

## 'Time...lost time'

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# **'TIME... LOST TIME'. EXPLORING HOW PARTNERS OF LONG-TERM PRISONERS EXPERIENCE THE TEMPORAL PAINS OF IMPRISONMENT**

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## *Abstract*

This article identifies and examines the temporal pains of imprisonment as experienced by female partners of male long-term prisoners in the UK. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 33 women, it discusses how long sentences interrupted the women's normative life courses, shaped their daily lives, and resulted in them having to negotiate living within both prison time and outside time. It also highlights the need to go beyond the focus on concentrated family time and consider the extent to which prisoners and their families are deprived of mundane but meaningful family moments. In exploring these temporal pains of imprisonment, it is argued that time is not just a critical aspect of a long-term prisoner's sentence, but also of his partner's experiences. Finally, this article seeks to take the scholarship beyond the assumption that a long-term prisoner's partner exists in a temporal limbo, and discusses the processes of change and adaptation the women interviewed used to cope with their partners' long sentences.

## *Keywords*

Prison time; family time; imprisonment; life course; everyday time; temporality

## *Introduction*

Time and the passage of time are essential features of a prisoner's experience, especially when a sentence is long. Temporal metaphors are often used to describe imprisonment, such as *Dead Time* (River, 1989), *Doing Time* (Matthews, 2009), and *Out of Time* (McKeown, 2001). A long sentence may be especially painful for long-term prisoners (Cohen and Taylor, 1972; Hulley *et al.*, 2016) because it represents a long period of time being taken away from them (Wright *et al.*, 2017). Even though we know that other pains of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958), such as deprivation of autonomy and liberty, extend their reach to families of prisoners (see Condry, Kotova and Minson, 2016 for an overview), there has been very little discussion of how the temporal pains of imprisonment are experienced by these families. In a recent study of prisoners' families and waiting, Foster concluded that even though we know much about the financial, practical, emotional and social effects of a prison sentence on the family, 'what remains lacking is a thorough exploration on the temporal impact of this prison sentence' (Foster, 2016: 16).

This article draws on sociological work on time to shed light on the temporal pains of imprisonment experienced by a sample of female partners of male long-term prisoners in the UK. Drawing on sociological work on time, including the concepts of absolute and relative time (Adam, 2004), and everyday time and life time (Alheit, 1994), as well as research on prison time specifically, it seeks to develop a coherent framework for thinking about the temporal pains of imprisonment in the context

of prisoners' families. Moreover, this article discusses how prison visiting conditions shape family time. Whereas the deprivation of family time is often taken for granted in work on prisoners' families, it has very rarely been theorised and has largely escaped a critical gaze (see Daly, 1996, discussing this in relation to sociology more generally). The theoretical work on family time needs to be married with the sociological work on prisoners' families in order to help us understand how partners of long-term prisoners are deprived of family time and how they experience this deprivation. It is often assumed that family contact in the prison context is *prima facie* a positive phenomenon (Moran, 2013), but this article seeks to problematize family contact and highlights the importance of focusing on *high-quality* contact. It does so by considering how long sentence can raise numerous challenges for *meaningful* family contact within prison walls, showing that even if there are, in quantifiable terms, high levels of family contact, that family time is not necessarily of high quality.

Moreover, this article challenges the commonly-held assumption that when a sentence is long, the partner outside will exist in a quasi-permanent state of waiting (Foster, 2016). This assumption has, perhaps, arisen due to research on prisoners' experiences of time (e.g. Medicott, 1999), which has found that prisoners can become suspended in time. Instead, this article uses the theoretical work on disrupted temporal landscapes in order to understand how the women in this sample reimaged their identities as partners and as women in order to move through time and, thus, cope with their imprisoned partners' long sentences. This, in turn, will help us understand how long sentences affect those outside and inform both the academic and policy debates about imprisonment and its broader impact.

### *Theorising the temporal pains of imprisonment*

It would be inaccurate to suggest that time has been ignored in prison sociology, yet it has rarely been critically explored using concepts drawn from the rich body of sociological work on time more generally and family time specifically (though see Jardine, 2017 for an exception). It is taken for granted that prison deprives the prisoner of family time, and yet prison sociologists have rarely questioned what family time means in this context or discussed the manner in which this deprivation occurs. We also know nothing about the ways in which partners outside experience long-term separation.

Time is everywhere and permeates every social institution. Adam (1990, 2004), in her seminal work on time across a range of different academic disciplines, argued that time is often seen, dualistically, as either absolute or relative. Absolute time, in this context, refers to measurable, quantifiable time – that is, time as measured by clocks and calendars. On the other hand, relative time refers to subjective time – time as the individual experiences it. Prisoners often speak of being “stuck in time” (discussed more fully below), meaning that for them, time seems to pass very slowly indeed. This highlights the subjective, experiential nature of internal time. However, Adam went on to highlight the fact that both absolute and internal time are integral to our temporal experience. Thus, prison sentences are, of course, handed down in absolute time. Prisoners serve X number of weeks, months or years and sentences are thus measured using calendar time. However, that time can pass quickly or slowly, and it can be negotiated and manipulated in one's mind in order to cope with the long sentence, as Medicott (1999), whose work is discussed below, found in her study on prisoners' experiences of time.

