17

Sharing Imprisonment

Experiences of Prisoners and Family Members in Portugal

Rafaela Granja

Introduction

In the last decade, the body of literature that focuses on the effects of imprisonment beyond prison walls has been expanding. There has been a consolidation of perspectives that challenge prisons’ physical boundaries and point to a need to place correctional institutions in permanent articulation with its several implications both inside and outside walls (Combessie, 2002; Gowan, 2002; Marchetti, 2002; Comfort, 2007; Cunha, 2014). So far, most of the academic debate has focused on mapping the forms whereby prisoners’ relatives negotiate relationships and experience a wide range of economic, relational, social, and material implications during imprisonment (Aungles, 1994; Girshick, 1996; Braman, 2004; Christian, 2005; Condry, 2007; Comfort, 2008; Touraut, 2012; Smith, 2014; Jardine, 2017) However, there has been little understanding of prisoners’ own views regarding the challenges associated with the upholding of family ties during custodial sentences (Dixey and Woodall, 2012; Thomas and Christian, this volume).

Prisons constitute a complex and multifaceted reality. Besides being embedded in and shaped according to specific historical periods, socio-political contexts, and institutional management styles (Foucault, 1975; Barak-Blantz, 1981; Wacquant, 2000), the ways whereby correctional facilities are experienced by distinct social groups is plural. Gresham Sykes, in one of the prison studies’ seminal texts, highlighted the rich multiplicity of perspectives that necessarily frames research focused on correctional environments. According to the author, the exploration of different points of view, which sometimes complement and other times contradict each other, allows to discern the most significant elements of the several dimensions of prison social life and structure.

The realities of imprisonment are ( … ) multi-faceted; there is not a single true interpretation but many, and the meaning of any situation is always a complex of several, often conflicting viewpoints. This fact can actually be an aid to research concerning the prison rather than a hindrance, for it is the simultaneous consideration of divergent viewpoints that one begins to see the significant aspects of the prison’s social structure. One learns not to look for the one true version; instead, one becomes attuned to contradiction (Sykes, 1958, 148).

The contributions of such seminal text have been widely incorporated in contemporary literature. Present-day studies take into consideration dissimilar types of involvement with the criminal justice system, such as professionally oriented (Liebling, 2000; Crawley, 2004; Bennett and Crewe, 2008), motivated by social and familial ties (Aungles, 1994; Condry, 2007; Comfort, 2008; Touraut, 2012), and imposed by conviction (Crewe, 2009; Rowe, 2011). Simultaneously, studies
have also been incorporating the diverse experiences of imprisonment through the differentiated lens of gender (Carlen and Worrall, 2004; Almeda, 2005; Bandyopadhyay, 2006), age (Codd, 2000; Crawley, 2007), and race and ethnicity (Woldoff and Washington, 2008; Western and Wildeman, 2009; Haskins and Lee, 2016).

Drawing upon the importance of taking into consideration the plurality of perspectives and social positioning factors, in this chapter I shall focus on prisoners and relatives’ narratives to analyse how they negotiate relationships in the shadow of prison and to explore their views on the relational, familial, social, and economic implications of imprisonment. Engaging in a constant balance between the elements that articulate the prison world and its external social perimeter enables the adaptation, diversification, and enrichment of the analytical gaze, turning it sensitive to the different gradations that permeate the socio-familial implications associated with imprisonment, both behind and beyond prison walls.

The analysis is based in the Portuguese context, a country that has been witnessing a substantial increase in the prison population and currently has a total prison population rate of 135 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants, which, in the European scenario, positions it as a very punitive country.\(^1\) Among the information publicly available about the socio-demographic characterization of the Portuguese prison population, there is no data on family-related dimensions, such as marital status, number of children, or composition of the household in the period prior to imprisonment. The absence of a method that collects, analyses, and disseminates information about the familial situation of prisoners is representative of the invisibility of the theme on the public debate, further reproduces its marginality in the political agenda, and poses several challenges to research (Knudsen, this volume). In addition to being invisible in the institutional domain, academic research on prisoners’ families in Portugal is just taking its first steps. The existing contributions consist of the study of Manuela Ivone Cunha that analyses how familial relationships are reconfigured behind and beyond prison walls upon scenarios of concentrated incarceration in heavily penalized lower-class neighbourhoods (Cunha, 2008), and one small-scale research that has analysed the impact of imprisonment on intimate relationships from the perspective of prisoners and their wives (Carmo, 2008). Therefore, this is the first in-depth and comprehensive Portuguese research that jointly takes into consideration prisoners’ and relatives’ views on the social and familial implications of imprisonment.

