This was not surprising considering the results of the National Survey of Long-term Prisoners in Australia (May, 1978)(4). This report indicated that married prisoners in New South Wales comprised only 32.7% of the total long-term population, compared with single prisoners (58%), divorced/separated (5.9%), and widowed / not known (3.4%).

Potential subjects were initially interviewed to request their participation in the study, confirm current marital status and to sign witnessed consent forms. It was found at these interviews that many prisoners had since divorced or separated, so that the married sample size was further reduced.

Of the original sample of 155 married subjects, 38 had divorced or separated, 30 were unavailable during testing period, 15 refused to participate, and 3 were excluded due to a language barrier. The final sample consisted of 48 married prisoners, 48 wives, and 21 divorced prisoners. Subjects were assured of the voluntary nature, and of the confidentiality of the procedure.

Interview Schedule

Data for the study were gathered using a four-part interview schedule for married prisoners and their wives. Divorced prisoners completed parts 1 to 3, and selected questions of part 4 of the male interview schedule. The sections of the interview schedule are described below.

Part One

(For all subjects) sought background information and retrospective assessment of the quality of the marriage prior to separation. This background information included demographic data such as age, country of birth, education and employment history, sentence details and criminal history and information on length of present marriage and number of previous marriages.

Part Two

(Of the wives' schedule) was a standardised family coping inventory designed by McCubbin (1979). This inventory was initially designed for wives of prisoners of war to obtain their perceptions of the coping behaviours they may have found helpful in adjusting to separation. For each of the 91 possible coping behaviours, the wives were asked whether they found the behaviour: "not helpful", "minimally helpful", "moderately helpful", "very helpful" or "not applicable". The inventory included both desirable and undesirable behaviours which enabled various functional and dysfunctional patterns of coping, during the total separation, to be identified.

The wording of the inventory was slightly modified to focus on the Australian prison population. The original inventory and the modified version were tested over a period of 2 weeks by a sample (N=14) of separated wives, to determine whether the context of the items had been altered during modification. Paired t-tests were computed on the modified items to ensure that there were no significant differences in responses to both scales.

(Of the schedule for prisoners) involved questions about the husband's actual prison experience. Each prisoner was asked both about the extent of his participation in various prison activities and the amount of contact he had with his family. Items for this section were developed from information gained at a general discussion with a group of prisoners at Long Bay Gaol, and discussions with relevant people involved in programmes, parole, welfare, etc.

Part Three

(For all subjects) was the Australian Attitude to Marriage Scale which was devised by Ray King (1980). This scale identifies: attitudes on traditionalism, legal traditionalism, sex role differentiations in marriage, family freedom of choice in marriage and parenthood, and independence of marriage and the family. It has been standardised with populations of single and married men and women. Of particular relevance for this study are the factors of traditionalism and legalism which will give some indication of the degree of commitment to marriage.

Part Four

(For wives) assessed the state of tension being experienced, and included items relating to financial matters, emotional/physical health, role change, coping alone, supports available, maintenance of husband's role through contact and finally the present perceived quality of closeness in the marital relationship.

(For the prisoners) assessed their perceived contact with the outside world with questions relating to supports, relationship with children, contact with wife and children and finally his perceived quality of the closeness of the marital relationship now.

For both prisoners and wives, part four included an open-ended question referring to the effects of imprisonment on the family. Items included in scales (in parts one, two and four for prisoners, and parts one and four for particular wives) were assigned by consensus of the authors.

Instructions for interviewers were standardised. Five

interviewers were trained prior to actual interviews which took place in the gaols for prisoners, and in homes for wives. Interviews took, on average, 90 minutes for wives and approximately 60 minutes for prisoners.

A pilot test was conducted with a sample of five prisoners and five wives to tease out the ambiguities and irrelevancies in the interview schedules.

RESULTS

Form of Analysis

Data were collected from both husbands and wives. Since the focus of the study is predominantly on the wives, results pertaining to them shall be presented first; these will be supplemented by relevant information from their husbands.

Multivariate procedures which are usually employed to investigate the inter-relationships between sets of variables cannot be used in this study because of the small numbers of wives in the sample. Hence, the form of the analysis is univariate: mainly analysis by cross tabulation, and analysis of variance where appropriate. (A probability of .01 was selected as alpha level for all data because of the large number of computational comparisons.)

A. Wives

The data collected from wives can be represented schematically as in Figure 1, which highlights the possible relationships between the sets of variables.

Although all data were collected at the one time, some variables (eg. retrospective quality of marriage) represent perceptions of the marital relationship prior to separation, while others measure perceptions of feelings and functioning during the separation. Consequently the variables will be considered in three sections:

- (1) Those measuring the present state of the relationship
- (2) Those measuring the retrospective quality of the marriage
- (3) Those measuring feelings and functioning during the separation.

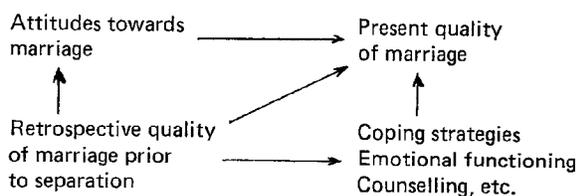


Figure 1: Schematic representation of possible relationships between variables.

i) Sample description

The wives ranged in age from 18 years to 68 years. The majority of the married sample either owned their own homes, or were renting houses or flats prior to separation. More than half had lived in the same place for more than two years.

Their net weekly income range, prior to imprisonment, was \$49 to \$500. Income decreased drastically for some wives after separation: the new range being from \$52 to \$202 per week.

More than half the wives had been educated to intermediate standard or higher. The same proportion had worked since their husbands' imprisonment. The most commonly stated reason for resuming employment was financial need.

1. (a) Present quality of marriage

Wives' subjective perceptions of the quality of marriage at the time of testing were rated on a five point scale. The relationship was assessed as being: "very distant", "distant", "indifferent", "close" or "very close". Because of the small numbers in some classes, this variable was dichotomised into "distant" (which encompassed the first three categories) and "close" (the last two categories). Nineteen wives classified the relationship as "distant" and twenty-nine as "close". This dichotomy was statistically verified by another 15 item scale that allowed indirect assessment of the degree of closeness in the marriage. Wives were asked to rank, in order of importance, the six items that reflected the feelings they most often experienced during their husbands' absence. The items pertaining to these feelings were grouped into: "angry", "indifferent", "uncertain" and "closeness" for analysis. The distant/close dichotomy and the responses to the "feelings most often experienced" were analysed by a chi-square test of association (Table 1).

Table 1: Wives cross-classified according to feelings most experienced during marriage and present quality of marriage.

		PRESENT QUALITY OF MARRIAGE		
		Distant	Close	Total
Feelings most often experienced	Angry/Indifferent	5	0	5
	Uncertain	6	4	10
	Closeness	8	25	33
(p < .005)	Total	19	29	48

The majority of "close" wives (86%) ranked "closeness" items first, compared to "distant" wives (42%). This difference was statistically significant (p < .005). Similar results were found for the feelings ranked second and third; the percentages of "close" wives ranking "closeness" items being 83% and 90% respectively. "Distant" wives were more "angry" and "indifferent" and in many cases "uncertain" of how they felt.