This highlights the subjective, internal nature of time and raises the question of how a prisoner's partner might manipulate her own internal times in order to cope with a long sentence.

The present and the future coexist together, with the present shaped by the past and influencing the future (Adam, 2004). It is critical that we understand how time is experienced by the individual outside and this cannot be explored through the lens of absolute time alone. It makes little sense to talk of the partner being separated from the prisoner for 10 years if we do not know whether she experiences this as painful and in what sense, whether this period of separation passes quickly or slowly, and how she adapts to it. Yet this article does not seek to propose that time is relative in the sense that it only exists in as far as it is experienced by the individual. Rather, cultural expectations and biological realities shape how we experience family time. For example, biological time shapes social expectations as to the ideal age for becoming a mother and therefore individuals' expectations for their own life courses. This is closely entwined with gender, which is discussed later in the section.

In order to understand the sense of which time may be an additional pain of imprisonment for women outside, this article draws on the concept of family time to explore temporal deprivation experienced by the prisoner and his partner. A long sentence represents a significant period of time being taken away from the prisoner (Jewkes, 2006). Yet it makes no sense to see time as belonging purely to the individual. Our subjective temporal landscapes are often entwined with those of other people, hence the categories of family time, work time, leisure time, *etc.* Inclusive in these categories are other people; relatives, colleagues and employers, friends and acquaintances, respectively.

Notably, sociological literature on family time has shown that family practices, which are the routines and activities we undertake to enact our family roles (Morgan, 2011) are actively used to create a sense of family out of interconnectedness. Family time is created from memories, and involves togetherness (Daly, 2001). It is, therefore, actively constructed using family practices as building blocks. Imprisonment, of course, reduces the prisoner's opportunity to engage in family practices such as family dinners, school runs, and so on, as recently confirmed in a study on family practices in the prison context (Jardine, 2017). A long sentence, thus, may result in a greater deprivation of family time than a short one as it deprives the prisoner and his family of a larger number of opportunities to engage in family time.

There is a need to unpack this temporal deprivation further. Lost family time may consist of both everyday time and life time (Alheit, 1994). The former refers to everyday, mundane events such going for a walk together, whereas the latter refers to milestone life events like weddings and anniversaries. The prisoner is deprived of an opportunity to participate in both kinds of family time. It is also important to recognise that everyday time ought not to be seen as less important than life time, as research has found that high-quality family time can be found in those spontaneous family activities which are mundane and not necessarily pre-planned or actively put aside as "family time" (Kremer-Sadlik and Paugh, 2007). For example, a spontaneous conversation between a mother who is doing the laundry and her child is not pre-planned "family time", and yet might still be very meaningful. Prison visits – especially Family Days and other child-friendly visits – are intended to be concentrated pockets of dedicated "family time" measured in absolute terms (hours). However, we cannot assume that simply because a family attends dedicated Family Days and/or calls regularly that they share high-quality family time with the prisoner. Understanding the sense in which prison deprives families of mundane but meaningful family interactions, and the consequences of this deprivation for the familial relationship, could inform prison policy and take us beyond a focus on concentrated "family

time” and enhance our understanding of temporal deprivation experienced by prisoners’ families. It is also important to understand how prison conditions (lack of privacy, for example) affect the quality of family time behind prison walls.

Time is relative, and as this study focused on women, it is important to try and understand how their experiences may have been shaped by their gender. We ought to consider how time intersects with gender: for example, by analysing loss of control over fertility and ageing. Studies have shown that biological time remains an integral part of women’s experiences (Shirani and Henwood, 2011), with one study on fatherhood finding that the passage of time was often seen as a problem for the female partner, whose biological clock was deemed to be “ticking”, but not necessarily for the male partner, who was not perceived as having such temporal limits to his fertility (Shirani and Henwood, 2011). This is an example of what can be seen as, more broadly, the embodied passage of time, which refers to how time is experienced as passing through ageing and other physical changes (Moran, 2012).

Notably, even though the concept of a standardized life cycle in which every lifetime event ought to occur at a specific stage of life has been contested (e.g. Neale and Flowerdew, 2003), there is evidence to suggest that people do not always see modern cultural changes – such as older parents becoming normalised in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – as applicable to them. Shirani and Henwood (2011: 63) found that when fatherhood was delayed or interrupted, men appeared to revert to ‘traditionalized mode of biographical certainty, where futures are planned according to specific time horizons’. This was despite the increased cultural acceptance of parenthood at an older age. This interruption of the *imagined* life time, therefore, was experienced as a painful tragedy by men whose fatherhood was delayed. A long sentence could also interrupt the planned life course of prisoners’ partners; and women could feel the passage of time more acutely not only because they see their fertility as time-limited, but also because they often have no easy access to fertility treatment with their imprisoned partners.