In Portugal, the construction of the welfare state was delayed until the 70s, after the fall of the dictatorial regime (1933–1974). In spite of the welfare state expansion during the last few decades, in Portugal, welfare state mechanisms are still largely underdeveloped (Alves, 2015). Taking into consideration this rudimentary state support, several scholars have been characterizing Portugal as a ‘welfare society’ (Santos, 1993), that is, a society that is largely characterized by the prevalence of family provision as a way of compensating for the shortcomings and inadequacies of the welfare State system (Portugal, 1999; Wall et al., 2001). The relevance of informal networks, and especially of family support, in Portugal hence makes it a very relevant case study for exploring how social support is enacted upon imprisonment (Cunha, 2008; Granja, 2016).

\(^1\) http://www.prisonstudies.org/country/portugal.
Experiences of Prisoners and Family Members in Portugal

Imprisonment and family: (in)visibilities

In recent years, there has been a growth, in scope, impact, and depth, of studies focused on prisoners’ families. Contributions are increasingly anchored on different socio-geographic contexts, thus extending the analytical focus to variable legal, penal, and social settings, as this edited collection illustrates in a particularly elucidative manner. This body of literature is, therefore, increasingly aware of the specific implications of imprisonment to different social groups—such as children of prisoners (Knudsen, 2016; Smith, 2014; Wakefield and Wildeman, 2013; Minson, this volume; Oldrup and Frederiksen, this volume), prisoners’ partners (Codd, 2000; Comfort, 2008; Fishman, 1990; Girshick, 1996; Kotova, this volume), prisoners’ extended family (Braman, 2004; Condry, 2007; Christian and Kennedy, 2011; Touraut, 2012), and communities highly affected by imprisonment (Clear, 2007; Cunha, 2008).

In general, studies have been showing how prisoners’ relatives hold in common a wide range of experiences, such as reorienting routines and deferring future plans (Christian, 2005; Touraut, 2012), dealing with the reverberations of social stigma (Condry, 2007; Hutton, this volume), rearranging family responsibilities (Turanovic et al., 2012), actively maintaining and constructing displays of affection and commitment (Granja, 2016; Jardine, 2017), addressing issues related to prison visitation (Hutton, 2016), facing a reduction of available resources (Grinstead et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2007), experiencing the repercussions of punitive surveillance and control on their own lives (Comfort, 2008; Jardine, this volume), and managing the paradoxical (de)stabilizing effects of imprisonment (Comfort, 2008; Godoi, 2010; Sampson, 2011; Touraut, 2012; Turanovic et al., 2012; Smith, 2014, 187–93; Turney, 2015). Nevertheless, the particular constellation of difficulties and challenges that each family face upon imprisonment is dependent on several elements. That is, imprisonment constitutes a polysemous force whose social, economic, and relational implications vary according to the type of crime committed by prisoners, the kind of structural disadvantage that individuals face(d) previous and during imprisonment, and the pre-existing and current social and relational dynamics (Morris, 1965). In this regard, in the United Kingdom, drawing upon the experiences of relatives of serious offenders, Rachel Condry has shown how these individuals deal with particular issues related to social exclusion and stigma. According to the author, relatives of serious offenders suffer several experiences of stigmatization that range from personal shame towards other people’ avoidance, verbal abuse, and even physical attack (Condry, 2007). However, these experiences of discrimination are not homogenous among different social contexts and distinct social groups (Hutton, this volume). Analysing the Portuguese context, Manuela Ivone Cunha has shown how in certain urban neighbours, highly segregated and levelled by poverty and social exclusion, the centralized action of law enforcement institutions—legitimized by specific criminal prosecution policies aimed at controlling retail drug trafficking—has led to the concomitant and consecutive detention of individuals from the same social networks (Cunha, 2008). In these particular social environments, the recurrent presence of imprisonment implies an additional blurring of the connotations associated with criminal and prison stigma, not because it becomes dissipated—in certain social contexts it continues to limit opportunities (Petersilia, 2001; Opsal, 2011)—but because prison becomes ‘normalized’ within social networks that share a disadvantaged social and economic position (Cunha, 2008). Regarding the relational impacts of imprisonment, the ethnographic research of Megan Comfort in the United States has shown how penal scrutiny and prison rules place prisoners’ intimate partners
in a quasi-imprisonment situation, by eroding the boundaries between home and prison and changing the forms whereby intimacy, love, and romance are experienced. Nonetheless, adopting an approach attentive to the macro-structural vulnerabilities that shape the lives of most of these women, Comfort also shows how imprisonment may sometimes represent to certain disadvantaged groups one of the ways to regain some form of control over highly disturbed relationships (Comfort, 2008).