In the subsequent results, in which an attempt is made to examine those factors affecting the perceived present quality of the relationship, the distant/close variable is taken as the criterion.

1. (b) Visits

There was NO relationship between the degree of contact and the wives' perception of the present quality of the marriage. The majority of all wives stated that they often

felt frustrated, tense and could not discuss intimate matters with their husbands during either contact or non-contact visits. The most common reason given for these feelings was the lack of privacy. However, more than 70% of wives stated that they felt very excited and eager prior to visiting their husband. Almost two-thirds expressed that they felt comforted after visits.

1. (c) Present Attitudes to Marriage

In order to investigate whether wives who felt close to their husbands were more committed to marriage generally than wives who felt distant from their husbands, responses in the sub-scales of 'traditionalism', 'legal traditionalism', 'sex-role differentiation', and 'freedom of choice in marriage' (King, 1980) were subjected to an analysis of variance. The results were not statistically significant. However, a tendency for 'close' wives to be more traditional (p < .08) and committed to marriage generally, while 'distant' wives were more committed to personal independence, was evident.

While it is recognised that caution should be exercised when treating separately items normally clustered around a factor, the separation and analysis of the following items were worth reporting in the context of the present study. When individual commitment items were analysed by chi-square, the results indicated that about half (55%) of 'close' wives strongly agreed that 'marriage was for life' compared to only a small number (11%) of 'distant' wives ($X^2_1 = 11.53$; p < .02). Approximately one third (31%) of 'close' wives also strongly agreed that 'a husband provided protection for his wife', compared to only 5% of 'distant' wives ($X^2_1 = 7.68$, p < .05).

2. Perceived Quality of Marriage Prior to Separation

Wives' subjective perception of quality of marriage prior to separation was rated on a four point scale: 'unhappy', 'OK', 'happy' and 'very happy'. The majority (71%) of wives stated that their marriages were not unhappy prior to imprisonment.

Wives' responses were analysed by chi-square according to their perception of the retrospective quality of marriage and the current quality of the marriage (see Table 2). Although there is no significant association between the two variables, (p < .05), inspection of Table 2 shows a tendency in the predicted direction. That is, the current perception of the quality of marriage appears to depend on the perceived retrospective quality of marriage. For example 24 of the 34 who reported having been 'happy' and 'very happy' still felt close to their husbands at the time of testing. On the other hand, of the 14 who reported having been 'unhappy' or 'OK', 9 were now feeling distant.

Table 2: Retrospective quality of marriage cross-classified with perceptions of quality of marriage now.

		Present Quality of Marriage		
		Distant	Close	Total
Retrospective Quality of Marriage	Unhappy	2	1	3
	OK	7	4	11
	Happy	5	11	16
	V. Happy	5	13	18
TOTAL		19	29	48

In addition to the overall measure of the quality of marriage prior to separation, 21 items measuring the degree of satisfaction in marriage prior to separation were recorded. By consensus of the authors, these items were grouped into sub-categories reflecting satisfaction with their husband's contribution to responsibility (financial and household supports), emotional (social and emotional supports), and family (child care and raising supports). An analysis of variance of these sub-scales, to determine the overall retrospective quality of marriage, revealed that 'distant' wives were more dissatisfied with responsibility ($p < .005$) and emotional ($p < .004$) aspects of their marriage prior to separation than were 'close' wives. (Figure 2 shows the difference between the means).

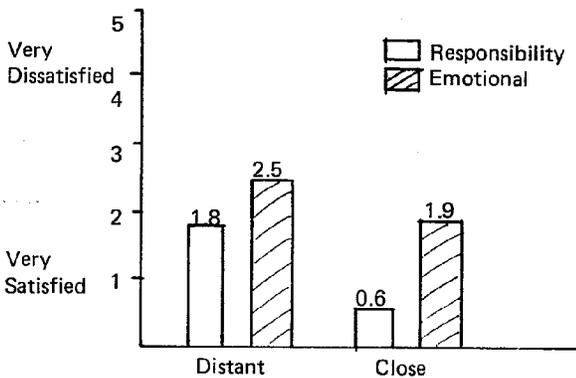


Figure 2: Subjective perception of overall retrospective quality of marriage for 'close' and 'distant' wives in relation to responsibility and emotional behaviours.

When asked to state the items missed most in their marriages now, three-quarters (76%) of the 'close' wives missed the emotional aspects of marriage most, compared to 53% of 'distant' wives. Although 'distant' wives had been very dissatisfied with their husband's marital responsibility, they stated (68%) that they missed having someone around to assist with responsibilities slightly more often than did the 'close' wives (62%).

3. (a) Difficulties in Emotional Function During Separation

Since the majority of marriages appeared happy and stable prior to imprisonment, the next step was to investigate whether the husbands' absence might have been partly responsible for the current state of wives' physical and emotional health after separation. For example, at the time this study was conducted, over two-thirds (69%) of wives were experiencing recurring health problems, and a slightly larger proportion (71%), recurring emotional problems.

Almost all (85%) wives had one or more children living at home with them, and of these most (80%) expressed difficulties in performing the dual roles of mother/homemaker as a result of emotional illness. In addition, the majority (77%) stated that their emotional health had worsened since their husbands' incarceration.

The degree of difficulty experienced as a lone parent was investigated for both 'close' and 'distant' wives by

means of chi-square computations (see Table 3). Most wives stated that they found aspects of being alone very difficult. Perusal of Table 3 indicates that the degree of difficulty in emotional, financial and social areas was perceived as a greater burden for 'close' wives, especially in terms of missing their husbands ($p < .002$) and money problems ($p < .02$). 'Distant' wives experienced the same difficulties but to a lesser degree, which again suggests a higher level of autonomy for this group.

Table 3: Percentages of wives experiencing specific difficulties during separation.

Items	Distant N=19	Close N=29	Total N=48	P
Problems with children	26%	34%	31%	NS
Having to be on your own	53%	87%	71%	NS
Lack of social life	14%	21%	17%	NS
Money problems	58%	83%	73%	$p < .02$
Missing your husband	63%	100%	85%	$p < .002$
Loneliness	63%	76%	71%	NS
Sex adjustment	37%	45%	42%	NS

'Distant' wives found it much more difficult providing emotional support (79% distant – 62% close) and discipline (74% distant – 59% close) for their children than did 'close' wives. However, differences between groups in overall emotional functioning did not reach statistical significance. This could be due to the opposed directions of the differences found.

3. (b) Coping Strategies

To determine whether low emotional functioning during separation was related to particular coping strategies, items from The Family Coping Inventory (McCubbin, Dahl, Boss & Wilson, 1979) reflecting wives' coping patterns during separation were cross-tabulated with 'distant' and 'close' wives.

A significant difference emerged between these groups in the use of ONE coping strategy that was potentially dysfunctional (Lazarus, 1966). Anxiety reducing methods were used less by 'close' wives ($p < .01$), and when utilised were not perceived as useful (see Table 4).

