

Making It Count:
A Gendered Analysis of the Survival
of Incarcerated Women

Rebecca Halpern
rebhalp@umich.edu
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Dr. Carol Boyd, PhD, R.N.
caroboyd@umich.edu
(734) 764-9537

Dr. Lora Bex Lempert, PhD
llempert@umd.umich.edu
(313) 593-5607

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Chapter One: Introduction

The construction of femininity and masculinity is a key issue—perhaps even the central issue—of feminist scholarship. The ways in which gendered bodies are regulated to perform particular sexual, social, and productive roles by social and cultural arrangements is both a fascinating and fluid phenomenon. In modern United States prison settings, these gender roles become particularly salient. Because prison is a sex-segregated environment, the regulatory mechanism that usually informs gender divisions—anatomical sex—is not in place. It is not feasible that biological men perform one set of roles and biological women perform an entirely different set of roles. Instead, as societal institutions, prisons are heavily invested in the creation and maintenance of what Gayle Rubin calls the “sex/gender system” (Rubin 1975). The sex/gender system is “the set of arrangements by which society transforms biological sexuality into human activity” (Rubin 1975: 28). In other words, the sex/gender system is the way in which societies determine which persons with which body parts do which social tasks. For example, the contemporary United States sex/gender system arranges bodies so that people with male biology are given opportunities to be primary breadwinners and are expected to be emotionally detached, whereas those with female anatomy tend to assume care giving roles and easily open up emotionally. Without the differentiation of anatomical parts in prison, women in prison must rely on other mechanisms to “do” gender.

Association with a gender group is an important component to creating an identity. Moreover, identification with one gender serves as a way to create meaning and purpose in life, as it provides an avenue towards specific social and occupational roles. As the variety of social and occupational roles that are afforded to women on the outside are not often available to incarcerated women, one of the most important ways they make meaningful lives in prison is

through the strategies they use to survive the pains and deprivations of the prison environment. Through the actualization of coping strategies, gendered realities emerge. The coping strategies women choose and create are themselves gendered and are informed by both the structure of the institution as well as the expectations and backgrounds of the inmates. My project, then, aims to discover the process by which women maintain gendered lives in a highly structured, highly oppressive, sex-segregated environment.

By investigating the gendered nature of prison and its investment in the creation and maintenance of a sex/gender system, I hope to explore the existing discourse of the saliency of gender in prison, and suggest both the traditional and alternative gender systems incarcerated women create.

Much of the discourse surrounding the construction of gender in prison focuses on men's prisons. A great deal of theoretical work has occurred to demonstrate the complexities of male inmate culture (Sabo, et al. 2001; Jewkes 2005; Hensley 2000). In men's prisons, sexual violence is a one way of constructing gender differences (Sabo, et al. 2001; Struckman-Johnson, et al. 1996). Those who are abused sexually, and specifically penetrated by other men, are considered female—indeed, they do not become a metaphor for women; they in fact *become* women within the prison walls. Sexually abused men become socially constructed as women and are therefore expected to perform certain traditionally female roles, specifically as an object of sexual pleasure to men. Scholars have suggested that the occurrence of sexual violence creates a sex/gender system in order to normalize the prison environment (Jewkes 2005); in other words, creating and enforcing a heterosexual environment through sexual violence is one adaptation to the realities of prison life for men. However, the narrative of sexual abuse in men's prisons is overly stereotyped and sensationalized and other adaptations to prison life do exist.

Ironically, another way men normalize prison life is by engaging in traditionally female behaviors, such as journal writing and forming and attending support groups and other outlets for emotional expression (Corley 2001; Bonner and Breiman 2001). One of the characteristics of men's prison culture, then, is negotiating the terms of masculinity. On one hand, they create a tough, macho, overly violent and sexualized definition of masculinity, and on the other they allow space to blur the fissure between masculinity and femininity.

Conversely, little theoretical work has been published on the processes by which women perform and maintain gendered roles in prison aside from the outdated analysis of the pseudo-family. This project aims to add to the discourse on women's gendered lives in prison. In her original work on women in prison, Rose Giallombardo (1966) suggested that women in prison form families and communities that closely resemble those that occur in the outside. Pseudo-families include mothers, fathers, siblings, cousins, and grandparents, much like family structures outside of prison. This analysis is outdated, though, because few contemporary studies have illustrated a similar social grouping. Unfortunately, however, a few prison studies (Owen 1998) still assume that the pseudo-family is the foundation of women's social structure in prison, though the women of this study made no mention to a literal family-like organization.

The work that has been published on women's prison culture is largely interested in the prison's historical investment in maintaining traditional gender roles on the inside. In a recent study, Brenda Smith (2006) pointed out that historically, incarcerated women were taught "domestic arts" in order to reinforce their prescribed social roles to ensure their easy transition back to life outside. These vocational courses not only reinforce stereotypes of proper "women's work," but they also contribute to the gendered division of labor. Other compelling arguments discuss the prison system's role in maintaining a traditional gender system, particularly the work

of Dana Britton. Britton argues that as an institution, prison is critical in maintaining gender norms, particularly those concerned with the division of labor, and that those norms are regulated through the structure, culture, and agency of the institution and personnel. What theoretical gap exists, though, is the relationship between prison structure and the gender system that results, as well as the ways in which gender simultaneously influences the prison structure itself. No study has discussed the alternative gender systems women create or the resistance to traditional modes of femininity that may exist, nor has a study investigated what aspects or modes of femininity become salient in this environment.

Why prisons?

Prison is what Erving Goffman (1961) refers to as a “total institution.” Sociologically, total institutions are fascinating phenomena because of the diffusion of power and the extreme deprivations that arise from it. In this paper, when I refer to “prisons,” I am referring not only to the physical space, but also to the total institution. A total institution has three main characteristics: it has encompassing tendencies, it has a strict division of authority, and life in a total institution is highly regimented. It is encompassing because all aspects of inmates lives, such as work, leisure time, and social gatherings, occur within its walls. Furthermore, there is a clear and strict delineation between personnel and inmate; all officers expect a level of deference from inmates and there is no overlap between those with official power and those without. Finally, all inmates follow a daily schedule that is decided by prison authorities and includes specific times for specific activities; for example, during meal times, inmates are not permitted to participate in any other activity besides eating. Because of the strict and totalizing environment of prison, the tools available to inmates to create meaningful, gendered lives are limited. The coping strategies women in this study implement to create a sense of normalcy in prison, then,

are rife with gendered aspects. It is my hypothesis that the gender system the female respondents create is a reflection of both the structure of prison and the gender socialization of the women prior to incarceration; furthermore, I propose that the gender system described by this study's participants is concurrently a reflection of the hegemonic gender system as well as a site of resistance from the potentially demoralizing prison experience.