Although this body of literature has been developing significantly in recent years, capturing and analysing how prisoners’ relatives manage relationships in the shadow of imprisonment, there is an apparent scarcity of contributions that look to the same kind of negotiations inside prison walls. Sociological accounts of prison life have been developing in the last few decades (Crewe, 2009; Cunha, 2014), addressing issues such as the reproduction of social, economic, and material inequalities among prisoners (Marchetti, 2002), the dynamics of prison suicide (Liebling, 2007), the idiosyncrasies of women’ imprisonment (Carlen and Worrall, 2004; Almeda, 2005; Rowe, 2011; Fili, 2013), and the social effects of concentrated incarceration of lower-class communities in prison life (Clear, 2007; Cunha, 2008). Although some of these studies directly or indirectly address issues related to the negotiation of familial relationships during imprisonment, its contributions remain widely dispersed. That is, the detailed exploration of how prisoners conceive and manage social bonds remains an under-researched aspect of prison life (see also Thomas and Christian, this volume). In general, such line of research has been narrowly focused on how imprisoned women and men deal with the experience of being separated from their children (Enos, 2001; Hairston, 2002; Nurse, 2002; Arditti et al., 2005; Celinska and Siegel, 2010; Easterling and Feldmeyer, 2017). This implies that other social significant relations to prisoners—such as ties with extended family and intimate partners—have been disregarded and enclosed in a grey box in which it is difficult to discern specificities (Leverentz, 2011).

In order to broaden the sociological approach on the social and familial impacts of imprisonment and to break with some of these limitations that have compartmentalized this body of literature, I thereby contribute, in this chapter, to an embryonic and promising field of research that sheds light on the ways whereby both prisoners and family members negotiate relationships during imprisonment (Christian and Kennedy, 2011; Dixey and Woodall, 2012; Hutton, 2016). This kind of approach allows outlining lines of continuity between two groups that experience variable degrees of correctional confinement and penal surveillance. Drawing on narratives of Portuguese prisoners and relatives I thereby argue that these individuals share an experience of imprisonment on the basis of a mutual situation of social-economical vulnerability, a collective sense of concern and powerlessness, a joint effort to invigorate strategies that creatively recreate presence at a distance, and a common recognition of the complex effects of imprisonment.

Methodology

This chapter draws from a research study conducted in Portugal that aimed to explore the familial and social impact of imprisonment from the point of view of prisoners and their relatives. The analysis presented here uses data gathered from seventy interviews: forty were conducted with prisoners (equal numbers of men and women) and thirty with prisoners’ relatives (twenty-three of them women), all of them Portuguese. Selection and recruitment of interviewees was made in two autonomous processes. Regarding prisoners, during the fieldwork conducted in two prisons (one for the male
population, and the other for imprisoned women), upon request, the prison administration provided me with a list of individuals convicted for more than six months. On the basis of this list I consulted prisoners’ individual processes to select a diversified group of potential interviewees in terms of criminal records, crime leading to conviction, and familial configurations. Prisoners’ relatives were recruited in the vicinity of those two Portuguese prisons during visiting periods. I selected a heterogeneous group of interviewees on the basis of sex, familial configurations, life trajectories, and previous experiences with the criminal justice system. These differentiated processes of selection and recruitment implied that interviewed prisoners and family members are not necessarily related to each other: among the thirty relatives who participated in the study only five are related to interviewed prisoners. The participants’ verbal and written consent to conduct the interviews was obtained after they were informed about the study’s aim and that their anonymity was guaranteed. The names used in the section that presents our analysis are fictitious, to ensure the respondents’ anonymity.