Ageing, too, could form an integral part of their experiences, since as discussed above, gender sometimes does play an important part in how people experience the passage of time (Shirani and Henwood, 2011). De Beauvoir’s (1972) seminal work argued that women experience ageing as more painful than men, and more recently, Segal (2013: 13) argued that ‘it is women who have often reported a very specific horror of ageing’, which reflects the cultural obsession with the “perfect woman” as one that is young. This is not to say that men do not experience ageing as painful (especially, for example, when it comes to loss of independence, as highlighted by Armengol (2017)), but rather that there is a stronger cultural tendency to associate ageing in women with a decrease in physical attractiveness and intimate desirability. Since physical intimacy are often an important aspect of intimate partnerships (Condry, 2007), it is important we explore how female partners of long-term prisoners experienced the passage of time and their own ageing when they are unable to engage in physical intimacy due to conjugal visits not being permitted in UK prisons.

A second temporal problem to be examined is the lack of temporal synchronicity. If time is to be understood as relative, then it is possible that it will flow differently for the prisoner than for his partner. Research has found that since prisoners’ daily routines are regimented and lack the differentiation that signifies the passage of time, they often experience time as standing still (Jewkes, 2006). What does this mean for the family relationship? Wahidin (2006: 7) argued that as time goes on, the prisoner’s link to the outside world – including his link to his family – becomes ‘more tenuous’. In order to understand how the prisoner’s link to his family may become more tenuous, we need to

consider Morgan's (2011) typology of familial intimacy: physical intimacy, emotional intimacy and intimate knowledge. The latter is especially pertinent in this context as it refers to knowledge that comes from the interconnectedness of relatives' lives. There is a clear link here to family time, since family time is constructed out of shared family practices, and as a result creates a shared history and high levels of intimate knowledge. This article considers whether the lack of temporal synchronicity results in lower levels of intimate knowledge and what this might, consequently, mean for emotional intimacy.

Finally, it is critical we examine how women outside adapt to long-term imprisonment. Charmaz (1997: 35-6) notes that 'when people feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the crisis, they handle it in small pieces by concentrating on the details' because 'details of the future remain vague and elusive'. It is possible that women whose partners are serving long sentences, especially indeterminate sentences, would utilise this process of chronometricalization – focusing on short-term goals – as a coping strategy. This was certainly found to be the case in cases of delayed conception (Shirani and Hendwood, 2011). Importantly, in her study of suicidal prisoners, Medicott (1999: 227) found that resilient prisoners were able to fill their time meaningfully and break out of the 'grip of an obsession with time'. Those who were not coping and were therefore suicidal, on the contrary, were unable to move through time and experienced a torturous temporal limbo, a protracted present.

Focusing on short-term goals may be envisaged as being a part of a broader process of the partner re-formulating her temporal landscape. Alheit (1994), also taking the view that time is relative as a starting point, argued that when everyday time is disrupted – such as when a crisis like imprisonment occurs – one is forced to re-negotiate their life time frame. For instance, when a woman loses her husband, she cannot engage in the usual family routines, which may 'trigger off retrospective and prospective biographical analyses' (Alheit, 1994: 309) and result in 'a dramatic revision of life perspective' (Alheit, 1994: 310). Likewise, when life time is disrupted, everyday routines may need to change. A person who realises they will never become a parent may, for example, shape their everyday routines around work and hobbies. It is entirely possible, therefore, that partners of long-term prisoners will not exist in a stasis waiting for the prisoners' release. Rather, they will undergo a process of change and adaptation.

### *The Present Study*

This article draws from a study of the experiences of long-term prisoners' partners in the UK. This project sought to examine the extent to which they felt the pains of long-term imprisonment specifically, and how long sentences shaped their relationships with the imprisoned partners. In order to address these questions, I conducted 33 semi-structured interviews with married and unmarried female partners of men serving determinate sentences of 10 years or more<sup>1</sup>, or IPP<sup>2</sup> or life sentences where the prisoner had already served or was expected to serve at least five years in prison. This minimum was chosen because much of the literature uses five years of continuous imprisonment as the definition of a 'long sentence' (e.g. Merriman, 1979; Flanagan, 1981). The participants were

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<sup>1</sup> One participant's partner was serving a sentence which was just under 10 years, but it was deemed appropriate to include her interview regardless of the small shortfall.

<sup>2</sup> Imprisonment for Public Protection: these were indeterminate sentences which were abolished in 2012, but not retrospectively.

recruited using social media, including my professional Twitter account, voluntary organisations working with prisoners' families, word-of-mouth, and a call placed in Inside Time, the national prison newspaper. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or, in three cases, via the telephone. The interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes and were conducted in quiet, neutral locations such as private rooms in public houses, cafes or community centres.

Due to the practical challenges of accessing this population, women at different stages of a partner's long sentence were included. Some were at the early stages of what one participant called 'the prison journey', with the longest experience of a partner's imprisonment being 28 years. However, even those who had not experienced a partner's imprisonment for a long time at the time of the interview were still able to discuss their temporal experiences, such as their normative life courses being interrupted. Similarly, three women who met their partners while working in prisons in various capacities were also included. Although they had not gone through the arrest and sentencing of their partners, these women also experienced the temporal pains of imprisonment.