'Distant' wives used anxiety reduction coping strategies such as: smoking, drinking alcohol and self-punishment. The 84% who used 'smoking' found it very helpful ($p < .004$); of the 37% of wives who used alcohol, a large proportion (26%) found it helpful. However, of the 53% who used 'punishing myself' as a coping strategy, all found it not helpful.

Responses to individual items on the 91 item coping inventory were scrutinised for the 'distant' and 'close' wives in an attempt to identify functional versus dysfunctional tendencies in current coping strategies. The 'distant' wives were clearly attempting to become autonomous. Compared to 'close' wives, they utilised the coping strategies of 'reading' and found it helpful. 'Developing job opportunities' ($p < .01$) and 'finding a new

lifestyle, friends, etc' were used and found to be very helpful ($p < .007$).

Table 4: Coping strategies utilised by wives during separation

Coping patterns	Distant N=19	Close N=29	P
Seeking resolution and expressing feelings	15%	14%	NS
Maintaining family integrity	20%	20%	NS
Establishing autonomy & maintaining family ties	15%	17%	NS
Reducing anxiety	12%	9%	$p < .01$
Establishing independence/self development	17%	14%	NS
Maintaining the past and a dependence on religion	12%	14%	NS

However, the major finding from this analysis was that local and community resources for social contact and support, other than the family, were very rarely utilised by most wives. For example, 52% of wives did not talk to other people in similar situations; 81% did not join in activities specifically for people in the same situation ($p < .05$); a substantial proportion (40%) did not involve themselves in social activities with friends; 71% did not participate in any kind of sporting activity; 73% were not involved in any church, school or work activities and 81% were not doing any type of course, etc. Of the small number who did utilise these behaviours, the majority found them to be helpful in coping with separation.

As would be expected, 'distant' wives appeared to make more use of these behaviours, although this difference was not significant (see Table 5).

Table 6: Use of relatives as a means of coping with separation

Items	Distant % N=19			Close % N=29			Total % N=48		
	n/a	n.h.	h	n/a	n.h.	h	n/a	n.h.	h
1) Living with or near my parents or in-laws	16	42	42	38	30	41	29	29	42
32) Doing things with relatives	16	11	74	31	0	69	25	4	71
83) Joining in gatherings and events with relatives	32	16	53	28	3	69	29	8	63
87) Seeking encouragement, guidance and support from parents	42	16	42	52	10	38	48	13	40
88) Seeking encouragement, guidance and support from in-laws	42	26	29	59	14	28	52	19	32

n/a = Not applicable
n.h. = Not helpful
h = Helpful

Table 5. Under-utilisation of local/community resources

Items	Non-use Distant N=19		Non-use Close N=29		Non-use Total N=48	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1) Talking with other people in my situation	10	53	15	52	25	52
2) Doing a course	13	68	26	90	39	81
11) Going to church functions	12	63	21	72	33	69
27) Joining in activities specifically for someone in my situation	15	79	24	83	39	81
30) Being active in community work with married couples	16	84	28	97	44	92
31) Being active in the local community	12	63	24	83	36	75
44) Doing volunteer work	13	68	21	72	34	71
45) Getting into social activities (parties, etc) with friends	7	37	12	41	19	40
58) Playing sports/ tennis, bowls, etc	11	58	23	79	34	71
63) Going to church or school P&C work, etc	13	68	22	76	35	73
64) Playing cards (poker, bridge, etc)	14	74	22	76	36	75

3. (c) Family Support

Wives' contact with families did not appear to change after separation. The majority of all wives (77%) said they felt they could often obtain family assistance to do the things they wanted to do. Social activities with relatives were used substantially by all wives as a coping strategy. Most wives (71%) lived near their own parents or parents-in-law and more than half found this helpful. Three quarters (75%) became involved in doing things with relatives and 71% joined in family activities or gatherings. Such extensive use would indicate reliance on family networks for practical and social support.

However, the much needed emotional support was very rarely sought from families. Approximately half of the entire sample stated that they did not seek encouragement, guidance or support from the parents or parents-in-law (see Table 6).

Inspection of table 6 indicates that 'distant' wives tended to make greater use of family networks as a source of support than 'close' wives. In comparison the majority of 'close' wives (83%) simply trusted their husbands to support them emotionally ($p < .02$) (Close = 83%; Distant = 57%).

3. (d) Professional Counselling

Only one-quarter of the wives had ever had any contact with their husbands' parole officer, and only half of these found the contact helpful.

Professional counselling and related community services were virtually untapped by wives for emotional and social supports. Almost three-quarters (73%) of the sample did not initiate or receive any type of professional counselling. An even greater proportion (81%) did not involve themselves in activities for people in their situation; 92% had not at any stage participated in self-help and/or support groups (see Table 7).

Table 7: Use of counselling or related community services as a coping strategy

Items	Non-use Distant N=19		Non-use Close N=29		Non-use Total N=48	
26) Having some professional counselling	13	68%	22	76%	35	73%
47) Using local programmes and services aimed at helping those in my situation	16	84%	22	76%	38	79%
72) Participating on a regular basis in planned activities conducted by others in my situation	19	100%	25	86%	44	92%
89) Taking "assertiveness" training to build my confidence	16	84%	29	100%	45	94%

3. (e) Children

Wives made extensive use of coping mechanisms that required involvement with children and these were generally found to be quite helpful for both distant and close groups (86% close; 90% distant).

The entire group of 'distant' wives and most (83%) of the 'close' wives found 'trying to keep the family on an even keel' useful in helping them cope. It would seem that greater emphasis on the parenting role allowed wives to direct attention away from their own emotional needs to some extent, and thus relieved, to a degree, the feelings of pain and isolation which they might have initially experienced (see Table 8).

4. (a) Efforts to Keep the Husband's Role Open

Of those who responded, more than half of the wives stated that they talked to the children about their father in his absence and approximately three-quarters always attempted to answer the children's questions openly regarding their father's absence. Over half the wives (57%) discussed the children's development with their husbands during visits. Furthermore, almost one-third prepared their children for seeing their father prior to actual visiting (see Table 9).

Table 8: Percentage of wives finding involvement with children a helpful means of coping

Items	Distant N=19	Close N=29	Total N=48
8) Doing things with my children	100	86	92
12) Trying to be a father/mother to the children	47	45	46
13) Maintain father's presence for children	47	52	50
18) Buying a lot of things for myself and/or my children	47	28	35
20) Trying to keep the family on an even keel	100	83	90
22) Spending all of my time with the children	84	79	81
42) Doing more things with the children	90	86	88
85) Going shopping with the children or by myself	63	66	65

Table 9: Wives' efforts to keep father's role open in family

Wives N=48	Frequency				N/A
	Never	Some-times	Often	Always	
1) How often do you talk to the children about their father in his absence?	1	6	10	20	11
2) Do you try to answer the children's questions regarding father's absence?	3	1	5	26	13
3) Do you discuss the children's development and difficulties with your husband during visits?	3	6	7	21	11
4) Do you talk with the children about what it will be like to visit their father prior to visiting?	7	12	5	11	13

Of those who responded, over 90% at some time planned their future life together with their husbands during visits. Most (93%) stated that they sometimes felt close to their husbands whilst visiting, and over 61% rated their present relationship with their husbands as 'close' or 'very close'.