Interviews with prisoners were conducted in closed and private rooms in prison facilities and interviews with prisoners’ relatives took place at various locations chosen by participants, such as the waiting room for prison visits, cafes, and their homes. On average, the interviews were ninety minutes long. Wherever possible, interviews were audio recorded and the tapes were transcribed verbatim. When certain contexts prevented audio recording, I registered in writing phrases and expressions used by the participants. The interviews focused on personal trajectories and familial life before prison detention; perceptions of the relational, familial, social, and economic implications associated with imprisonment; and future prospects. For the purposes of this chapter, using a qualitative content analysis approach (Mayring, 2004), data were systematically compared, contrasted, synthesized, and coded in three main dimensions associated with the shared experience of imprisonment: (i) the economic and familial implications associated with imprisonment; (ii) the creative negotiation strategies mobilized for sustaining family involvement; and (iii) the complex effects of imprisonment.

**Economic and familial implications associated with imprisonment**

In the period prior to imprisonment most prisoners held active familial responsibilities in one or more domains, such as economic provision, elderly care, and childcare. Upon their imprisonment families therefore undergo a process of reallocation of responsibilities and reorganization of resources. In this regard, both prisoners and relatives’ narratives outline two main implications associated with imprisonment: reduction of available resources (Smith et al., 2007) and restructuring of childcare configurations (Turanovic et al., 2012). On most occasions, the diminution of available economic resources results from the combination of two dimensions: suspension of the prisoner’s income and additional expenditures emerging from the maintenance of contact with imprisoned relatives (Grinstead et al., 2001).

Regarding the interruption of prisoners’ financial involvement, although not all prisoners contributed significantly to the household income, most of those that did describe how the disruption of their provider role tends to leave dependent relatives in vulnerable positions. These situations generally promote feelings of powerlessness among prisoners, exacerbated when relatives are facing challenging situations on the outside and they cannot directly assist them. Sandra, aged 25 and sentenced to seven years for stealing, faced a significant change in her family life when her partner was imprisoned. He was the main provider for her and their two children, and his arrest led to a reduction in the family’s income and an increase in expenses for childcare. This experience highlighted the importance of family support and the need for alternative strategies to maintain familial stability during incarceration.
years for theft, lived with her mother, father, and brothers prior to imprisonment and contributed significantly to the household maintenance. After being imprisoned, the loss of Sandra's income left the family, and especially her mother who is 64-years-old and retired due to disability, in poverty. This situation fostered guilt and anxiety that even led Sandra to attempt suicide in prison.

In my head, I was responsible for my family's misfortunes. The troubles that my mother started to have after I was imprisoned, starving, not having this, not having that. I was to blame for that. That's what I thought.

Concerning the costs associated with maintenance of contact with prisoners, these are mainly related to prison visitation (Dixey and Woodall, 2012; Hutton, 2016). Going to prison generally entails a significant channelling of economic resources due to the costs associated with transportation, provision of goods (such as food, entertainment items, and toiletries) and delivery of variable amounts of money to prisoners. Family members tend to consider these kinds of provisions as a 'cushion' that might soften the harshness of prison life for their imprisoned relatives. However, visiting on weekly, biweekly, or monthly bases poses a substantial burden on scarce household budgets. In this sense, as also noticed by Johnna Christian (2005), in order to be able to sustain basic needs on the outside—such as expenses related to food, housing, health, children's education, among others—sometimes prisoners' relatives are compelled to decrease the delivery of goods or, in more extreme cases, reduce the frequency of prison visitation to protect the familial economic situation.

Raúl, aged 63, whose son and daughter in law have been imprisoned for more than eight years, explains how the frequency of visits varies according to the resources available.

[The frequency of visits] is according to the money I have [available]. For example, on the past, I went to [prison] visits every week, then things got complicated on my side and I went there every 15 days with the bag full of food. Nowadays, being alone with my grandchildren, I just go there whenever I can. I don't have a specific frequency and I don't even take a bag.

Besides posing several emotional challenges to prisoners' relatives—who feel uncomfortable for decreasing the support provided to prisoners—reducing prison visitation and/or lessening delivery of goods also tends to put prisoners in a vulnerable situation. Deprived from the resources and affective support that relatives are able to provide through frequent visits, prisoners face challenging situations, being dependent on the scarce earnings of prison work or, in cases where this is not available, of solidarity networks among other prisoners. Facing such situations, some prisoners prefer to conceal the problems they face within prison so as not to enhance family members' concerns about their wellbeing—a strategy also noted by Rachel Condry (2007, 60). This is the case with Rosa, aged 41, facing a prison sentence of five years in a correctional facility located more than 300km away from where her family lives. Due to the scarcity of visits from her family, she prefers to keep her problems away from them since sharing her problems with relatives would only promote feelings of impotence. According to her, this in an implicit shared strategy between her, her mother, and other members of her extended family.