Dana Britton's *At Work in the Iron Cage* (2003) is an excellent text that argues that prisons, as institutions, work to maintain the same gendered expectations and norms that work outside of it, such as the gendered division of labor. For example, for several decades, the correctional system barred women from being employed as correctional guards, as the job was perceived as an exclusively male position (Britton 2003). Even today, with anti-discrimination laws in tact, women are often discouraged in the form of harassment from co-workers from taking positions in male prisons, as they are deemed "too dangerous" for women officers by prison personnel and policy makers; similarly, women correctional officers have difficulty getting respect from male inmates and co-workers (Rader 2005). Furthermore, both early and contemporary occupational programs in women's prisons "emphasized training programs directed towards traditional roles" (Britton 2003: 39). Thus, in both its hiring practices and in the kinds of future workers it creates, the criminal justice system reinforces traditional gender norms. Britton (2003: 3) investigates prisons to better understand the carceral institution's role in creating gendered systems: "In a more general sense, the role of the total institution as a societal microcosm, as a small society in itself, means that gendering processes that may be diffuse or hidden in more open organizations may be easier to identify in this closed institutional context."

Another reason that prison is a particularly useful location for understanding the processes by which women create gendered lives is that gender is often a rhetorical identity—that is, people have to identify someone as a woman in order to place her in that location—and the more she is watched, the more compelling her gender performance must be. In this context, like Goffman (1959), I consider prison a “social stage” where the inmates are under constant threat of surveillance, both by guards and other prisoners, and thus must be even more aware of their multiple performances of woman, inmate, and friend, among others. The nature of prison as an “enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point...in which each individual is constantly located” (Foucault 1977: 197) sets the prisoners in a perpetual state of surveillance. Upon incarceration, prisoners are inducted to “a state of conscious and permanent visibility” (Foucault 1977: 201). It is not just guards and supervisors who are watching inmates: carceral safety requires inmates to surveil other inmates, as well. Every aspect of women’s lives in prison is watched, documented, and interpreted. Part of the inmates’ coping mechanisms, then, can be described as being communal in nature; that is to say, some of the ways women in this study alleviate the pains of imprisonment are to maintain a shared sense of normalcy. Recognitions of femininity, performances of tasks that are usually considered to be women’s tasks, and empowerment through “doing” gender, the women of this study are able to make sense of a world in which they have little power.

Methodology

The methodology of this project is interview-based. I chose this method because I wanted to give the respondents an opportunity to discuss the complexities and nuances of prison life that a survey-based method would not afford them. It is likely that categories I defined prior to speaking to any of the study participants would not be accurate categories to describe

everyone's experiences; I therefore wanted to respondents to be as involved in the process of codifying their experiences as I was (Devault 1990). Also, I wanted to encourage the participants in this study to discuss the aspects of prison life that were the most important or influential in their own experience. I interviewed five formerly incarcerated women, all previously detained in facilities in Southeastern Michigan about their experiences in prison and how they coped with the pains of imprisonment (see Appendix B). I found these women through contacts of my advisor, Dr. Lora Bex Lempert; I sent them letters explaining my project and requesting participation, as well as an informed consent form (see Appendix A); only Dr. Lempert and I have the real names and addresses of the participants. Their identities were kept on a separate and secure hard drive and were erased at the completion of this project; all subsequent reference in this paper is made through the use of pseudonyms. Once I received confirmation of their participation and their consent, I arranged a meeting time with each one and conducted one-on-one interviews in either a conference room at the University of Michigan-Dearborn or at the participant's home. I transcribed all notes from a voice-recording device used during the interviews; the transcripts were also kept on a separate and secure hard drive. I also wrote my own notes immediately after each interview documenting my impressions, observations, and feelings about the participant and all the topics we discussed. The data collected, then, is a combination of interview narratives and field notes taken immediately after the interviews.

The five women of this sample vary in age, race, length of sentence, age at sentencing, and parental status. They chose their own pseudonyms, which are used throughout this paper in order to protect their identities. Below is a demographic chart of the participants (note that when

specifics were not disclosed, I used the public information on the Offender Tracking Information System):

Name	Age	Race	Length of Sentence	Age at Admittance	Parent status
Agnes	60	White	26 years	34	yes
Kim	35	Black	10 years	25	yes
Marabella	54	White	26 years	22	no
Mary	35	White	17 years	17	no
Mid	71	White	28 years	43	no

Admittedly, the demographics of the women of this sample are more homogenous than would be ideal. Racially, the women in this sample over represent the white population and grossly under represent the population of women in color in correctional facilities across the country. In the future, I hope to have a larger and more diverse sample of women. Given more time, access, and funding, I would have also included, in addition to the five women of this study, women currently serving sentences.

Once the interviews were conducted and transcribed, I then engaged in a content analysis of their responses in order to determine the ways that these women constructed the conduct of their lives behind bars. I categorize their responses according to the three most difficult adjustments to prison as they reported them: the limitations of the physical space, missing loved ones, and nostalgia for their lives before prison. I identified their three most predominant coping strategies as: staying positive, keeping busy, and maintaining a sense of self. Each of these topics will be discussed in detail in the body of this paper.

I decided to compensate each participant \$20 in cash for taking time out of her day to talk to me. The money also served as a token of my appreciation for their generosity in remembering and sharing what were sometimes traumatic experiences. Because inmates receive very little

compensation for their labor while incarcerated, I decided that payment would serve as an indication of my gratitude and respect. Because the amount of compensation was relatively small, my advisor and I did not consider the payment to be coercive. Additionally, every participant was reluctant to accept the compensation, even though mention of the payment was included in the recruitment letter. Each one made some remark expressing concern or reluctance about taking the compensation due to my age and position as a college student and they often wanted reassurance that the money did not come from my personal bank account. This serves as evidence that the compensation was non-coercive.

This project incorporates feminist research methods, as this project is an explicitly feminist one in that I understand gender as a central tenant to the organization of social life. I consulted several texts on feminist-based interviewing strategies (Devault 1990; Reissman 1991; Reinharz 1992) in order to familiarize myself with some of the obstacles and issues of negotiating epistemology and objectivity. Because the research focuses on women's unique experience in prison *as women*, their experiences must be understood in context of their social positioning (Owen 1998; Reinharz 1992). Women in prison are often both victims and offenders: citing the 1999 Bureau of Justice Statistics, Chesney-Lind and Pasko (2004) report that 57% of women in state prisons report a history of sexual and/or physical violence (27). Women inmates' status as both victims and offenders make their situations as inmates different than men's and therefore differentially shapes their experiences in prison. Similarly, their prison experiences will differ from that of men's because the influence of gender in everyday activities is instrumental and insurmountable. Thus, understanding the embeddedness of the influence of gender is at the heart of this work. Similarly, I wish to understand the forces that shape gender from the words of the women who experience it.

