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Imprisonment and Family Separation: A Literature Review

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Imprisonment often has a devastating effect on the prisoner and his family relationships, and can be the experience which locks the person into a criminal career. Maintaining close contact with the family during imprisonment, and re-entering a satisfactory role in the family on release, appears to prevent many of these effects. Evidence from studies of prisoners of war and of imprisoned offenders suggests that where the wife assesses the quality of the marriage prior to imprisonment as poor there is little chance of successful re-integration on release from prison.

If wives assess the marriage prior to separation as satisfactory, then successful re-integration upon release will be a function of the following:

1. High degree of contact between husband/wife during imprisonment.
2. Wife's satisfactory emotional functioning during the separation period.
3. Husband's low level of "institutionalization" during imprisonment.
4. The ability of the wife to keep the husband/father's role open in the family structure.
5. Use by the wife of "direct action" coping patterns.

Evidence for the above claims about the value of, and the factors affecting the survival of, the marriage, are set out below.

1. Personal and family 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, routinization "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 'institutionalization' is fostered (Sykes and Messinger, 1970). 'Institutionalization' 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).

For the wives who are 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).

SUMMARY

Empirical studies are reviewed that support the hypotheses that maintaining family ties during the incarceration of an offender will reduce institutionalization during imprisonment and recidivism and parole failure after release.

Evidence suggests that, if quality of marriage prior to imprisonment is high, subsequent marital stability will be a function of the following variables during imprisonment: high contact between husband/wife; the wife's satisfactory emotional functioning and use of constructive coping techniques; and maintenance of the prisoner's role in the family structure.

It is suggested that the hypotheses generated out of the literature review require local testing. If it is demonstrated that marital breakdown is one of the dysfunctional effects of the current prison system, intervention techniques and policy changes are proposed.

Finally, some cautions regarding the causal direction of the relationships are expressed, and potential management consequences of prescribed policy changes are discussed. These points further demonstrate the importance of careful evaluation of any policy change based on the hypotheses.

The initial disorganization 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 18 months to 2 years imprisonment, the prisoner very often becomes emotionally inaccessible. Even though wives establish a very high level of contact early in the sentence, when permitted by prison policies, they are unable to maintain this level of contact/communication in the face of their husbands' emotional withdrawal, and their own feelings of insecurity, and thus marital ties weaken (Merriman, 1979).

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2. Effects of family contact

It is well documented that the degree of institutionalization for long-term prisoners is kept to a minimum 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 subculture.

Research indicates that *continued* family contact will play an important part in neutralising this institutionalization process for prisoners. Furthermore, it has been suggested that pre-release anxiety may decrease with the certain knowledge that a supporting family will be waiting (Schafer, 1977).

It has also been demonstrated that prisoners without family contact during incarceration are 6 times more likely to become recidivists than those who maintain family ties (Holt and Miller, 1972). Consequently, the prisoner's family is recognized as the most ideal and natural support group to aid in the rehabilitation of the prisoner after release (Burstein 1977; Zemons and Cavan, 1958; Holt and Miller, 1972).

3. Importance of quality of prior relationship

In adjustment to stress of war separations, a relatively predictable roller coaster type pattern of adjustment can be identified involving initial disorganization, recovery and reorganization (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 characterized by tenuous relationships with relatives and neighbours. Both of these types of family lack the essential supportiveness from friends and relatives and in turn find adjustment very slow and difficult. They tend to withdraw into anonymity to fester inwardly rather than risk being rejected (Hill, 1949).

In a U.S. 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 separation, and then reunion after imprisonment. That is, wives who had previously coped well with their marriages were tenacious in their plans to reunite 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 separations due to war 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 reunion (McCubbin, Dahl, Lester, and Ross, 1975).

4. Other predictors of marital survival

Length of marriage and wives' emotional dysfunction during the separation period were also highly significant factors for

successful family reunion (McCubbin, *et al*, 1975). Findings indicated that a well established relationship which was perceived by the wife as being stable and enduring prior to separation was essential for successful re-integration. Results 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 husband/father 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 considering the latter, it would be expected that constant family contact experienced during long-term imprisonment, would create more opportunities for the father's role to be maintained in the family structure. "Contact" here is defined as degrees of interaction with wife/children by phone, mail, visits, contact visits, day leave, week-end leave etc.

In a later study, six coping patterns used by wives of prisoners of war were identified (McCubbin, Dahl, Lester, Benson, and 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:

1. Maintaining family integrity.
2. Seeking resolution and expressing feelings.
3. Establishing autonomy and maintaining family ties.
4. Establishing independence through self-development.

The two other coping patterns were anxiety reaction patterns that were potentially dysfunctional. These were:

1. Reducing anxiety.
2. Maintaining the past, and a dependence on religion.

Implications for practice and research in New South Wales

A number of implications for local practice follow directly from the evidence reviewed above.

The hypotheses generated out of the literature review certainly require testing locally. If findings from such research verify the critical effects of family break-down resulting from the incarceration of one partner, then a review of the present system might be recommended.

Some suggestions for maintaining family ties might include minimizing the incidence and length of prison terms for first offenders by implementing half-way houses and/or shorter sentences.

Other options could also be utilized, such as modifying the system to strengthen family contacts. For example, contact

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visits and day leave could be increased, and conjugal visits introduced. 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 subsequent marital stability and parole success (Burstein, 1977).

Professional support for wives/children in dealing with the effects of separation such as loneliness, sexual frustration, loss of emotional ties and loss of practical supports could also be fruitful. Furthermore, marriage counselling for husbands and wives inside the prison during the separation period might be helpful, not only in maintaining marital ties while in prison, but also in preparing the couple to cope effectively with the adjustments required for successful reunion.

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 and 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.

The institutionalization of prisoners into passive, dependent, withdrawn behaviour has functioned in the past as an aid in the management of the prison system that Emery (1970) has identified as inherently unstable. Suggested changes will, if effective, reduce such institutionalization. These new approaches could therefore present the challenge of devising new and less destructive methods to manage the built-in conflicts and strains of secured institutions. Failure to meet this management challenge could result in unintended and undesirable consequences flowing from innovations that are, in other ways, valuable.

A second reservation must also be mentioned. All the research reviewed relies on correlations found over time. The studies certainly show that there are relationships between marital stability and institutionalization during imprisonment and parole success, recidivism and marital adjustment following release. It is possible that some other unrecognized factors actually control all of these variables, and could thus account for the relationships observed. If this is so, then improving marital stability during imprisonment will not affect the other variables. It is also possible that recidivism causes post-release marital breakdown rather than marital success inhibiting recidivism. Ultimately, the test of all these ideas is to implement and evaluate intervention techniques based on the hypotheses. Demonstration that marital breakdown can be reduced and that this in turn reduces institutionalization and subsequent recidivism will, if achieved, be a firm basis for policy change.

To conclude, this review has identified evidence in support of many changes to reduce apparently dysfunctional effects of imprisonment, and suggests that such changes could have multiple benefits to the offender, the offender's family and to the community. It remains to ensure that the hypotheses hold under local conditions, that action based on the hypotheses has the desired effects and that other difficulties possibly created by the changes are recognized and effectively counteracted.

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