I do not tell [them] anything that happens here. Just as my mother does not tell me anything serious on the outside. (…) [She says that] if I’m in here I cannot solve things, so she won’t tell me the bad things that happen on the outside. (…) I do the same (…) because they cannot solve anything and they’re going to be suffering.
In addition to the socio-economic vulnerability shared by prisoners and relatives, one other dimension of the impacts associated with imprisonment concerns the reconfiguration of arrangements for the care of children (Turanovic, Rodriguez, and Pratt, 2012). Participants’ narratives consistently show that, prior to imprisonment, most women bore extensive responsibilities of childcare, being the main or sole caretakers of their children—as also showed by other studies (Enos, 2001; Celinska and Siegel, 2010). On a differentiated scenario, shaped by traditional gender norms, men generally carried out different roles, such as financial support and caregiving, and had different levels of involvement with children from different mothers (Hairston, 2002). Upon detention, in the case of women’s imprisonment, children generally stay under the care of their grandmothers or other female relatives; as a result of men’s confinement, mothers usually continue to provide the childcare. It is therefore clear that, regardless of the sex of the imprisoned individual, childcare tends to be provided by kinship networks and particularly by women.

Independently of the particular childcare configurations, upon imprisonment, the boundaries and contexts of parental relationships are entirely redrawn in the shadow of prison, posing challenges both to prisoners (Enos, 2001; Hairston, 2002; Nurse, 2002; Arditti et al., 2005; Celinska and Siegel, 2010; Easterling and Feldmeyer, 2017) and their caregivers (Turanovic et al., 2012). Prisoners’ narratives generally highlight how the scarcity of opportunities to interact with offspring during imprisonment has the potential to detach, or further disconnect, prisoners from their children. In this regard, Jorge, aged 29, sentenced for nineteen years for aggravated robbery, describes the most emotional challenging moments he faces during his imprisonment in relation to his child.

Sometimes I’m talking with my son on the phone, and he’s calling ‘father’ to his grandfather and it hurts. (…) But the thing that has hurt the most here in prison was when my son entered in visit walking. I didn’t saw my son first steps, I didn’t hear my son first word, and that’s what hurts me. I lost everything.

The description of the emotional challenges associated with childcare during parental imprisonment are also vividly present in the ways in which caretakers explain routinely dealing with minor children. As well as referring to the wide variety of challenges associated with taking care of children during the imprisonment of one or both parents—such as routine modifications, difficulties posed by health conditions, and household changes (Turanovic et al., 2012)—these individuals also outline the difficulties associated with explaining imprisonment to children and managing prison visitation. In this regard, Beatriz explains the reflection she underwent before deciding if she would take her 5-year-old son to prison to visit his father, and her current daily struggle with household maintenance and prison visits financial management.

Before I bring him here [to prison], I reflected a lot. (…) I decided to bring him [here because] I didn’t want my son to grow up angry without knowing his father. (…) Nowadays in order to go to the [prison] visit I sometimes have to activate the credit, I know it is a stupid thing and I should not do it but otherwise I am not able to go. (…) Last weekend I told my son ‘This weekend we can’t go see dad’ (…) but he started to cry and I can’t [stand it].

One of the transversal elements of prisoners’ and relatives’ narratives is the forms whereby imprisonment has further aggravated—or, in less frequent cases, catalyzed—socio-economic vulnerability (Marchetti, 2002; Smith et al., 2007). Besides posing challenges to the management of daily life, in some cases jeopardizing the response to basic needs (Christian, 2005), and to the ways that individuals cope with imprisonment,
social economic situations also (in)directly influence the type and frequency of contact between prisoners and relatives. This thus implies a permanent inconstancy and changeability of family contact patterns according to resources’ availability, which, as a result, poses several challenges to families’ ability to remain engaged with loved ones and sustain emotional bonds.