Furthermore, this project is a strictly feminist one simply because both the subjects and myself are women. This is not to suggest that all women share a common epistemological viewpoint, but does reflect my personal awareness of social positioning, such as gender and race, in the generation of social consciousness (Devault 1990). Using a “woman-to-woman” interviewing approach, rather than surveys or case studies, allows the interviewer to use “[c]ategories that represent what women do rather than categories that reflect men’s activities or terms derived from social sciences” (Reinharz 1992: 23). In other words, women writing about women are more likely to represent the subjects as full, complete, complex individuals rather than as statistics or evidence. In this way, then, my methods are feminist because they aim to understand women’s specific experiences in prison as women through their own words and to represent them as accurately and wholly as possible.

However, implicit in a feminist research model is the challenge of moving away from objectivity by honoring the experiences and vocabulary of the participants without the influence of the researcher’s background. My privilege as a white, upper-middle class, college educated researcher without a criminal record was thus not forgotten while interviewing or analyzing their narratives. It appeared, though, that I was more cognizant of these privilege differentials during the interviews than were the participants. Each one seemed to speak to me warmly and openly, perhaps because of their personal relationship with my advisor or because they perceived my youth as non-threatening. At no point did I feel as if the participants were threatened by my position as a researcher, nor did they appear to treat me with any more or less respect than they would have treated anyone with whom they were conversing. Their reluctance to accept compensation reflects their perception of our relationship as two women conversing, instead of as a researcher and subject. Alternatively, perhaps the participants viewed our interaction as

someone who was experienced (them) versus someone inexperienced (me); or, perhaps they perceived us within the framework as adult/youth. Indeed, several times throughout the interviews, the participants did play the role of my mentor, as each one taught me volumes about struggle, survival, love, and compassion. Because of my own reactions to the interviews, following each one, I took note of my own emotions and thoughts; during my analyses, I reflected on these notes to remember which parts of their stories made me uncomfortable, nervous, excited, or confused in order to challenge my beliefs and assumptions about life in prison. The end product is a result of the voices and narratives of my research participants and the reflections of my experiences as a researcher.

Project Outline

This paper begins with a literature review in order to acquaint the reader with the ongoing research already completed on the topic of women in prison, as well as give some insight into my models of analysis and the basic questions with which my research begins. Then, I discuss the results of my interviews and observations. It is here that the bulk of my analysis unfolds: I first explore what mechanisms women used to cope in prison and I seek to unveil their consequences and meanings; I then discover how similar the gender system is in prison to the system outside and how notions of femininity and masculinity are accepted, rejected, or modified; and finally I illuminate the relationship between the prison's conception of gender and the gender women inside create.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Although the scholarship of women in prison is not as robust as the counterpart research in men's facilities, four relatively well-developed areas of study inform the theoretical framework of this project. It is important to note that although I have separated them into distinct categories for analytical purposes, they often overlap in content. In the first section, I will synthesize the theories concerned with prison structure. Through various analyses of prisons and prison-like institutions, I describe the environment incarcerated women experience. The severe deprivation environment that forms the iron cage in which inmates live, forces the inmates to develop coping strategies. Additionally, understanding the structure of prisons sheds light onto the conditions under which some coping strategies are more prevalent or preferable over others; therefore, this category includes existing studies on coping strategies. Also included in this section are theories of adaptations prisoners make as well as the structures that inform the culture that inmate create, which, as these theories suggest, are adaptations to prison life.

The second area of literature I will be explicating are the theories of female criminality. By explaining why some women commit the kinds of crimes they do, theorists have attempted to show connections and aversions to particular modes of femininity enacted by female offenders. By better understanding the relationship between the kinds of crimes women commit and their perceived social roles and expectations, the saliency of gender in their prison lives is realized. Moreover, the profile of the female offender may illustrate the gendered nature of their criminality, which may also be reflected in their gendered coping strategies in prison.

The third category I will be elucidating are the theories of gender performance. These theories demonstrate the flexible and unstable nature of gender. Perhaps many of the strategies employed by the inmates are role-playing in nature; that is, as suggested by Barbara Owen

(1998) and others, women inmates act out particular modes of femininity as wives, friends, lovers, or sisters. Incarcerated women may choose to reinforce or remember their social roles outside of prison by performing their gender in certain ways via prison-adaptive coping mechanisms. Additionally, since I will be analyzing prison as a gendered institution, the performative nature of gender and the role institutions play in recreating the performances is a critical component of my analysis.

Lastly, perhaps the most controversial issue surrounding women in prison is their sexuality. Some theorists posit a deprivation model, which points to homosexual activities as a way of alleviating the pains of imprisonment and as a way of forming nurturing communities. Sexuality in prison may also be a form of rebellion, trade, and/or reclamation of personhood, all of which are viable mechanisms for coping. Exploring the myriad manifestations of prison sexuality will provide a more robust picture of the culture and coping mechanisms of women in prison.

Prison Structure and Culture

An informed study of prisons as institutions must begin with theorist Erving Goffman. His seminal works on institutions have been the foundation of sociological theory since he first published them in 1961. His chapter in *Asylums*, “On the Characteristics of Total Institutions” is a comprehensive analysis and description of the components and mechanics of a particular type of institution—one he calls “total.” A total institution is one in which the inmates’ entire lives are encompassed within the walls of the institution, that is there is a literal and physical border between life in the institution and life outside it. Examples of such are mental hospitals, boarding schools, monasteries, and most importantly for this project, prisons (Goffman 1961: 4). Secondly, a total institution has a strict and explicit division of authority; a guard’s primary role

is surveillance, and there are several ways an inmate is distinguished from a guard that include dress and freedom to move about the grounds (ibid.: 7). Third and finally, life for the inmate is highly regimented; all daily activities take place at the same time, with the same people, and in the same place every day (ibid.: 6). Not only is there a strict schedule, but all inmates are treated identically. There are few, if any, opportunities for self-realization or individual expression. Moreover, prison authorities create the daily schedule and the inmates have no influence in what might be a logical schedule for the inmates' needs; that is, administrators and officials, through formal rulings, tightly schedule all the days' activities. The enforced activities are based on a rational and bureaucratic plan designed to serve the aims of the institution, not the inmates.