Almost all the participants were White British, with one Black British and one Mixed Race participant. Their ages ranged from 20 to 70, but most were in their 40s or older. All but two described themselves as coming from ordinary, relatively untroubled backgrounds with little to no prior experiences of the criminal justice system. One woman said she had been to prison herself and another's partner had been in and out of prison for a long time. Most described the relationships in question as stable and generally positive, though one prisoner was described as abusive. As such, most of the participants had spent a significant amount of time together prior to imprisonment, and thus felt deprived of family time. This could be different for women whose imprisoned partners had been largely absent from their day-to-day lives. Thus, this sample's characteristics mean that no wider claims to generalisability can be made. However, these women lived across the UK, including Scotland and Northern Ireland, and between them had visited a very large range of prisons. Some were supported by voluntary organisations, and some were not. Some visited prisons routinely and often, and others only very occasionally due to the distances and stress involved in visiting. As such, the sample was quite diverse. More importantly, considering the practical challenges involved in accessing partners of long-term prisoners – it took 24 months for this project – the number of interviews enabled me to gather rich, detailed data on female partners' experiences of long-term imprisonment.

The recorded interviews were transcribed in full, and data analysis was undertaken using NVivo. The specific type of analysis undertaken was influenced by the thematic analysis tradition (Riessman, 1993). The starting point is pre-existing theory, which guides the analysis; even though the researcher remains open to new theoretical issues emerging out of the data (Riessman, 1993). Interviews were therefore coded individually for themes drawn out of existing literature, and others were identified as they emerged. I then went back to the interviews and uncovered thematic categories spanning numerous interviews. In order to maximise internal validity, I met with a colleague with expertise in this area of research in order to verify the codes and categories arrived at during the process of data analysis. Any contradictory or unusual findings were discussed extensively in order to ensure that a valid explanation for these discrepancies could be provided.

### *Interruption of the Normative Life Course*

From early childhood, individuals project themselves into the future. Our identities are closely entwined with what we imagine our futures to be like – for example, a young woman enacting traditional gender roles may imagine herself getting married and becoming a mother. 'We assume that the future will be intelligent and ordered, with individual trajectories according to perceptions of biographical certainty' (Shirani and Kenwood 2011: 50), and yet long-term imprisonment interrupts these imagined trajectories or normative life courses. Such experiences result in ontological insecurity and are experienced as painful and upsetting, reaching to the very core of the individual's self-identity.

The women in this study certainly felt that the long sentence disrupted the imagined trajectories of their lives. Some descried having had concrete plans for weddings and parenthood prior to their partners' arrests, and imprisonment meant that these plans had to be cancelled or postponed indefinitely. For those who were older, motherhood would no longer be possibility if they were to wait until their partners' release. It was especially painful for the women who did not already have children, such as Susan, but also deeply upsetting for those who had children with previous partners but also wanted children with their imprisoned partners specifically, such as Elly:

**Interviewer:** Do you have any children?

**Susan:** No, I don't. Um... You know, that's a bit of a sore subject, really, because we were thinking about it, about trying, and then this [imprisonment] comes along and it's effectively ruled out our chances.

**Elly:** It hit me quite a few years ago. It was oh... Again, I'm gonna swear. It was – oh, fuck, what have I have?'

**Interviewer:** Did anything trigger that?

**Elly:** I think some... [My husband] says it was the menopause. But I think some of it is age. I think it was realising, actually, we would never had children. I think that maybe that was it.

Underlying this interruption of the women's imagined future is the deprivation of autonomy associated with a prison sentence (Sykes, 1965). Prisoners are of course deprived of much of their autonomy in relation to both mundane issues such as choices of food but also of life choices like parenthood. The partners, however, also experienced what is, in effect, a deprivation of *temporal autonomy*. Elly did not say that she been actively planning to become a mother again, for example, but suddenly finding herself deprived of that option caused her considerable anguish. In their study on fatherhood, Shirani and Henwood found that when conception was delayed, men felt a 'lack of control over time' (2011: 53). In the context of imprisonment, this was not simply nature interrupting the women's imagined life courses – rather, separating them from their partners *was* the intended

consequence of long-term imprisonment and this deliberate nature of the deprivation made it all the more painful.

There was also a strong sense in which time was experienced as passing in an embodied manner (Moran 2012). Physicality may be an especially important aspect of partners' experienced because, as Condry (2007) noted in her study of families of serious offenders, physical intimacy is often an integral part of intimate relationships. Loss of fertility with age, of course, is in and of itself one way in which the passage of time can be experienced in an embodied manner. In addition, many of the women also felt the pressures of ageing and associated it with a loss of attractiveness, reinforcing De Beauvoir's (1972) and Segal's (2013) analyses of women's experiences of ageing. Susan, who was in her early 20s, felt that her 'best years' were passing by without her being able to engage in a sexual relationship with her partner, as conjugal visits are not permitted in the UK. Casey, also in her 20s, similarly, described not wanting to wait until her partner's release to get married. She felt that were she to get married at an older age, she would not have 'nice' wedding photos, alluding to her physical appearance:

**Casey:** We can get married when we're older, but still... You might call this vain, but you don't wanna get married when you're older. You want nice wedding pictures...