Creative negotiation of family involvement

Enacted in a context framed by paucity of resources, institutional restraints, and scarce structural support to the maintenance of social ties, the management of relationships in prison is inscribed into a nexus of absence, powerlessness, and vulnerability. Prisoners and relatives outline how altogether these elements present challenging scenarios and variable threats to the sustaining of meaningful relationships. Nevertheless, as also explored by Cara Jardine (2017), participants in this study also describe how they are actively engaged in creatively renegotiating involvement with family during imprisonment. That is, in order to prevent the dilution of emotional bonds, prisoners and relatives seek possibilities of exercising family roles through prison walls, keeping abreast of daily dynamics and routines and reinventing ways of sharing activities through distance. These kinds of strategies help to sustain a sense of belonging, represent a source of hope and symbolize a major motivation to the future. One of the ways whereby prisoners seek to remain engaged in their families’ lives during imprisonment is by providing emotional and developmental support to their relatives on the basis of exchange of letters, phone calls, and prison visitation (see also Thomas and Christian, this volume). João, aged 38, sentenced to three years and six months due to qualified theft, has a 6-year-old son. In his narrative, he explains how he is trying to actively participate in his son’s development, by encouraging him educationally and building an emotional connection through small gifts and actions.

He is learning to speak English, he knows has all the numbers in English and the whole alphabet, I train here with him. Now I began to teach him a few mathematical rules. I’m here but it’s like if I was outside. […] My son sends letters to me with drawings. Every week he asks daddy for a surprise, I do a drawing or I try to give him a lollypop or a Kinder egg. A simple paper airplane, a doll made of paper. He gives such a huge value to that, I feel really happy.

A similar effort of fostering connectedness and closeness is enacted by relatives on the outside. Aware of the potential of prison environment weakening prisoners’ bonds to the outside, these individuals attempt to sustain bridges between the home and the prison (Comfort, 2002). Besides keeping prisoners abreast of the several dimensions of family life—such as news from close and extended family; familial routines in terms of food, hygiene, and schedules; and options and strategies taken in terms of household income—, these elements also attempt to punctuate prison life with several elements reminiscent of life beyond prison, such as photographs from home and loved ones, books, magazines, music playlists, familiar smells in freshly washed clothes, perfumes in letters, body care products, home-made food, amongst others. Overall, these elements aim to ‘display’ and strengthen the bonds between the prison and the home by being representative of the care, affections, desires, and commitments of family life (Jardine, 2017). However, besides being dependent on the availability of resources, the provision of these objects is also constricted by prison regulations. In Portugal, although most of these items are allowed in correctional facilities, recently there have been some changes in the regulation of prisons that pose limits to the delivery of goods. Among
those changes, the one that caused most indignation to both prisoners and relatives
was that of imposing new restrictions on the amount and type of food relatives were
permitted to bring in for prisoners. In this regard, Tânia, aged 49, whose son is im-
prisoned, expresses her exasperation with the recent prison rules that prohibited the
bringing-in of homemade food into prisons, especially during special occasions, such
as Christmas.

Especially at Christmas, it was ridiculous what they did because in previous years we could take
food to prison. This year they only allowed deserts because they made the lunch and we had
to pay to go. There was no longer that occasion for being there, being able to take him [son] a
homemade meal, the food he loves. Because, in the end, we don’t go to prison to eat! We seize
the opportunity to take food for him!

Similar frustration about the limitations imposed on the admission of food are ex-
pressed by prisoners for whom food represents a living memory of home and a way
of connecting to familial memories (Ugelvik, 2011). In order to avoid the pervasive
influence of prison regulations on the possibilities of sustaining familial ties during im-
prisonment, some prisoners and family members thus resort to alternative strategies of
recreating involvement (Comfort, 2002; Jardine, 2017). That is, instead of solely make
use of forms of contact provided by prison to sustain family ties—namely, prison visits,
phone calls, and letters—some participants also describe how they mobilize creative
ways of blurring the boundaries between presence and absence. For prisoners, some
of these strategies include, for example, the recreation of daily family-life moments in
the semi-privacy of their cells. With photographs, music, smells, and other significant
elements prisoners engage in personal rituals that enable them to evoke the presence of
their loved ones into the solitude of their cells. In this regard, Cláudia, aged 35, serving
a four year, eight months’ sentence due to drug trafficking, explains how every night
she recreates the presence of her daughter in her cell by playing her favourite games.

Inside my cell, I have tazos [a children game] and everything I did in the street with my daughter
I do here too. I put a picture of her on the floor . . . but I’m not crazy, but I’m not crazy! With her
picture on the floor I play with the marbles as I played with her, I play with tazos, and I speak as
if she was there. I know she is not here but it’s my thing.