Since the induction into a total institution proves to be incompatible with other systems of living outside of the institution, such as an attachment to economic or labor structures, family structures, or communities, an induction ceremony must occur to initiate the inmate into her loss of social roles (Goffman 1961: 14-28; Ward and Kassebaum 1965: 10). In fact, the entirety of the induction ceremony is centered on loss. First and foremost, the institution is invested in role dispossession: as Ward and Kassebaum (1965) note, "Former identities become meaningless and new labels become relevant" (9). In other words, once a woman becomes "criminal," all other identifiers, such as mother, wife, daughter, or worker, are displaced and sublimated with criminal. Whereas Goffman ignores the implications of the role-dispossession process specifically for women, Ward and Kassebaum understand that this role removal proves to be particularly difficult for women, as they cite separation from children—and thus an isolation from the role of mother—as the most intensely felt "pain of imprisonment" (Ward and Kassebaum 1965; Giallombardo 1966; Owen 1998). This is because for many women the role of

mother is not just a role, but an identity. When the prison environment removes opportunities for motherhood, it is simultaneously taking away many women's core identities.

This attack on identity, which is so well documented (Owen 1998; Britton 2003; Ward and Kassebaum 1965; Foucault 1977), illustrates the shift Michel Foucault describes in his influential work *Discipline and Punish* (1977). His argument is that in the last century, the penal system moved from a focus on corporeal punishment to non-corporeal discipline. He cites and describes many seemingly archaic modes of punishment, ranging from the guillotine to being drawn and quartered. However, when punishment was a spectacle of torture, the line between punisher and prisoner was blurred because the torture was often long, gory, and terrifying. Because audiences may have witnessed executions that lasted for hours, sympathy for the victim was conjured and the execution would seem as horrific as the crime. Thus, with the transition to prison and more "civilized" forms of punishment such as incarceration, there is a clear distinction between the bearer of justice and the wrong doer (ibid.: 59).

Without the support of corporeal torture, the penal system's goals are to punish what Foucault refers to as the soul. The soul, "Unlike the soul represented by Christian theology, it is not born in sin and subject to punishment, but is born rather out of methods of punishment, supervision, and constraint" (Foucault 1977: 29). In other words, the soul is a human's subjectivity. When a woman is incarcerated, social and gender roles, expectations, values, and perceptions of existence are imprisoned as well as her body (Giallombardo 1966: 272).

In order to maintain dignity and to create meaningful lives despite the insistencies of the penal system, inmates create a carceral culture, a response to the structure of the prison environment. Two models are posited as the theoretical trajectories of prison adaptations (Hensley, et al. 2002). First is the importation model, which suggests that all behaviors that

occur within a prison setting are “imported,” or brought into the environment vis-à-vis socialization and cultural expectations of life outside. The second is the deprivation model that posits many behaviors of inmates are enacted out of desperation or lack of alternatives. It is my hypothesis that the culture women form in prison is an adaptation to the deprivations of prison and that the culture is created in gender-specific ways; the gendering process in prison, then, is both a reaction to deprivation and imported from ideals and expectations of femininity learned outside the prison walls. Furthermore, the adaptations and importations that comprise prison culture are simultaneously influenced by the gender system inside.

Many researchers have indicated that the culture in men’s prisons is an adaptation to the prison environment itself (Jewkes 2005; Sabo, et al. 2001). Specifically, these studies suggest that the culture of hypermasculinity ideal is a way to structure their lives and to give them meaning:

the custodial experience provides a highly structured environment, which demands an adherence to an inmate code and provides ontological security based on mutual support and camaraderie for people who have otherwise found their life chances seriously diminished. This cohesive structure among similarly disadvantaged social misfits helps to compensate for the bleaker aspects of prison life (Jewkes 2005: 50).

Prison culture for men is way to transform the deprivations of their environment into a meaningful, mutually recognized social unit.

Discussions and descriptions of inmate codes exist in literature on women’s prisons and are similarly framed as adaptations to the prison environment (Ward and Kassebaum 1965; Owen 1998). These take several forms, ranging from an illegal, underground economic market (Heffernan 1972; Owen 1998), to pseudo family structures (Giallombardo 1966), to a trade system where bodies are used as currency (Struckman, et al. 2002). The last point will be discussed in greater detail in the “prison sexuality theories” section. While the inmate culture

has been studied and analyzed for decades, I find there is a theoretical gap that this study serves to explore. To begin with, there is a lack of literature that seriously investigates the processes by which women create or resist heteronormative structures. What is the relationship between hegemonic modes of femininity and the femininity that exists in prison culture? Secondly, there is a lack of analysis of what prison femininity tells us about gender outside of prison. In other words, what aspects of femininity are so salient that they are created in a sex-segregated environment? Moreover, do the manifestations of prison femininity reinforce or contradict the notion that female inmates are “unfeminine?” I will consider several theories of female criminality in the following section.

Female Criminality Theories

The rate of incarceration of women in this country necessitates attention to the context and content of women’s lives and criminal behavior. As of December 31, 2006, there were over 1.5 million incarcerated individuals in the United States, 7.2% of whom were female (West and Sabol 2008). Of these women, 34% were arrested for violent offenses¹, 28.7% for drug-related offenses, and 30.9% for property offenses² (at yearend 2004, *ibid.*). In light of these alarming female crime trends, it seems nonsensical that the majority of criminology theories are centered on male criminality and then infrequently follows the “add women and stir” method, as though gender was insignificant. Only in the last decade have theories to explain the specific context from which women commit crimes emerged.

Because conceptions of criminality are so firmly rooted in masculinity, early theories of female offenders posited that women who commit crimes are, naturally, more masculine

¹ Violent offenses are defined as: murder and non-negligent manslaughter, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault (FBI UCR 2007).

² Property offenses are defined as: burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson (FBI UCR 2007).

(Steffensmeier and Broidy 2001: 113; Mann 1984). Basically, according to early (predominately male) theorists, “emphasized the role of biological and psychological factors in women’s and girls’ crime, seeing criminal women as exhibiting masculine biological or psychological orientations” (Steffensmeier and Broidy 2001: 113). In this biological essentialist view, all women in prison would be more masculine, either in appearance or psychology, than non-offending women. Remnants remain of this biological essentialist view in contemporary theory. The “liberation theory,” for example, argues that because of the increased independence brought in part by the feminist movement, women have more resources and access to the criminal world and are thus more able to commit crimes; it also assumes that only those who are “liberated” will commit crimes, which is, of course, a difficult measure to quantify (Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2003). That suggests, then, that there should be significant increases in not only the amount of crime women commit, but also the types of crimes women commit, as with increased resources to crime will have a larger variety of crimes to choose from and will tend to choose more “masculine” crimes to commit. This does not seem to be the case, as the percentage of incarcerated women in 2000 was 6.7, compared to 2006’s 7.2% and among the same years, the percentage of types of offenses has had no significant change (West and Sabol 2008).