4. (b) Obstacles to Keeping Husband's Role Open

Unfortunately, almost one-third (27%) of the wives experienced some physical or financial difficulties in travelling to visit their husbands. Furthermore, almost half (47%) experienced these difficulties most of the time or always (see Table 10).

Table 10: Frequency with which physical or financial difficulties were incurred in visiting gaols

Frequency	N
Never	12
Sometimes	12
Often	7
Always	14
No information	3

Of those who experienced travel difficulties, over a third (38%) stated that this reduced the number of times they visited their husbands.

Contact with husbands, whether by telephone, letters or actual visiting, was generally found to be very helpful for coping with separation. All of the 'close' wives found telephone, letter and visiting contact helpful in dealing with separation. Of the 'distant' wives, over half (58%) found visiting their husbands without the children helpful, however the majority (84%) found visiting their husband with the children most helpful (see Table 11).

Table 11: Contact with husband as means of coping

Items	Distant N=19(%)			Close N=29(%)			Total N=48(%)		
	n/a	n.h.	h	n/a	n.h.	h	n/a	n.h.	h
60) Telephoning my husband as often as permitted (p < .01)	74	0	26	59	0	41	65	0	36
61) Writing letters (p < .0002)	16	32	53	0	0	100	6	13	81
73) Joining my husband on day leave or at visiting time with the children (p < .05)	0	16	84	10	0	90	6	6	90
74) Joining my husband on day leave or at visiting time by myself (p < .008)	21	21	58	17	0	83	19	8	73

n/a = Not applicable
n.h. = Not helpful
h = Helpful

Summary

In summary, the wives as a group fell into two distinct classes according to the present quality of marriage. This dichotomy assists in interpreting most of their behaviour

in relation to marriage, but there are important aspects of their lives as prisoner's wives where both classes shared common feelings, for example, the kinds of contact with their husbands. The conditions of their social lives contain features of relative deprivation, strain and emotional isolation. Some of these features can be effectively dealt with by ordinary social services. In other instances more radical measures would be necessary.

B. Prisoners

Sample description

A large proportion of the prisoners had been raised in Australia (81%) and their ages ranged from 23 years to 62 years. More than half of the sample had not completed educational training to the intermediate or school certificate level. Of the remainder, the majority had completed trade courses while only four had tertiary qualifications.

Two-thirds of the sample had been employed in semi-skilled or unskilled positions, while the remaining third were located in a skilled or professional position. It was interesting to note that, contrary to popular stereotyping these prisoners experienced a high degree of both marital and work stability prior to imprisonment. For example, at least four-fifths of prisoners tested had been employed for more than 12 months prior to imprisonment.

Furthermore, the majority (83%) stated that they had been involved in a stable relationship for longer than four years. A similar proportion (86%) described their marriages as either 'happy' or 'very happy' before separation. Of the 69 prisoners, almost two-thirds had been involved in only one marital relationship. The majority of the remaining third had entered into their second marriage. Almost one-third (32%) of the sample were first offenders and the rest were recidivists. Over half (57%) of the latter group had four or more previous convictions.

In the married population the ratio of recidivists to first timers was less than 2:1, whereas, in the separated/divorced population it was over 3:1.

One would expect that recidivists as a group would be older than first-timers in both the married and divorced populations. However it was interesting to note that the first-timers generally were older than recidivists, the average ages being 36.6 and 33.2 years respectively. Furthermore, married first-timers were substantially older than married recidivists, the mean ages being 39 and 33 years respectively.

1. Present Quality of Marriage

As with the wives, married prisoners assessed their present quality of marriage on a five point scale: 'very distant', 'distant', 'indifferent', 'close' and 'very close'. These responses were dichotomised into 'distant' versus 'close' categories. Most (83%) still felt close to their wives, compared to only 17% who felt distant. Given the small number of prisoners who felt distant (8), it is not surprising that, in most of the areas investigated, there were NO significant differences found between those prisoners classified as 'close' and those classified as 'distant'. Furthermore, there were no differences in attitudes to marriage for these two groups of prisoners.

Taking the married prisoners as a complete group (N=48), only four stated that marital breakdown had occurred after a term of imprisonment, and these four still felt close to their wives.

2. Contact

There was no relationship between contact and husbands' perception of present quality of marriage.

(a) Visits

The majority of married prisoners (71%) are currently receiving weekly visits. A small percentage (8%) of divorced prisoners also still receive occasional visits from their ex-wives.

More than one-fifth of married prisoners who did not receive visits from their wives at one or more gaols stated that the reason for this was the difficulty their wives had in travelling to the gaol. This information is disturbing, particularly since, of those who responded, 98% of prisoners expressed a great need to have regular visits from their wives, and 85% of all married husbands felt eager and excited prior to visits from their wives ($p < .047$).

Of the married prisoners who responded, almost half (48%) said that visiting time was totally inadequate. Even 'distant' husbands regarded visiting time as inadequate (see Table 12).

Table 12: Prisoners' perceptions of the adequacy of the amount of visiting time

Adequacy	Distant N	Close N	Total N
Inadequate	5	18	23
Not bad	1	13	14
OK	0	7	7
Adequate	1	2	3
Total	7	40	47

Almost half of the married prisoners (48%) stated that they found intimate conversation very difficult during visits. The constraints to satisfying contact, as perceived by prisoners, were: firstly, no privacy; secondly, staff observers; thirdly, not enough time to get started; fourthly, sexual frustrations, fifthly, feeling nervous or depressed; and lastly, too much noise from other visitors and children.

Prisoners who felt close to their wives (65%) gained more comfort from visits than prisoners who felt distant (25%). On the other hand, half of the 'distant' husbands found visits distressing compared to a very small proportion (15%) of the 'close' prisoners.

Furthermore, half of the 'distant' prisoners felt tense during visits compared with 'close' prisoners, of whom the majority (90%) only occasionally or never felt tense during visits ($p < .007$). As would be expected, more than half of 'close' husbands planned their future life together with their wives during visits.

A little over one-third (38%) of 'distant' prisoners always felt close during visits compared with over three-quarters

(78%) of 'close' prisoners ($p < .001$). Not surprisingly, the majority of all married prisoners (72%) felt the need to be alone after visits.

However there was clear evidence that the 'close' group were more likely to get the visits to which they were entitled compared with 'distant' prisoners. It also appears that 'close' prisoners made more effective use of visiting time as a resource for maintaining their relationships. Furthermore the majority of all married prisoners, whether close or distant, claimed that they felt concern for their wives and their marital relationship.

2. (b) Letters

More than half of the prisoners both wrote and received letters on a weekly or fortnightly basis. Of the remainder, only one never sent letters and three never received mail from their wives. Reasons given for this lack of written contact were, firstly, an adequate amount of visiting time and, secondly, regular telephone contact (see Table 13).