Similarly, several family members also describe their strategies to symbolically maintain
the presence of their imprisoned relatives into daily routines. Less constrained by prison
limitations than prisoners, these individuals resort to various strategies that seek to
keep vivid the past memories of a shared life (Condry, 2007; Comfort, 2008; Touraut,
2012). This may include keeping prisoners’ rooms untouched, evoking prisoner’s pres-
ence in daily meals by reserving a seat for them at the table, and/or carrying around,
at all times, symbols that corporify prisoners’ absent presence. In this regard, Cristina,
aged 40, describes how she is permanently surrounded by photos of her imprisoned
husband, both when she’s working—in her wallet and on her mobile phone—as well
as at home, especially in their room.

In the bedroom, I have photographs of him on both sides of the bed and I also at the foot of the
bed, this way I am always surrounded by him. [...] He being there [in prison] does not mean that
I don’t take him here: in my heart and close to me at all times.

Actively engaging in family dynamics, sharing elements that strengthen the bonds be-
tween the home and the prison, and recreating presence at a distance are some of the
ways that prisoners and relatives strive to creatively negotiate a space within which
familial bonds are sustained during imprisonment. Enacting these kinds of acts thus,
to a certain extent, makes prison walls permeable to fluxes of persons, objects, places, activities, smells, tastes, and memories that help to sustain vivid emotional bonds and symbolically subvert the physical, geographical, temporal, and communication limitations imposed by imprisonment (Comfort, 2002; Jardine, 2017).

Complex effects

Prior to imprisonment, most interviewed male and female prisoners faced a broad constellation of social problems. In some cases, these individuals were for several years victims of domestic violence and/or addicted to substances consumption (Carlen and Worrall, 2004; Edin, Nelson, and Paranal, 2004). Although these issues posed several challenges and problems to family life and to other significant relationships, few men and women had resorted to social services and/or law enforcement agencies to address them. Within this framework, imprisonment emerges as the factor that compulsorily withdraws individuals from the cumulative pressures that characterized their lives, imposing a highly constrained and limited context (Christian and Kennedy, 2011). Facing such a scenario, some prisoners thus highlight how imprisonment interrupted destructive cycles of abuse and, to a certain point, is conceived as an opportunity to change previous life trajectories. For example, Joaquina, aged 37 and sentenced to 14 years for robbery, describes how she was a victim of abuse by her husband for more than ten years. Her narrative explains how, while in prison, being away from her abuser and exposed to professional counselling, Joaquina began to address violence differently. This ‘violence awareness’ has empowered her to deal with abuse in new ways, including the way it is perceived in retrospect and projected in the future.

Imprisonment has opened my eyes. When I entered here it was like I was blind, he was always beating me and I didn't reacted. Now I say bad things to him too. (…) The psychologist here helps me a lot (…) For me it was better to be imprisoned. If I wasn't arrested maybe at this point I was already dead. He was sick, I swear.

Besides functioning as a peculiar site of protection for victims of domestic violence, as also noted by Abigail Rowe (2011, 579), one other dimension of the complex effects of imprisonment highlighted by prisoners is the discontinuance of drug abuse while in prison (Edin et al., 2004). Although this interruption does not necessarily result from specific resources available in prisons, some prisoners describe how, during imprisonment, they were able to temporarily control their substance abuse. As a result, in specific cases, prisoners describe how, at least in the short term, imprisonment enabled the reconstruction of previously deeply distressed family relationships (Comfort, 2008). Paulo, aged 43, sentenced to seven years for qualified fraud, stopped his problematic drug use during imprisonment. He describes how this helped him to regain the trust of his father, with whom he had not had a relationship for several years.

Gradually I managed to conquer [my family's trust], slowly, I understand the fragilities, the suspicions, the uncertainties, small things that I can say, they stay in doubt but I clarify immediately. But I realize how 25 years’ addiction will not be solved in 3 years, no way. (…) For my relationship with my father it was very important. We had not talked for two years and it was here [in prison] that I manage to get my father to talk to me again. (…) And now we are inseparable, I am his boy again.

These kinds of complex effects also have direct implications on family members’ views and experiences associated with imprisonment. When their imprisoned relatives are
Experiences of Prisoners and Family Members in Portugal

abusive and/or addicted to substance consumption, prisoners’ relatives tend to perceive and describe imprisonment as a less troubled period than the one they faced previously (Christian and Kennedy, 2011). The description of imprisonment as a stabilizing force that allows instituting control in prisoners’ life trajectories and, by extension, on family life is, for example, present in the narratives of relatives who suffered domestic violence, as the case of Filipa, aged 35 whose father is imprisoned, illustrates:

I didn’t had a childhood, I had a life of terror, panic, this forced us to grow very fast! […] We slept dressed because we already knew that in the middle of the night we were going to have to run away from my father. […] For us it is a peace of mind that he is here imprisoned.