However, within the last decade with the help of feminist interventions, theories that center on women and the experiences of women in their unique social location have formed. These theories more adequately and accurately demonstrate the complexity in women’s involvement in crime. Essentially, “when it comes to the pressures that force women into criminal activity, gender matters” (Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2004). For men as well as for women, economic circumstance is a critical piece in the many components that make up motivations for criminal activity. As the Department of Justice Statistics show, the

overwhelming majority of incarcerated women are charged for drug and property offenses; these are crimes often referred to as “survival crimes” because they are most often committed out of economic necessity. The feminization of poverty (Pearce 1978) is a phenomenon that addresses the inequalities of both the welfare system and the labor market that disadvantages women (Morash 2006). The consequence of this disadvantage is that women are increasingly living below the poverty line and are disproportionately more likely to be poor than men. This phenomenon occurs for two reasons: first, the labor market and welfare system force women into low-paying jobs that prohibit the possibility for education or promotion, while the welfare system privileges working women instead of determining aid based on need. Secondly, many social structures, such as the labor market and justice system often hold stereotypical gender views that encourage women to enter into care-giving roles. Thus, women are more likely to be single parents and more likely to gain custody of children after divorces, often without receiving financial support. These dire economic straits often propel women into criminal activity as a means of survival (Morash 2006; Richie 1996; Mann 1984).

Those women who commit crimes do not always do so, however, out of their own agency. The rates of incarcerated women with prior histories of abuse, whether physical, verbal, or sexual, are staggering. Often, women who engage in illegal activity either do so to support an intimate partner involved in crime, or to defend themselves against abusive partners (Richie 1996). Self-defense is a primary reason why most women who engage in violent crime do so. As Sokoloff (2005) notes, “Even when women commit violent offenses, gender and abuse play an important role in their crimes. Thus, of women convicted of murder or manslaughter, many had killed husbands or boyfriends who repeatedly and violently abused them” (132). Prostitution is also a good example of the convergence of economic necessity and abusive

histories. Morash (2006: 171) estimates that “between 60% and 90% of prostituting women have been sexually assaulted as children.” This is, of course, due to economic circumstance, as women or girls who runaway from abusive households often have very few resources outside of their own bodies. Furthermore, women often turn to prostitution due to “poor self-concept,” which comes from negative sexual experiences of “rape, incest, and other forms of sexual molestation” (Mann 1984). The legal system criminalizes prostitution as a survival strategy and is one attempt of the State to regulate and control women’s sexuality; the result is putting victimized women at additional risk of harassment by police officers and abuse by pimps and johns (Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2003).

Black women and other women of color often face another obstacle when it comes to choosing involvement in crime. Gender Entrapment Theory (Richie 1996) contends that both racial and gendered models of behavior trap black women into committing crimes. Gender Entrapment assumes that many black women feel a sense of camaraderie for, and an obligation to protect, black men from racialized stereotypes, as well as a commitment to uphold traditional gender roles. For example, a black woman who steals for a boyfriend who “keeps watch” is modeling two types of expectations. First, she is affirming her traditional gender role, as a man is protecting her; secondly, she is protecting her partner from the racial stereotype that all black men steal, thereby maintaining her place in the black community as a so-called “good black woman.” This demonstrates the intersectionality of not just gender and violence, but the critical addition of race; all three often come together to complicate the context of women’s criminal lives.

When discussing female criminality, the role abuse plays in the choices women make to commit crimes cannot be ignored; “what appears to be happening within American society is a

penalization of economically marginalized women (those who are young, single, and from minority groups) who were simply trying to escape from or cope with their own victimization” (Proctor 2004: 78). This points to another set of theories that suggests perhaps it is not female criminality that has changed, the types of crimes law enforcement polices. Because the “War on Drugs” campaign of the 1980s had such profound effects on Black and urban rates of incarceration, it is no surprise it also had devastating effects of rates of female incarceration; between 1984 and 1993, the population of female offenders on drug charges more than doubled (Chesney-Lind, Bloom, and Owen 1994). While it’s true that this so-called “war” also significantly affected rates of male incarceration, it had particularly poignant effects on women. To begin with, women are more likely than men to abuse drugs in order to self-medicate, particularly when they are in abusive relationships or involved in sex work (Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2004). Women are also more likely to use and abuse drugs when involved with an intimate partner who also uses drugs, in order to “establish a deeper connection with their partners, to create emotional intimacy and mutual sexual pleasure with their abusers” (Richie 1996: 123). Thirdly, women involved in drug trafficking are less likely to be awarded leniency in sentencing; “because these women are ‘low down on the totem pole’ of drug organizations, they have little with which to bargain in terms of information on the drug operation” (Sokoloff 2005: 130). Without these crucial bargaining chips, women are disadvantaged when engaging in plea-bargaining.

The War on Drugs and other changes in policing have had particularly racialized consequences. Because drugs that are more common in poor and inner-city neighborhoods, like crack cocaine, carry higher consequences than other drugs commonly used by white and middle class people, like powdered cocaine, poor women and women of color are disproportionately

affected by the War on Drugs. Theoretically, this is of interest. Historically, the criminal justice system has long been invested in maintaining proper standards of femininity and thus metes out harsher punishments to women who have in some way betrayed their traditional gender role. The notion of “double deviance” (Lloyd 1995) pervades the penal system; this concept asserts that women offenders are doubly deviant—first as legal deviants, and secondly as deviating from traditional definitions of femininity (Lloyd 1995: 36). These archaic gender expectations in the courts translate to unrepresentative rates of commitments. Women who can better demonstrate a level of femininity in their crimes—such as women who steal in order to feed their children—often receive more leniency in sentencing than women who cannot, such as women who kill abusive partners. This femininity advantage works against women of color, as definitions of traditional femininity are unequivocally white. Thus, women of color are more likely to be incarcerated than white women, because, in some jurisdictions, women of color are automatically considered to be deviant (Linders and Van Gundy-Yoder 2008). The creation of proper femininity is also almost universally concerned with the policing of sexuality. In the next section, I will turn to theories of prison sexuality in an attempt to untangle meanings, benefits, and costs of being or becoming a sexual person behind bars.