In England and Wales, the average age at which women get married is 34.6, and it has been rising since the 1970s (Office for National Statistics 2017). It is therefore becoming more common for women to get married later, and Casey would be in her mid to late 30s at the time of her partner's release. Yet the experiences of these younger women in this study suggest that cultural changes are not always applied by individuals to their own imagined life courses. Women like Susan and Casey, with their temporal landscapes altered by long-term imprisonment and being largely deprived of their autonomy over these aspects of their lives, reverted to 'traditionalized mode of biographical certainty' (Shirani and Henwood, 2011: 63).

Those who were older also spoke of their plans for retirement being dramatically altered; a further way in which their imagined lives at an older age were changed by a long sentence. Many had been expecting to spend their later years with their partners, looking after and caring for one another. Being older, some feared they or their partners would die or that their health would deteriorate and they would not be able to look after one another. Iris and Anne spoke about this in their interviews:

**Iris:** Oh, and I saw, at our age you tend to think of these things. I don't want him to die, I want him to go home... And if anything goes wrong... But both of us have this concern for each other. Which, of course, is again a stressful thing.

**Anne:** There's a fear from it too, that because of our age, one of us will die, before release. You know, and that's a fear. Because of our age, you know?

### *The Deprivation of Couple and Family Time*

One of the most prominent themes to come out of the interviews is the deprivation of family time. There is, however, a need to theorize this temporal pain of imprisonment carefully. Echoing Alheit's (1994) analysis of everyday time and life time, the participants noted that they were deprived of both the mundane, everyday family time and life time events. Despite being able to regularly communicate by phone, letters, emails and see their partners during visits, many still felt that the 'hard fact' was that they were 'leading separate lives' (Elsa). In the UK, visits are infrequent, and most were able to visit for an hour or two, once or twice a fortnight. Phone calls usually lasted a few minutes, and some prisons capped them at 10 minutes. Alice summarised this deprivation of family time neatly in her interview:

**Alice:** Time... Time, to me. Lost time. 28 years – long time. [...] When he left me I was in my 30s, I think, when he went away. And now I'm in my 60s. So we can't get those years back. We haven't got the benefit of years and years together, like other couples.

Firstly, the women described being deprived specifically of couple time. Of course, this included couple events such as anniversaries – events which were painful annual reminders of the fact of separation for many. However, they were also deprived of mundane but meaningful everyday togetherness that comes out of sharing a household and being a couple, and not necessarily deliberately intended to be "couple time", like a date or an anniversary celebration (see discussion of Kremer-Sadlik and Paugh, 2007, above). For the partners who shared a household, imprisonment resulted in a deprivation of the prisoner's everyday presence, including spontaneous expressions of affection, such as hugging each other. One woman, who met her partner while working in a prison, said she missed washing the dishes with him, for example. For her, this mundane activity had created a sense of closeness and she missed these moments many years after she stopped working in the prison. Another spoke of her husband not being able to spontaneously give her a bouquet of flowers, but having to painstakingly arrange such gifts via intermediaries, such as their children.

The women were also deprived of, more broadly, of opportunities to engage in activities that would have helped them construct family time with their partners. These activities included targeted family time, such as family meals. Rebecca, for example, described the big family dinners that did not take place any longer because her husband was in prison. It was not simply that he was not present at these meals, but they did not take place at all because he had been such a focal point of such family activities. Some also spoke of feeling the loss of less structured but still important family time, such as their partners 'pottering in the garden' (Anne) or cooking.

Even when the women were not directly deprived of family time, the family time they did have was still altered by the long sentence. Some participants described important family events being different without the presence of their partners. For example, as many of the women and their partners were aged 40 and older, the participants often discussed relatives dying and their partners not being there

to attend funerals. The women themselves could attend these events, but were not able to make them a full part of the family's shared history, and therefore felt that a significant part of the familial "puzzle" was missing. They were hyperaware of the lack of interconnectedness of their and their partners' lives, highlighting the importance of interconnectedness for family time (Morgan, 2011).

The lack of togetherness and temporal interconnectedness could explain why concentrated prison family time was seen as being of poor quality. As a result of being deprived of everyday togetherness and the ability to share in the minutiae of family life, levels of intimate knowledge (Morgan, 2011) were reduced. Most of the women recognised that for the prisoner, time stood still, confirming Jewkes' (2006) study on prison time. Lucy, for example, said that 'he's in the place, doing the same thing'. Prisoners were unable to live through the changes happening in their families' lives on a day-to-day basis. Children grew older, partners made new friends and changed jobs, developed new interests and made new friends. As time passed, family life as the prisoner remembered it and as it actually was became increasingly different.