Table 13: Time between letters written and received by married prisoners (N=48)

Time b/n letters written			Time b/n letters received				
Weeks	Distant	Close	Total	Weeks	Distant	Close	Total
1 - 2	5	29	34	1 - 2	4	24	28
3 - 4	1	4	5	3 - 4	1	11	12
5+	1	7	8	5+	2	3	5
Total	7	40	47	Total	7	38	45

2. (c) Telephone Contact

More than half of the sample telephoned their wives on a weekly basis. Less than one-fifth (16%) of prisoners did not ring their wives. Where a prisoner did not telephone his wife, this was due to the wife's inaccessibility by telephone.

2. (d) Prisoner/Children Contact

When asked how they perceived their relationship with their children, the majority (80%) still felt close or very close to their children (see Table 14).

Table 14: Married prisoners perceived relationship with children

	Distant N	Close N	Total N	%
Very distant	4	1	5	11
Distant	0	4	4	9
Close	3	10	13	30
Very close	1	21	22	50
TOTAL	8	36	44	100

($p < .0009$)

It appears that, for prisoners, the closer the relationship with their wives, the closer the relationship with their children. Prisoners who felt 'distant' from their wives stated that their usual feelings about their children were firstly, that 'the wife copes very well with child raising alone' (50%) and secondly, 'loneliness' (25%). On the other hand, prisoners who felt 'close' to their wives ranked 'loneliness' first (48%), and 'relief that the children always seemed pleased to see them' (45%) second.

3. Retrospective Quality of Marriage

Married prisoners rated their overall retrospective quality of marriage on a four point scale (see Table 15). Most (94%) considered that, prior to imprisonment, their marriages had been either happy or very happy.

Table 15: Overall retrospective quality of marriage as perceived by close/distant prisoners

Retrospective Quality of Marriage	Distant	Close	Total	
	N	N	N	%
Very Unhappy	0	1	1	2
Unhappy	1	1	2	4
Happy	2	20	22	46
Very Happy	5	18	23	48
TOTAL	8	40	48	100

When asked to rate the degree of satisfaction with specific aspects of their marriage, the majority of married prisoners were very satisfied with the emotional aspects of their marriage (see Table 16 for percentages).

Table 16. Percentage of prisoners satisfied with specific aspects of marriage prior to separation

Items	Distant N=8	Close N=40	Total N=48
R4 Emotional support from wife	50%	73%	69%
R11 Going out with my wife	75%	73%	73%
R18 Feeling close to my wife	88%	88%	88%
R19 Having my meals ready	75%	63%	65%
R20 Feeling emotionally secure	50%	60%	58%

Consequently, it was not surprising that prisoners ranked 'emotional' items first (56%), 'family' items second (27%) and 'responsibility' items third (16%) when asked to rank in order of importance the aspects of marriage that they missed most while in prison.

4. Institutionalisation

To test the hypothesis that husbands' level of 'institutionalisation' during imprisonment is related to commitment to marriage, married prisoners were asked to rank in order of importance statements which best described the feelings

they experienced most of the time while in prison. Twenty-eight items were classified by consensus of the authors into three categories, namely: 'isolation', 'coping', and 'institutionalisation'.

'Isolation' was the most commonly experienced feeling in the sample of married prisoners. Items relating to 'isolation' were ranked first for more than half of the prisoners (58%); 29% ranked 'coping' items first and only 13% ranked 'institutionalisation' items first.

There were no significant differences between 'distant' and 'close' prisoners. The hypothesis that the degree of 'institutionalisation' is related to the degree of commitment to marriage was not supported in this study.

5. Supports

When asked if they felt they could call on anyone for help in the event of any problems, almost half (47%) of the prisoners interviewed replied that they could never call on anyone. Furthermore, more than half (60%) reported having never received any counselling from psychologists, welfare officers or a chaplain.

A similar pattern was indicated when prisoners were asked about the effectiveness of contact with their parole officers (see Table 17).

Table 17: Married prisoners' perceptions of parole officer support in prison

Prisoner population N=48	Never %	Some- times%	Often %	Always %	N/A %
Has the parole officer ever contacted you?	38	56	6	—	—
Has this contact been helpful?	50	17	6	2	25
Has the parole officer offered to arrange counselling?	75	4	—	—	21
Have you felt that you had the support of the parole officer?	56	10	4	8	21
Is your parole officer always accessible?	29	31	6	19	15

While more than half of the married sample stated that they had been contacted by a parole officer at some time during their term of imprisonment, and that their parole officer was readily accessible, as many said that they did not feel they had the support of their parole officer and that their contact had not, in fact, been helpful.

C. Phases Over Time

To determine whether there were identifiable time phases during the term of imprisonment when marital ties were more likely to weaken, the couples were divided into three groups based on the length of time the husband had served. These groups were where the husband had served: between 1 and 12 months; between 14 and 31 months; and finally between 33 and 80 months.

Analyses of variance revealed no significant differences in the wives' perceptions of present quality of marriage, dual role responsibilities, emotional functioning or coping patterns utilised across these three periods. However, there was a tendency towards significance in emotional functioning on items relating to responsibility and emotional support during the 14 to 31 months phase (see Figure 3). This tendency suggests that difficulties in maintaining family responsibilities and in self-support may reach a peak during the 1 to 2½ year separation period. Maintaining warm and supportive contact with husbands may be very difficult at this time.

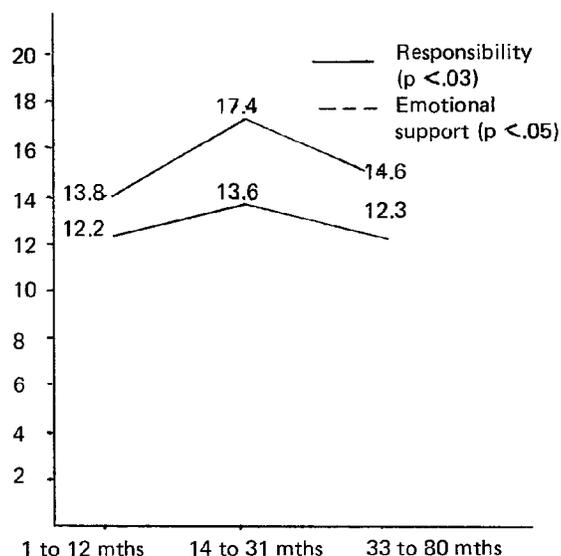


Figure 3: Difficulty in two areas of wives' emotional functioning over three time spans

D. Congruence in Responses (prisoners/wives)

Congruence between prisoners' and wives' responses in the variables under study were investigated by cross-tabulations. There were general trends towards positive correlations which indicated reasonable congruence. The only noteworthy discrepancy was between husbands' and wives' perceptions of the 'present quality of marriage' (see Table 18).

Table 18: Prisoners' and Wives' perceptions of present quality of marriage

	Husbands	Wives		Total
		Distant	Close	
Distant	N=	4	4	8
	%=	21	14	17
Close	N=	15	25	40
	%=	79	86	83
Total	N=	19	29	48
	%=	40	60	100

Of the 19 wives who said they were 'distant', 15 of their husbands stated that they were 'close'. This discrepancy is not surprising since the wives' reality would in fact be very different from that of the prisoners'. Wives are carry-

ing the full-time burden of emotional depletion, responsibility overload and coping difficulties. On the other hand, prisoners' perceptions would be influenced by their need to believe that the wives still care and are coping in their absence, and by the fact that the wife continues to keep contact.