Prison Sexuality Theories

The field of study of prison sexuality has proven to be controversial, and rightly so. The reasons a person chooses to have sex with another person are widely variable. Consequently, the context under which prison inmates have sex with each other has been a subject of much analysis. Unfortunately for this analysis of women in prison, most existing literature concerns itself with male inmates, particularly their use of sexuality as a tool of dominance and power (Sabo, et al. 2001; Buffum 1972). This body of research suggests that for men, prison sexuality

in the form of rape is a way to construct “masculine power hierarchies” and reinforce hegemonic masculinity (Messerschmidt 2001: 68). For example, the “hard” men—that is, those who can most effectively demonstrate physical strength and toughness—are on top of the hierarchy, where the “punks,” or men that cannot meet these standards are on bottom and consequently receive the brunt of sexual violence; thus, sexuality in men’s prisons “fuses sexual and social roles” (Donaldson 2001: 118; Kupers 2001). There is little research on sexuality in men’s prisons as a form of emotional expression.

For women in prison, the majority of cases of physical sexual coercion occur between the female inmates and the male guards (Alarid 2000; Thomas 1996; Beck and Harrison 2007). However, there are a number of incidences of reported sexual violence among inmates as well—approximately 2.9% of all inmates in federal prisons reported sexual misconduct by staff members, of which approximately 56% were female victims (Beck, et al. 2007). Dave and Cindy Struckman-Johnson’s 2002 study of sexual coercion of women in prison took samples from three separate women’s facilities; of these samples, between 8 and 27% of the inmates reported incidences of sexual coercion by either staff members or fellow inmates (they account for this relatively large range by suggesting that two of the facilities were structurally very different from the other). Of these incidences, fellow inmates perpetrated about 50% and the other half by staff; the Beck, et al. (2007) report found that other inmates perpetrated just under half of all incidences of sexual coercion. However, those incidences perpetrated by inmates usually only involved fondling or touching, whereas sexual assaults by staff were often more invasive and involved vaginal or anal penetration (Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson 2002). Some factors that account for such a large number of intra-prisoner offenses can be attributed, according to a study by Alarid (2000), to institutional influences, such as size of the

inmate population, the type of housing, and offender type; “female institutions that were larger, had barracks or dorm-style housing, and housed offenders who were convicted of crimes against persons were more likely to have higher rates of sexual coercion” (Alarid 2000: 393).

The same models that are used to understand inmates’ behavioral adaptations are also applied by theorists to understand their sexual lives. The authoritarian and deprivation environment of prison may foster particular behavioral or sexual responses:

The aspects of the deprivation model were originally outlined as being the forfeiture of liberty, withholding of goods and services, denial of heterosexual relationships, loss of autonomy, the sacrifice of security, boredom, lack of privacy, and forced association... Homosexual relationships, therefore, are seen to evolve from these psychological and physiological desires (Hensley, et al. 2002: 126).

Thus, according to this argument, sexuality eases the deprivation of the loss of the social roles of wife and mother. An example of the way women adapt to deprivation in prison is Giallombardo’s classic analysis of the “pseudo-family” she found in a California women’s correctional facility in 1966; a “pseudo-family” is a group of inmates that form a social unit that resembles a traditional family and includes the roles of fathers, mothers, spouses, children and sometimes extended family members. In addition to providing the social roles most women are accustomed to, Giallombardo found a prevalence of sexual relations between the “wife” and the “husband” of these arrangements. Giallombardo’s model presumes that all sexual relationships inside are “temporary and situational” (Ward and Kassebaum 1965: 89). It also follows a very heteronormative framework; it assumes that most women in prison are heterosexual, are mothers and/or wives, and have heteronormative sexual identities. There is no explanation of what happens to lesbian women or women who did not occupy these social roles outside of prison; presumably, they are either turned into the “male” partner, or they abstain from sexual activity in prison altogether. Furthermore, because there are no reports of coercion or violence in the

deprivation model, this model suggests that for women, sex is only an expression of emotional commitment or personal involvement, compared to the similar research in men's prisons that suggests sex for men is only about domination.

The deprivation model is illustrated in official opinions of the penal system in regards to prison homosexuality. White women who engaged in homosexual conduct were treated as "situational homosexuals" by prison personnel and were believed to eventually "return to heterosexual relationships upon release prison" (Freedman 1996: 399). Additionally, because homosexuality in prison was seen as a temporary remedy to loneliness and lack of male companionship, it was perceived as relatively innocuous and should not have formal prohibitions against it (ibid.: 404). However, prison authorities have always tacitly discouraged sexual activity among inmates because they saw sexuality as detrimental to the institution's aims. Because so much of prison ideology is predicated in rehabilitation, prison officials taught inmates to "abandon behaviors that had brought them into prison," such as sexual conduct and promiscuity (Smith 2006: 198). Additionally, sex between inmates was implicitly prohibited because of the perceived racialized aspects of the relationships (Freedman 1996).

The second, and somewhat less evidentially substantiated, model to explain female sexuality in prison is the importation model; "when considering homosexuality as an imported commodity, it is assumed that those who engage in homosexual behavior before incarceration continue to do so during incarceration." Sexuality, then, "is just one behavior/value that follows an inmate from the street to prison" (Hensley, et al. 2002: 126, 7). Thus, not all women in prison engage in sexual activity; only those with homosexual pre-dispositions will. Similarly, those women who were engaged in same-sex sexual relationships will find another woman to pair with while incarcerated. This model helps explain the situational homosexuality many inmates

engage in, as prison may provide an environment to indulge those pre-dispositions that may not have previously been available. However, there have been few studies to empirically demonstrate the tendency of women to engage in homosexual behavior while incarcerated based on their sexual history prior to incarceration. The deprivation model, then, may be more appropriate in understanding inmates' attitudes towards homosexuality (Hensley 2000) rather than their tendency to engage in it.

Ironically, the importation model supplied the prison institution's ideological framework for understanding black women's homosexual conduct in prison. Historically, prison officials believed that black women's "innate" promiscuity and aggression was translated into homosexuality while incarcerated and upon release would not necessarily return to a heterosexual lifestyle, and because little research had been done on black urban communities, they could not determine definitively whether or not black women ever had a heterosexual lifestyle to begin with (Freedman 1996). Consequently, much of the early literature on prison sexuality focused on a black woman-white woman dyad wherein the black woman unequivocally played the role of the masculine partner; this literature, in turn, shaped the official policies and regulations regarding female prison sexuality (*ibid.*).