As a result of this lack of temporal interconnectedness, dedicated prison family time – such as visits – became challenging and at times awkward, even when communication patterns were regular and reasonably frequent, such as daily phone-calls. Communication became disjointed, as prisoners had 'less and less to say in letters' (Elly). 'There's not really a lot he can tell me', lamented Cara, who said her letters were much more detailed, as she had much more to share. Yet even if the partner outside was determined to share the minutia of her life, it could be difficult for the prisoner to relate to what was happening to her because he was unable to live through these occurrences with her. Although dedicated family time still took place, including visits and phone-calls, this family time was perceived as being of relatively poor quality:

**Elsa:** By the end of the visit you're frantically scrabbling around trying to think of something to say. You know?

**Interviewer:** And why do you think that is?

**Elsa:** Well, part of it is talk... We talk every day on the phone, as you've gathered. Um... I suppose... [long pause] I don't really know. I suppose at the moment it's the hard fact of leading separate lives. Very often some of the things I have in my life, he just wouldn't understand, wouldn't relate to. [...] I mean mostly, in my previous work, he's known who I've worked with. Whereas if I tell him so-and-so, he would think – 'who's so-and-so?'. D'you know what I mean? It just wouldn't have any significance to him.

If the couple had children, maintaining high levels of intimate knowledge, and engaging in *high-quality* family time across prison walls, was even more difficult. Children grew up and changed quickly, and the prisoner was not living through these changes with the children's mother. He was not there to engage in spontaneous everyday parenting activities, which have been shown to be important parts of family time (Kremer-Sadlik and Paugh, 2007). The women were left to parent largely on their own. This, then, created tension when the imprisoned parent attempted to engage in or create family time.

The father of Rachel's children, for example, wanted to know his daughters would like as presents for special family occasions, which caused problems:

**Rachel:** Just think about how much he's missed, things have changed. How much it costs... Kids aren't asking for dollies, they're asking for iPads. And... Do you know what I mean? He'd say – 'how much are they?'. I'm like – '300-odd quid'. Yeah, I'll get three. [sarcasm]

Children were not used to their father or step-father being an active part of their everyday lives and only saw him during visits or spoke to him on the phone. Some became distanced from the prisoner and this too meant that it was difficult to motivate the children to engage in meaningful family time during visits, especially as the children grew older and wanted to spend time with friends rather than visiting a prison. Sally said that her teenage son, for example, did not like to visit as he got bored during visits. This indicates that he did not feel sufficient emotional intimacy and/or intimate knowledge (Morgan, 2011) vis-a-vis the prisoner to engage in a meaningful visit.

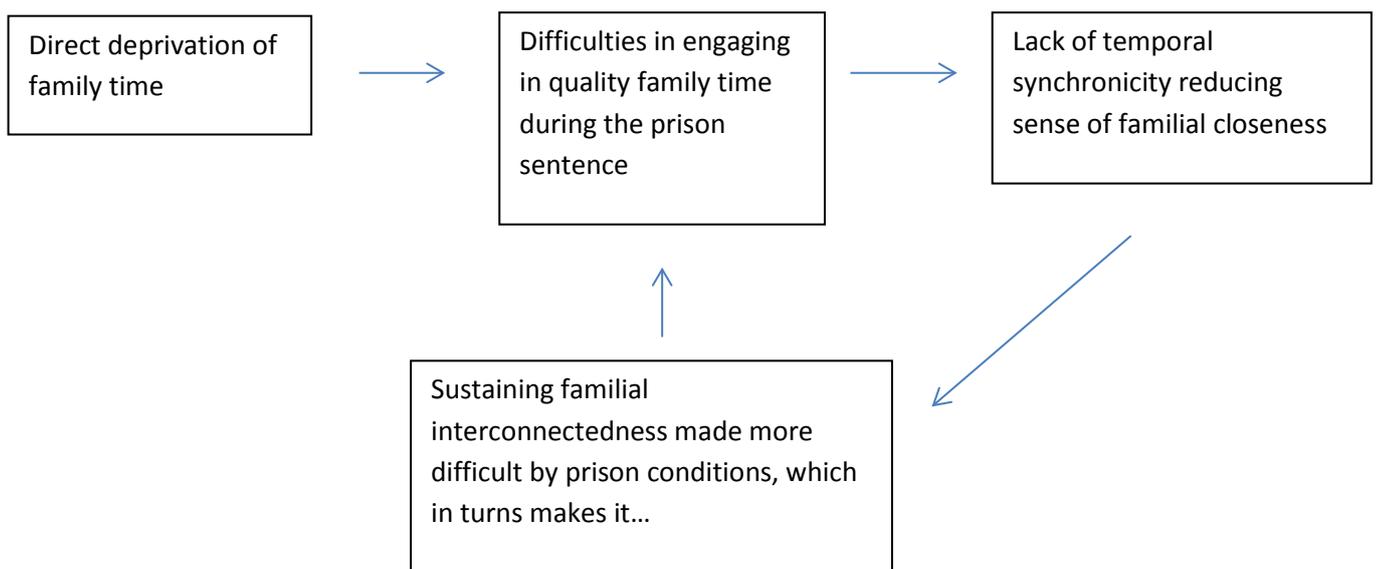
In addition to the lack of temporal synchronicity damaging a sense of familial connectedness, poor visiting conditions also meant that dedicated family time in prison was not of high-quality. Since the men were serving long sentences, the offences in question were serious, such as homicide and sex offences. The prisoners were, at least at some point, all housed in high-security prisons. Visits were, therefore, highly scrutinised, and there were numerous rules as to what visitors were not allowed to do. For instance, many of the participants lamented not being able to engage in physically intimate contact beyond one hug and one kiss at the beginning and at the end of the visits (there are no conjugal visits in the UK). Again, there was next to no opportunities offered for spontaneous expressions of affection as they were scrutinised by officers and CCTV cameras. Visitors had to sit in a specific place and act in a specific way, with children being unable to run about and engage in play. This confirms much of what we already know about the challenges of visiting prisoners (e.g. Condry, 2007, XXXX, 2016, Lanskey *et al.*, 2018). What has not yet been carefully discussed in relation to prison visits is what these conditions mean for the quality of family time and emotional intimacy. Judy declared that visits were 'cold and barren', and Elly said that noisy, strictly-controlled visits reduced the levels of emotional intimacy between her and her husband.