These kinds of narratives therefore emphasize how imprisonment may paradoxically present to several individuals, both inside and outside prison walls, a particular platform for protection and/or for addressing the complex problems they faced (Comfort, 2008; Godoi, 2010; Sampson, 2011; Touraut, 2012; Turanovic et al., 2012; Smith, 2014, 187–93; Turney, 2015). However, recognizing prisons’ complex effects implies adopting an ambiguous position that is visible in participants’ narratives. On the one hand, prisoners and their relatives describe the forms whereby imprisonment further exacerbates scenarios of socio-economic vulnerability and poses a wide range of challenges to the sustenance of meaningful relationships. On the other hand, some respondents also describe how, in particular cases, penal confinement might emerge as a possibility for interrupting previous dangerous cycles of abuse that posed several threats to prisoners’ life and families’ wellbeing. Tânia, aged 49, with an imprisoned son who had a severe drug addiction problem, illustrates the coexistence of these controversial and paradoxical implications of imprisonment. According to her, although imprisonment represents a less troubled period than the one she was facing prior to her son’s imprisonment, it also involves experiencing great distress and apprehension about her son.

[Imprisonment] was a good thing, it was. If he continued outside as he was I think my son was already dead, [imprisonment] was the form for him to leave the drugs and leave the life in which he was. […] At this moment he feels happy. We feel very happy. Despite everything, as I say, there is something positive, in the midst of this disgrace there is a good thing and in this case, is that he left drugs. At least that.

The narratives of prisoners and relatives sharing experiences of imprisonment show how prison institutions are accumulating and overlapping a wide range of social functions that range from penal punishment to prisoners’ social rehabilitation. However, taking into consideration that prisoners’ potential to deal with complex social problems and provide specialized therapeutic intervention is undoubtedly dominated by the punitive ‘nature’ that dominates the penal environment, prison institutions are enacting social roles that would probably be more adequately exercised outside its walls (Almeda, 2005; Comfort, 2008).

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to explore how prisoners and relatives experience the relational, familial, social, and economic implications associated with imprisonment and negotiate relationships in the shadow of prison. Although these groups have, traditionally, been addressed in separate frameworks due to the differentiated levels of penal involvement they are subjected to, in this chapter I aimed to outline particular realities where
their views and experiences might intersect and converge. This contribution therefore pushes forward a renewed agenda within studies addressing the social implications of imprisonment, which is based on multifaceted perspectives that take into serious consideration the wide variability of family configurations (Jardine, 2017), the gendered implications of imprisonment (Aungles, 1994; Condry, 2007; Touraut, 2012), as well as the paradoxical implications of imprisonment (Comfort, 2008). I argue that such grounded perspective on the views and experiences of prisoners and family members is central when addressing this theme from a human rights’ perspective (Smith, this volume) that fits with the key principles of social justice (Condry, this volume).

Based on prisoners’ and family relatives’ narratives, data shows that, although subjected to variable degrees of penal surveillance, both of these groups experience direct and indirect implications of the socio-economic vulnerability aggravated or catalyzed by imprisonment, share feelings of powerless to assist and protect their loved ones, mobilize creative strategies to reinvent familial connectedness, and face realities that recognize the coexistence of (de)stabilizing effects of imprisonment. Such common experiences thereby collapse prison immanent physical boundaries in two main inter-related dimensions. The first regards the ways whereby the vulnerabilities faced on the outside of prison have direct implications on inside life, and vice-versa. For example, scenarios of socio-economic vulnerability might prevent relatives from maintaining frequent contact with prisoners; and, on the opposite side, prisoners cessation of substance abuse while serving prison sentences might foster more stable scenarios of family life on the outside—as also noted by Megan Comfort (2008). The second form whereby the social and familial implications associated with imprisonment collapse prison physical limits concerns the ways that prisoners and relatives’ strategies for recreating involvement are able to make prison walls permeable to the circulation of affections, objects, spaces, smells, and tastes. That is, prisoners and relatives actively negotiate imprisonment-imposed limitations in a way that constructs porous walls, able to defy, recreate, and resignify notions of presence of absence.

References

Experiences of Prisoners and Family Members in Portugal


Rafaela Granja


Experiences of Prisoners and Family Members in Portugal