These two models are best illustrated in two commonly used prison terms describing women engaged in homosexual behavior: the "jailhouse turnout" and the "prison butch" (Owen 1998; Alarid 2000). The former refers to women who have only engaged in homosexual behavior since coming to prison, thus exemplifying the deprivation model. Often, these women are looked down upon as promiscuous, manipulative, and engaging in such behaviors solely for personal gain (Ward and Kassebaum 1965; Owen 1998: 143), presumably because they are inauthentic lesbians. On the other hand, "prison butches" refer to the women that were

homosexual before entering prison and continue to be so once inside. These women often dress more masculine and appear more masculine in. Prison butches often choose to partner with the jailhouse turnouts as opposed to other prison butches, as more often than not, jailhouse turnouts play the femme in relationships (Alarid 2000). These women are also often viewed as manipulative and coercive, as they often have multiple partners and tend to be more aggressive and intimidating than other inmates (Owen 1998: 148; Freedman 1996: 416). These terms are, of course, rather problematic. First, since both categories of homosexual women are perceived in negative terms, the overall climate for sexual expression among inmates is cold. In other words, inmates infrequently perceive relationships as genuine or emotionally based, but rather with distrust. Perhaps this is due to the overwhelming pervasiveness of heterosexuality in our culture, which sees homosexual acts between women as deviant and undesirable. It is also possible that this sentiment reflects the inmate culture, which is characterized by “manipulation, loneliness, and a general lack of emotional bonding among inmates” (Hensley, et al. 2002: 132) and therefore few women trust any other women while in prison. Secondly, none of these analyses take into account the very gendered nature of these processes. Is previous sexual orientation the only factor in determining which women stay women, as femmes, and which women “become” men, as studs? Is femininity so entrenched with heterosexuality that it is near impossible for “real” women to be gay, even if it is just while in prison? Lastly, there have been very few analyses on the racialized nature of this process (Freedman 1996).

Brenda Smith’s comprehensive article, “Rethinking Prison Sex: Self-Expression and Safety” (2006), on the other hand, complicates and problematizes various motivations for prison sex. Smith focuses on sex as a form of expression, but also notes it can be exploitative, manipulative, and coerced. The seven reasons for engaging in sex in prison are: pleasure, trade,

freedom, transgression, safety, love, and even procreation, when sexual activity is performed with male personnel. This is a long way away from the problematic, oversimplified bifurcation of the deprivation/importation paradigm. According to Smith, sex is a way for prisoners to not only express emotional and pleasurable outlets, but it is a way for inmates to resist the corporeal hold the prison system has on their bodies. Additionally, “prisoners use sex to transgress these normative structures by performing in ways that defy society’s constructs of gender and sexuality” (Smith 2006: 210). Women prisoners, as I previously discussed, are double deviants: they sometimes defy femininity in particular ways, and as gender deviants, they often rebel against both the institution of prison and gender as an institution.

Why is the literature on prison sexuality so important in understanding the gendered nature of coping mechanisms? First, as Smith shows, sex and sexuality can be viable coping strategies for women. In an environment that denies prisoners agency, the only tools they can control are their bodies and minds and thus sexuality is often critical in self-empowerment. Secondly, as the slang terminology the deprivation/importation paradigm demonstrates—like “butch” and “jailhouse turnout”—sex and sexuality in prison is a gendered process. By better understanding how some cultural aspects are gendered, the gendered nature of other aspects of prison culture may similarly be realized. Lastly, femininity and heterosexuality are culturally linked to the point that one often implies the other. Many coping strategies of incarcerated women involve resisting and sometimes conforming to institutional standards; sexuality is an outlet of both of these strategies and it involves performing cultural standards of femininity and masculinity. It is how these performances manifest themselves in prison that is the focus of my last section.

Gender Performance Theories

To begin this section, I believe a justification is needed. The concept of gender as performative is largely taken as a given in the fields of Women's Studies and Sociology, but it is often problematic, overly theoretical, and therefore difficult to apply to daily situations. But as this project aims to do a gendered analysis, I make a couple of assumptions about gender that are easily supported by gender performance theories. First, I make the assumption that gender is a socially constructed phenomenon; in other words, there is nothing innate or inherent in human physiology that accounts for the occurrence of gendered organizing. Secondly, gender is not immutable or static. Gender is fluid and its expectations often shift from historical location to historical location and geographic location to geographic location: "In prison as well as in the outside world, gender is a social construction, flexible in both appearance and behavior" (Owen 2004: 142).

Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) first posited the insight that social life is constructed as a performance; "social intercourse itself is put together as a scene is put together" (72). A social scene, at its most basic, then, has a performer who plays a part or role, a scene, and an audience. It is the aim of the performer to foster an impression of the scene that is convincing to the audience. An idealized performance, in fact, is a key component in a believable—and thus "authentic"—performance and the actor often goes to great lengths to ensure that the audience is receiving the best possible impression of the scene (ibid: 35-48). It is important to note, though, that most performances that occur on a daily basis are not consciously contrived or planned; on the contrary, we are socialized into various parts and we understand at a very basic level what constitutes appropriate performances in appropriate situations (72). For example, though I was never formally taught distinctions of formal roles, I

know that the way I behave on a Saturday night with friends should be very different from the way I conduct myself at a job interview. Additionally, a person must inquire of her audience as to whether or not she can play a believable part in a certain role. As an example, a woman of color must figure out if she can believably play the part of the president of the United States or if she would be more convincing playing the part of his wife (ibid: 62). In other words, conceptions of who we are and what we can become are largely shaped by the performances a particular society will support. The “self” then, as Goffman understands it, is not a “material thing to be possessed and displayed; it is a *pattern of appropriate conduct*” (ibid: 72; emphasis mine).

Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) and specifically her conception of the performativity of gender takes the insight posited by Goffman and applies it specifically to gender. Not only is gender not inherent or biological to a person’s body, but it also possesses a kind of authority, which every socialized being must come to accept (Butler 1990: xv). While gender is an external construction, it occurs individually through a series of cultural expectations. Like Goffman’s understanding of the self, Butler understands the performative nature of gender not as “a singular act, but a repetition and ritual” that is both “culturally sustained” and “temporal” (ibid.). In this sense, gender is “always a doing” although not intentionally. It is the deed of gender that is important to our society, not the doer; in other words, “the deed is everything” (Nietzsche 1969 in Butler 1990: 34). Gender, then, is a culturally defined, structurally cohesive pattern of behaviors and expectations that transforms an object into a subject and that transcends the realm of consciousness. Gender is the way a person becomes a socially recognized subject.