**Elly:** If you're sitting next to a really noisy family, you can't really tell them to shut up because that won't really go down well. And the other thing is physically, you can't touch one another. And that creates quite a lot of distance in your relationship. And that's happened to us.

Phone-calls, which the women could share with their imprisoned partners more often than visits, were listened to (in some prisons, this was made obvious by audible clicking noises) and some letters were read by prison staff. This also made it difficult, for some women, to share personal details and in doing so create familial interconnectedness. One participant found this lack of privacy meant she felt unable to discuss her health with her partner. As a result, the prisoner's link to the partner and the extended

family became more tenuous, and the special “family time” (e.g. visits and calls) was inadequate when it came to bridging the widening gap between the prisoner and his family. However, it is often assumed that *more* visits, *more* phone-calls and *more* opportunities for dedicated family time would be good for prisoners and families alike (see Farmer, 2017). This is far too simplistic if such dedicated family contact is poor in quality.

It is therefore clear that the deprivation of family time is a complex dynamic process in the context of long-term imprisonment, as shown in Figure 1. The experiences of engaging in family time can change over the course of the sentence, and this needs to be recognised. We also need to understand how prison conditions shape family contact, and cannot assume that *more* family contact will necessarily result in qualitatively better family contact. Firstly, partners said they were directly deprived of family time, and drew attention to the importance of mundane but meaningful family time. Secondly, it was difficult to engage in family time in prison and, therefore, difficult to sustain high levels of familial interconnectedness. Over time, this created emotional distance as the prisoner and his family lived increasingly separate lives and as the family outside changed. Prison conditions once again exacerbated this, making it difficult to ensure that the prisoner was able to take part in family time and remain an active member of the family. He was, temporally, left behind in the past. This separateness, in turn, made it even more difficult to engage in quality family time as the sentence drew on.



**Figure 1**

*Waiting and Re-adjusting Life Time and Everyday Time*

One of the questions raised earlier in this article was whether a long sentence meant that the partners outside lived in a quasi-permanent state of waiting. Foster (2016: 13) found that in her study on prisoners’ families and waiting, families did exist in a ‘state of waiting’. She notes that families experienced both short-term waiting (e.g. for a visit) and long-term waiting (e.g. for the prisoners’ release). Despite the fact that her work was not focused on families of long-term prisoners, the

implication was that they too would experience very long-term waiting. However, this study found that for most of the women interviewed, this was not the case.

In very simple terms, the women did discuss waiting. They waited to go into visits and waited for the prisoners' phone-calls, for example. Yet their lives were not defined or consumed by waiting. One of the women in Foster's study (2016: 14) stated that her life was 'on hold' as she waited for the prisoner to be released. This did not appear to be the case for the partners of long-term prisoners' in this study – rather, they used chronometricalization (Charmaz, 1997) to help them move forward in time. They went to work, engaged in parenting, hobbies and housework. In other words, as Elsa put it, most were 'trying to consciously go on with life' as best as they could. Many discussed taking things 'one day at a time' and focusing on short-term goals. Elsa's metaphor of long-distance running made this clear:

**Elsa:** He used to do a lot of long-distance running, I did one or two races with him. Around the Peak District, 40 miles. The way you get through this is breaking it down into little bits. You think of the whole course, you think – 'I can't run that!'. But break it down to five miles, then another five miles, to this landmark and this landmark, becomes possible. [...] ...next year, with any luck, we may be able to transfer him to mainland prison. Which would make visiting an awful lot easier.

How can we understand this? It is possible that when a sentence is long, the partner cannot simply put her life on hold. She had to take care of immediate family affairs, both financially and practically. Most of the women in this study spoke of both immediate and long-term arrangements that had to be made upon arrest and conviction. This included financial and business affairs, looking after the prisoners' and extended families' wellbeing, and so on. In other words, unlike the suicidal prisoners in Medicott's (1999) study, the women in this study had plenty to fill their time with.