In summary, even with a restricted social life, the prisoners' feelings and experiences mirror quite closely those of their wives, with the marked exceptions of their perception of the present quality of the relationship. Therefore, it is reasonable to suppose that they would be accessible to the same services as their wives.

E. Comparison of the Divorced with the Married Prisoners

As would be expected, divorced prisoners, compared to the married population, perceived their prior quality of marriage as being unsatisfactory. For example, they stated that they were dissatisfied with such aspects of the relationship as emotional support ($p < .006$), discussion of problems ($p < .06$), going out with wife ($p < .005$), feeling close to wife ($p < .001$), having meals ready ($p < .007$) and feeling emotionally secure ($p < .0003$).

Divorced prisoners generally perceived their relationship with the children as distant (see Table 19). This is not surprising since the relationship with the children appears to be dependent upon the degree of closeness with the wife. This phenomenon emerged with 'distant' and 'close' married prisoners' perceptions of their relationships with their children.

Table 19: Married and divorced prisoners' perceptions of relationship with children

Perceived relationship with children	Married N= 48	Divorced N= 21
Distant	19%	57%
Close	73%	24%
N/A	8%	19%

($p < .002$)

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify the factors which may contribute to the maintenance or breakdown of the marital relationship of long-term prisoners in NSW prisons and to identify possible phases in which the marital bonds are weakened. We sought to test hypotheses about the relationship between specific variables, and also engaged in a process that usually precedes the testing of hypotheses, namely, the identification of some existing conditions.

The hypothesised relationships did not reach statistical significance. It is possible that a combination of the chosen alpha level of .01, the small sample size and the heterogeneous population may have reduced the chance of reaching statistical significance. Sample size was a problem due to the small number of married prisoners who were serving long-term sentences in NSW gaols. Had the sample been larger or more homogenous it is possible that statistical

significance could have been obtained where tendencies were evident in the data.

1. Contact

The expected positive relationship between high degree of contact and 'closeness' in marriage did not reach statistical significance in the present study. However, it was established that prisoners and wives who were still close made full use of visiting entitlements. Evidence obtained also suggests that 'close' wives took full advantage of every avenue of contact that was available, compared to 'distant' wives. Wives who felt 'close' to their husbands utilised telephone contact, letter writing and visiting both with and without children as means of coping with separation, and found it useful.

The design of the study was correlational. Thus the causal direction of the relationship between contact and closeness cannot be ascertained on the basis of the results obtained. That is, we can't be sure whether 'closeness' was responsible for maintained contact, or maintained contact caused 'closeness'. Nevertheless, we do know that relationships do not exist in a vacuum. They need to be nurtured by interaction. Therefore, the question must be asked whether or not there were physical obstacles to maintaining contact which could have mitigated against the potentially closer relationship between some prisoners and their wives.

The majority of all wives (both distant and close) did report that they experienced physical or financial difficulties in travelling to gaols at some time during their husbands' incarceration. Furthermore, almost half of these wives often or always had difficulties in visiting their husbands. This did restrict the number of visits for over one third of the sample (see Table 10). These difficulties in visiting were nominated by almost half of the wives as the major obstacle in keeping the husbands'/fathers' role open in the family.

Additional constraints to maintaining stable, caring relationships for prisoners and their wives were identified in the present study. The majority of prisoners and spouses reported that during both contact and non-contact visits in gaol they found it very difficult to be freely expressive or natural in their communication with husbands.

It was interesting to discover that there was no difference in this response between those who felt 'distant' and those who felt 'close'. This can be explained by positive or negative feelings needing to be expressed when they arise if intimacy is to be maintained at some level. Furthermore, sensitive issues surrounding the relationship, or the individuals, also need to be discussed if the relationship is to develop and grow. It is possible that the atmosphere of censorship and being guarded in prison inhibits and detracts from the levels of communication and privacy that are required to sustain marital relationships that are already under immense pressure.

An extreme example of communication breakdown is provided by comparing husbands' and wives' responses to how they felt about their relationships. As was previously reported, nineteen of the forty-eight wives perceived the marriage as distant; only four of the nineteen husbands whose wives reported this distance concurred with their perceptions.

Implications for policy are clear from these data. Improvements in the quality and quantity of visits may prevent the more fragile relationships from disintegrating. That is,

more frequent, longer and private contact are essential for maintaining marital bonds of long-term prisoners and their wives.

Options that could be utilised are increased contact visits and day leave for prisoners and the introduction of conjugal visits. The outcome of conjugal visits has been evaluated at the Soledad Correctional Training Centre, California. The analysis revealed that conjugal visits were positively related with substantial marital stability and parole success (Burstein, 1977).

2. Retrospective Quality of Marriage

Wives' perceptions of the quality of marriage prior to separation related positively but not significantly with current perceptions of the quality of marriage. It must be noted however, that retrospective quality of marriage is necessarily confounded by the effects of the current state of marriage on recall. Therefore, interpretations based on this finding must be very conservative. Even so, divorced prisoners reported poor marriages prior to separation and this is consistent both with the hypothesis formulated in this study and past research (McCubbin et al, 1975; Stuckhoff, 1979).

3. Wives' Emotional Functioning

Maintaining distance or closeness appeared to be two very different styles for coping with separation, both of which produced costs and benefits. For example, wives who were distancing themselves from their husbands more often used self-destructive methods of reducing anxiety such as smoking, drinking alcohol, etc, but also appeared to be developing some level of autonomy by making a new lifestyle, through reading, study and similar activities. On the other hand, 'close' wives used more interpersonal coping patterns, but relied very heavily on their husbands for fulfilment of various practical and emotional needs. Since these could not in fact be met with any degree of success, they experienced stress and unhappiness.

The difficulties associated with being a lone parent were also very diverse for these groups. 'Distant' wives found providing emotional support and discipline for the children a problem, while 'close' wives, who were for the most part biding time, found loneliness and money shortages the most difficult problems to handle.

Of major importance was the discovery that the majority of both 'distant' and 'close' wives were experiencing recurring health and emotional problems. Past research has indicated that if wives cope well emotionally and function satisfactorily throughout the separation period, the marriage has a better chance of survival (McCubbin et al, 1975). A major finding to emerge from this study concerns sources of emotional support. Most wives had no knowledge of, and consequently did not make use of, any of the available resources for social contact and emotional support. In the majority of cases, prisoners' wives obtained practical support from families, but did not seek emotional assistance from them. Self help or support groups for single parents do exist in the community.

One supportive group available is specifically designed to cater for prisoners' wives (The Family of Prisoners Association - FOPA), but it appears that many wives were unaware of this avenue of support.

Furthermore, most wives did not receive or initiate any professional counselling. In fact, in 1980 the Corrective Services Welfare Division counselled 3,524 prisoners, but only contacted 17 wives during the same time period (Robertson, 1980).