Moreover, when a sentence is long and indeterminate, as was the case for almost one half of the participants in this study, the partner outside does not know when the prisoner will be released. Foster (2016) suggested that in these circumstances, there is no end to the family's waiting. Again, this appeared to not be the case for the women in this study. This is not to say that the women were not waiting for their partner's release. Rather, their lives were not consumed by waiting. With the release date either far in the future or altogether uncertain, most of the women focused on short-term goals, such as the date the prisoner would be moved to a lower-category prison. This was made clear in Elsa's interview, quoted above.

Alheit's (1994) analysis, constructed upon the concept of relative time, highlights the subjective nature of time and can explain how the women manipulated their temporal experiences to cope with their partners' long sentences and, thus, did not exist in a semi-permanent temporal limbo. The women knew they were to be separated from their partners for a long period of time, and thus rebuilt their temporal landscapes in order to avoid becoming consumed by the present. They refocused their futures on career progression, being good mothers or grandmothers, or hobbies. Anne, who was used to spending all her time with her husband, said that she had to adjust to being on her own, going out for tea without her husband, and even travelling alone. She said she needed to enjoy life and could not just live waiting for him to be released. Although she had been planning to semi-retire, she was

now going to stay in full-time employment. Another participant said she was focusing on her business, and a third on finding out whether she was going to retain her job.

It appears that the women's lives were not consumed by waiting because they were able to transform their life time and everyday time. Alheit (1994) suggested that when someone's everyday time was interrupted by a crisis like imprisonment or death of a partner, she could not continue living according to the set everyday schedule. Most of the women in this study, of course, had to change their everyday schedules because their partners were no longer living with them. This, in turn, resulted in a reformulation of their life times too, as they became more focused on work, grandchildren, etc. Likewise, the interruption of their imagined life courses meant that everyday schedules had to be adjusted – for example, some became dominated by paid employment. These shifts were less pronounced for those younger women who were already career-oriented, but represented a significant change for those women who were older and/or had engaged in more traditional gender roles, like Anne.

None of this should be taken to imply that the women no longer cared for their imprisoned partners. Most of the participants described themselves as being in close, caring relationships. However, they also realised that they needed to have a life outside of the prison and could not put their own lives on hold for a long and sometimes indefinite period of time. This was easier for some, whose partners were supportive of them going on holidays and otherwise enjoying their lives, but others felt a sense of guilt due to enjoying themselves without their partners. Even so, these women too felt this was necessary in order for them to cope with their partners' long sentence. Thus, unlike those prisoners who were unable to cope with time in Medicott's study (1999: 229), the women in this study were 'able to consider the future, and make representations of it to themselves'.

### *Concluding Comments*

This article analysed the experiences of a sample of female partners of long-term prisoners in the UK, and yet much remains to be explored. This study focused on women, and therefore this article highlighted how their experiences were shaped by their gender. If we, as a society, choose to imprison men for a long time, we need to comprehend and account for the indirect consequences of such prison sentences, including the temporal pains experienced by their female partners. This is especially pertinent as there are no conjugal visits in UK prisoners, and accessing assisted reproductive technologies is very challenging indeed. It is dependent on the state allowing the prisoner and his partner to access these services, and only a small handful of couples have been successful in their requests (see Codd, 2015). Yet much remains to be learned about how the temporal pains of imprisonment as experienced by those outside. For example, the temporal experiences of male partners and extended family members may be different. Moreover, 'long sentences' are defined differently in different countries. In the US, for instance, sentences tend to be much longer – how might a partner experience time if her husband gets a sentence of over 100 years?

However, this article showed that the temporal pains of imprisonment are complex, shaped by gender, age, and prison visiting conditions. They are also best seen as a dynamic process during which the deprivation of family time further erodes familial closeness. This article highlighted the ways in which women's everyday time and life time are transformed by imprisonment, and explored the manner in

which they were deprived of family time. It challenged the view that more or longer visits or more frequent or longer phone calls are necessarily the best way of envisaging family time in the prison context, and instead showed that spontaneous, everyday interactions can also be important for familial closeness. The findings from this study suggest that we need to look into ways in which prisoners might be able to engage in such spontaneous, everyday family time.

Despite the transformative impact of a long sentence, the women were, nonetheless, resilient and able to continue living their lives outside. They did not appear to be existing in a state of quasi-permanent waiting, as previous research (Foster, 2016) appeared to suggest they might. This could be important when it comes to supporting partners, as it shows that they may need to be encouraged to reformulate both their everyday and their life course temporalities. By drawing on sociological work on time and family practices, this article also develops the previous research on not just long-term imprisonment, but also on family time and family practices.

As discussed in the introductory section, we have long come to realise that imprisonment can have a dramatic and negative impact on families outside. Yet how they experience time, a key feature of long sentences, has received very little academic attention to date. In focusing on the temporal aspects of their experiences, this article once again highlighted the fact that the effects of imprisonment reach far beyond prison walls and shapes the temporalities of those outside. The fact that the women in this study experienced a range of temporal pains strengthens the case for greater support for families of prisoners, but can also add to the discussion of how and when we use imprisonment as a way of punishment. Recognising that families outside 'do time' as well as prisoners can also strengthen the case for shrinking the prison estate in England and Wales.

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