A disturbing feature of this finding is the fact that for the majority of wives, emotional and social needs remain critically neglected. These results reflect, in part, a widespread ignorance of the existing services and a need for adequate provision of services for wives of prisoners. It is relevant that in all areas of investigation, emergency of isolation and emotional factors were predominant for both 'distant' and 'close' wives. In terms of the need for emotional assistance these groups cannot be differentiated.

Consequently services recommended should be made universal with the expectation that counselling will render individual results. That is, counselling will provide a more constructive medium for reintegration or separation depending upon the climate of the relationship at the time of intervention. The knowledge that help is available, and that they are not struggling alone is very often a support in itself, and may decrease the sense of isolation that wives experience during separation.

At the time of testing, vulnerable wives were identified in both the 'close' and 'distant' groups (see Table 1). These wives reported indirectly that they felt uncertain about their relationships. It is very likely that 'close' wives who felt uncertain about their relationship may be at risk compared to those who were already feeling indifferent and those who still felt close. Furthermore the 'distant' who felt uncertain may still be accessible to intervention if assistance is made available.

Professional support for wives and children in dealing with the effects of separation such as loneliness, sexual frustration, loss of emotional ties and loss of practical supports is essential if marital bonds are to be maintained.

4. Phases

As mentioned in the introduction of this report, prison officers in New South Wales have observed distinct sequential phases in marital relationships during the long-term incarceration of one partner. In the present study, the time phase of 14 to 31 months emerged as a critical phase during separation in which wives' emotional functioning was impaired (although these findings did not reach statistical significance). Past research certainly supports the assumption that wives' emotional functioning is a crucial factor in maintaining marital ties (McCubbin et al, 1975). Furthermore subsequent prison research has suggested that the important time span in which marital breakdown occurs after imprisonment is 18 months to 2 years (Merriman, 1979).

Consequently, the direction towards the expected response appears sufficiently strong to enable some manipulation of services to take account of the phases of greater vulnerability in the marriage. It seems quite reasonable to propose policy changes that can be evaluated empirically at a later time.

One option available is marriage counselling for husbands and wives inside the prison during the separation period, especially during these critical phases. Such counselling may be able to both prevent the inevitable widening of bonds and assist in preparing the couple to cope effectively

with the adjustments required for successful reunion after imprisonment.

At the Kansas State Penitentiary, weekend marital workshops were introduced for prisoners serving the final six months of their sentence. The purpose of the workshop was to allow couples to begin evaluating their relationships prior to release. Couples had the opportunity to focus on changes experienced by both partners during separation, to learn communication skills, to discover what community resources were available to them and to work through the effects of stress and tension on their communication (Showalter & Jones, 1980).

Even though this service was introduced to increase the effectiveness of treatment programmes, and as yet has not been empirically evaluated, it appears that this type of counselling in prison could be most effective in increasing marital stability through guidance in open communication and understanding.

Methodological Considerations

One reservation must be noted. Any study that takes place within the confines of a prison must operate with some methodological handicaps. Prisoners, for example, were very likely to respond in a way that they thought would affect their future in prison favourably, so that it is possible that prisoner responses to questionnaire items may have been biased. There was a risk that prisoners interviewed initially would pass on to other potential respondents their interpretation of the aim of the study. However, it is anticipated that this flaw in the research design was counteracted by comparing husband/wife responses. The congruence that was obtained between responses indicates that this particular bias was kept to a minimum in the present study.

A possible source of differences between the findings of this study and of other research lies in the timing of the measurement of marital closeness. Previous studies examined outcome after reunion. In this study the marriage was assessed during separation. It is quite possible that, if assessed after the prisoners' release, marital breakdown would be more common among the couples where wives were more distant, more distressed, less often used constructive and more often used destructive coping behaviour.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The impact of Enforced Separation Study presents powerful arguments for closer attention to the marital problems of long-term prisoners and their wives. Many of these difficulties are, of course, the result of pressures and prejudices in the broader community, which Corrective Services is powerless to control. The basic reason, for example, that many wives interviewed had been compelled to travel long distances to visit husbands in country gaols is that metropolitan communities are unwilling to accept prisons. Many of the state's gaols have been built outside the major cities, and the department has no option but to use these facilities efficiently.

Within these ultimate constraints, however, the department could take further steps to improve the lot of long-term prisoners and their wives. Research indicates that ultimately such reforms will benefit the whole of the community, through reduced recidivism rates. The steps include:

- (a) *Giving greater publicity to existing schemes for assisting wives to travel long distances for prison visits.*

For several years, the Department of Corrective Services has issued travel warrants to relatives and close friends of prisoners to allow them to visit country gaols. This concession is available to any applicant receiving a pension or social security benefit. Departmental accounting figures indicate, however, that relatively small amounts are being expended on this vote: clearly, as the research suggests, many wives and relatives are not aware of this benefit.

- (b) *Making greater efforts to involve volunteers in assisting the wives and families of prisoners.*

Over the past few years, the Corrective Services Commission increasingly has called on volunteers to supplement services the Department provides. With specialist skills and flexibility, volunteers often can find ways around problems which are difficult to solve through normal bureaucratic means. In the current context, volunteers could be particularly helpful:

- * in providing child-care facilities for wives with very young children, thus freeing them to visit their husbands
 - * in helping transport wives and families who, due to illness or some other reason, are unable to utilise normal public transport.
- (c) *Increasing efforts to provide more relaxed and private facilities for prison visits.*

The department already has made significant achievements in this respect: any further initiatives must, of course, take full account of the balancing requirement for security. One possible initiative would be to introduce play areas for children, within full view of parents, in visiting complexes. Initially this could be done on an experimental basis, in one maximum security gaol.

- (d) *Following the example set by many western countries and allowing conjugal visits for some long-term prisoners.*

As Justice Nagle, Royal Commissioner into New South Wales Prisons, observed (1978), the ideal location for a conjugal visit is completely outside the institution — for example by allowing a prisoner home on day leave. Day leave, however, is not feasible for many long-term inmates serving the initial 12 — 18 months of their sentences: the most vulnerable time for marriages. The only alternative for prisoners in this category is conjugal or family visits within the gaol. Such visits should, however, be subject to the following conditions:

- (i) in accordance with Commission policy of using incentives rather than coercion as a system of control, conjugal visits should be seen as a privilege to be earned by prisoners rather than an automatic right;
- (ii) full consideration must be given to security aspects;
- (iii) conjugal visiting schemes must take full account of the husband and wife's right to self-respect and

dignity. In Victoria, the Department of Community Welfare Services' Private Visit Facility shows how this can be achieved: it has been in operation for a number of years and could provide a suitable model for New South Wales.

- (e) *Issuing the wives of all prisoners with comprehensive information about prison rules, visiting services and community resources available, as soon as the husband has been imprisoned.*

It is possible that volunteers could assist with this task.

- (f) *Making further use of the Corrective Services Welfare Branch, and Probation and Parole staff, to counsel and assist prisoners' wives.*

The Welfare Branch was established twelve months ago, and already has assisted many prisoners with welfare problems. Recently its effectiveness has been increased by rostering staff to work in gaols on weekends. This makes them more accessible to the families of prisoners. The practice should be extended and, if possible, officers from the Probation and Parole Service also made available on a weekend basis.

- (g) *Introducing marital and family counselling into New South Wales prisons.*

Specific support services that might be implemented are mentioned in the body of this report. Before this type of policy initiative is undertaken, there should be close consultation with an expert community-based organisation, such as the Marriage Guidance Council of New South Wales. As soon as possible, the Council should be requested to introduce its counselling services into at least one major gaol in New South Wales, and to assist in training departmental officers in appropriate skills.

- (h) *Further research should be carried out into some issues raised by this study.*

(i) High priority should be placed on in-depth research into the marriages of the first offender for both shorter-term (6 months to 2 years) and longer-term (over 2 years) sentences.

(ii) A comparison between wives facing forced separation for other reasons (eg. seamen's wives) and prisoners' wives would provide valuable information regarding the special problems that arise as a result of prison separation.

(iii) Data from this study should be examined further to determine what variables are associated with differences in wives' levels of emotional and health problems.

(iv) Any innovations that are implemented to provide additional support or to foster greater contact between prisoners and wives should be carefully evaluated.

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FOOTNOTES

1. "In essence, exploratory studies have the primary goal of developing, clarifying and modifying concepts and ideas in order to provide researchable hypotheses for further study. This primary goal can be subdivided into three subordinate purposes:
 - (i) The relatively detailed quantitative and qualitative description of a particular phenomenon.
 - (ii) The development of specific ideas through the systematic use of a specific data collection procedure.
 - (iii) The systematic observation of the potential effects of an independent variable as it is manipulated for a small number of behavioural units in clinical and/or demonstration studies".

(Tripodi, T., Fellin, P. & Meyer, H.J. : 1969, 48)
2. Marital relationship is operationally defined as: any stable live-in relationship between the prisoner and his lover, defacto or wife.
3. "Institutionalisation" is defined as the process of assimilation into the prison subculture whereby the prisoner learns and finally accepts the values, mores, customs and general culture of the prison (Schafer, 1977). It has also been demonstrated that prisoners without family contact during incarceration are six times more likely to become recidivists than those who maintain family ties (Holt & Miller, 1972). Consequently, the prisoner's family is recognised as the most ideal and natural support group to aid in the rehabilitation of the prisoner after release (Burstein, 1977; Holt & Miller, 1972; Zemons & Cavan, 1958).
4. National Survey of long-term prisoners in Australia, report to the Annual Conference of State Ministers and Correctional Services Administrators, Broome, W.A., 1979, p.5, prepared by Grant Wardlaw, Australian Institute of Criminology.

THE EFFECTS OF SEPARATION ON MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS OF PRISONERS AND THEIR WIVES

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The effects of long-term imprisonment on the family relationship of prisoners is important for many reasons. In particular, evidence is reviewed from prior research that suggest that where marriages survive the imprisonment, recidivism is considerably lower.

However, extensive evidence shows that marriages are very vulnerable to longer terms of imprisonment. Variables which appear likely to predict breakdown of marital ties during imprisonment were identified from the review of previous research. In particular, the quality of the marriage before separation appeared to be crucial: marriages recalled as unhappy rarely survived; some marriages recalled as happy did survive while others did not, depending on a number of other variables.

This report describes an exploratory study. The purpose of the study was to identify the factors which may contribute to the survival or breakdown of the marital relationships of long term prisoners in New South Wales and to identify possible phases in which the marital bonds are weakened. The study sought to test hypotheses about relationships between specific variables and also to explore some of the effects of separation through imprisonment.

The relationships between the quality of the marriage of 48 married long-term prisoners and a number of the variables identified in the literature review were examined. Data were also obtained from 21 prisoners whose marriages had ended in divorce during their terms of imprisonment. Additional descriptive data identified the effects of various aspects of imprisonment on the prisoners' wives, including effects on their mood state, health and coping behaviour.

The main hypotheses tested were that commitment to the marriage will be greater where contact is greater, where the wife reports a better marriage before separation, where the wife's emotional state is better during imprisonment and where the prisoner is less 'institutionalised'.

Factors which limit the certainty of conclusions drawn from the results are acknowledged in the report. Allowing for these factors, some important findings can be asserted with reasonable confidence.

The current quality of marriage was judged to be lowest for those who had divorced following imprisonment and to be highest where the wife described the marriage as close. On this basis there was some support for the hypothesis that marriages recalled as having been successful before separation will be successful during imprisonment.

No single measures of contact (namely, frequency of visits, telephone calls and letters) was related to the current closeness of the intact marriages. The closer couples did make greater use of the full range of contact possibilities.

No relationship was found between current closeness of the marriage and the wife's emotional state. This could be due to the fact that nearly all the wives, whether closer or more distant, reported considerable emotional distress and physical health problems. These effects were slightly greater for wives who had been separated from their husbands for between 1 and 2½ years. Turmoil was less but still common where separations were less than one year or longer than 2½ years. The timing of this effect corresponds not only with the time phases noted by New South Wales prison officers but also with findings from previous research which indicate a critical period from approximately 18 months to two years in which marital breakdown may occur after imprisonment.

'Institutionalisation' of the prisoners was not found to be related to closeness of the marriage. This could well have been due to use of an inadequate measure of 'institutionalisation'.

Important findings emerged from the descriptive data. In particular:

1. Both married prisoners and their wives highly valued contact visits, but also reported many dissatisfactions with the limitations of time and privacy during visits. The sense of strain and artificiality made meaningful discussion of mutual concerns almost impossible and greatly constricted normal intimacy of communication.
2. The effect of the imprisonment on prisoners' wives was highly distressing and little meaningful help appears to have reached them. Prisoners' wives appeared completely ignorant of the availability of any services where support could be obtained, and yet these wives were, in most cases, in need of emotional, financial and practical support. The lack of contact with services for prisoners' wives who must be recognised as a group with specific problems, emerged as a very real danger to marital stability.
3. Two styles of adaptation to the separation and to the problems of keeping the marriage alive emerged for wives. One group of wives were emotionally close to their imprisoned husbands, and appeared to build their lives around this closeness. Another group of wives felt more distant and were more involved in various personal development activities. Whether these groups will cope equally well with re-union on the prisoner's release is unclear. Both groups were equally distressed and equally isolated from emotional support.

Recommendations are proposed for policy and action in relation to visiting arrangements and support services for wives, with special reference to the timing of intervention and to tailoring the services offered to the individual needs of each wife.

Additional research which could assist programme development is also recommended.

Key recommendations include:

1. Provision of financial/practical assistance to wives to enable more frequent and longer visits.
2. Increased privacy for visits and provision of child care facilities.
3. Introduction of conjugal visits.
4. Provision of information on available supports to both prisoner and wife.
5. Contact with wives by Welfare Officers immediately after the husband is sentenced.
6. Encouragement for formation of self-help groups among prisoners' wives.
7. Ensure access to normal community marital counselling services for prisoners and wives within the prison.
8. Conduct further research on the marriage of prisoners serving six months to three years.
9. Any innovations introduced should be systematically evaluated.