How, then, is the concept of performance and the self pertinent to understanding the lives of women in prison? First and foremost, the crime that leads to incarceration can be a gender performance. As the literature in the theories of female criminality section suggests, many existing sentencing laws are rooted in the idea that women are not “woman enough to commit a crime” (Giallombardo 1966: 277); in other words, the ways in which femininity is expected to be performed are not conducive to committing offenses. Ironically, though, even women who do commit offenses—even violent offenses—are engaging in socially appropriate gender performances (Steffensmeier and Broidy 2001: 123). The previous discussion on survival crimes illuminates this theory: many women in prison committed crimes to protect their children or family members, or to cope with years of sexual abuse. Since gender expectations for women dictate a commitment to the private or family sphere, women who commit these survival crimes are participating in acceptable gender performances. Therefore, even women who are viewed as deviant in the eyes of the criminal justice system are still often deeply invested in maintaining traditional gender roles and expectations.

Secondly, as previously mentioned, the criminal justice system has long been involved in regulating and policing appropriate gender performances. Dana Britton (2003) “conceptualize[s] gender as a process, the product of a social construction that can be carried out both at the micro level (by the individual actor) and at the macro level (by social institutions, policies, and practices” (6). From this perspective, “gender structures the organization and is reproduced by organizational policies and actors” (ibid.). Butler and Goffman agree that the cohesiveness and authority of social performances are given in its reproduction (Butler 1990: 191; Goffman 1959: 79). In the prison system, these performances are reproduced and reinforced by legislation that gives clemency to those women who most closely resemble hegemonic expectations (Linders

and Van Gundy-Yoders 2008) and by introducing programs inside the prison that support traditional notions of femininity, such as vocational courses that emphasize domestic skills (Britton 2003).

Lastly, although no contemporary research has solely addressed this topic, many coping strategies of women in prison are designed to help maintain a sense of self. As Goffman and Butler explain it, selfhood is only created through social interactions and commonality of performances. Thus, the coping mechanisms employed by incarcerated women can illuminate the ways in which gender is understood and performed outside of prison. For example, the creation of family systems in prison is a way for women to express their desire for maternal interactions; in fact, without the role of mother or daughter, women often lose their sense of self (Owen 1998: 134). Gender performance is thus so integral to a women's sense of identity that opportunities for expressing femininity similar to the ways gender are performed outside of prison, are created in order to maintain sanity and comfort. It is my contention that prison, as well as all total institutions, serves as a microcosm for the larger society. By understanding which aspects of the performance of femininity or masculinity are salient in prison, we can better understand the nature and mechanisms of gender performance and reproduction in daily life.

Chapter Three: Coping Strategies of Incarcerated Women

The Modern “Pains of Imprisonment”

Because this study explores the strategies some women implement to cope with prison life, it is necessary to briefly discuss the environment the respondents describe. Ward and Kassebaum (1965) label the general atmosphere of prison and the adjustments inmates have to make to it as “the pains of imprisonment.” These pains involve not only the expected “deprivation of material comforts” but also, “the restrictions on personal freedom, and the separation from family and friends” (Ward and Kassebaum 1965: 1). Although Ward and Kassebaum wrote over 40 years ago, the women in this contemporary study support their earlier conclusions; they too noted the relinquishment of control, missing children and family members as well as the critical addition of unsatisfactory living conditions.

The increasing rates of female incarcerations and the statewide tightening of budgets, result in overcrowded and run-down facilities. All of the women in this sample mentioned the adjustment to, what Marabella called, the “woefully inadequate” physical spaces of the prison. Agnes notes that her experience with her cell was “claustrophobic;” Marabella echoes this sentiment, saying,

The hardest part was the physical conditions. Because the old Detroit Department of Corrections was a condemned rat hole. It had no heat in the wintertime and really bad water, horrible food. The windows didn’t have screens; it was an old farm and it was literally falling down. You could lay and literally watch plaster falling out of the ceiling.

A concern related to the physical conditions of the facility was the difficulty adjusting to prison food. Though the state is required to provide a well-balanced and nutritious meal three times a day, it is often, as Agnes maintained,

...like when you were in school and you had a menu and the menu always sounded so great but when you got to school, they talked about this big, thick, golden-crust pizza

you were going to have that day, and then when you get it, it's like a piece of cardboard? That's exactly how our food was.

Finally, the difficulty navigating illness through the health clinic was an aspect of prison life several of the inmates noted. Agnes expressed frustration over the complicated process of transferring and filing necessary paperwork in order to be seen and treated by the clinic personnel. Similarly, because clinic use can be abused by inmates who are avoiding chores or daily responsibilities and are not really ill, those who need the clinic face difficulty being believed by the prison and hospital staff, resulting in delayed service times for those with legitimate health concerns.

The second most difficult adjustment to prison life for these women was removal from friends, family, and social networks. Though only two of the sample participants were mothers, four out of five mentioned the heartbreak of leaving loved ones. Kim, 25 when committed and a mother of two, noted being away from her daughters was the hardest thing to face in prison. Making the adjustment even more devastating was the prison's lack of support in helping her cope with her loss, like providing resources for her daughters to visit. Mary, the participant who at 17 was the youngest respondent when first admitted, recalled the shock of losing her sense of familiarity was her most taxing adjustment. When I asked her what was, initially, the hardest adjustment, she remembered:

Not being around familiarity. Imagine being in a place where you know nobody. That was very difficult because I come from a family where we were all pretty close and I lived in a community where my family lived all around me. Going to prison, you know nobody. That was very difficult.

Mary emphasizes this point, saying that after the physical conditions of the facility, the most day-to-day tragedy is

...the loneliness, especially for lifers, when you're doing a really long time. Being separated from your family is the punishment. A lot of people don't understand that, they

think it's perfectly all right for prisoners to be tortured because that's a part of prison. No it isn't. What you're sentenced to is exile; you're sentenced to be removed from those you love, that's the punishment.

Mid summarizes this point concisely, saying, "you're actually alone more than you want to admit it. You're around 100s of people, but you are alone." The paradox of this is that while other inmates occupied her physical space, she knew none of them intimately, loved no one, and had no one to share her spirit with. In fact, even the people inmates were around were not always the kinds of people they would've chosen for companionship. Kim mentions that a difficult adjustment was being forced to live and associate with people much different from herself. She remembers when she first came to prison, her roommate was a woman who "looked like a man;" she was a type of person Kim had never been around and was, initially, uncomfortable with. Having to interact with people she would not have ordinarily chosen to be around was a painful adjustment to make. The respondents are defining a critical component of punishment here as exile; while punishment emphasizes the bodily hold of the prison system, exile suggests a hold on the soul. While the official aim of the criminal justice system may be to remove criminals from their communities to ensure safety and security—a corporeal hold—the consequence the women realize is the isolation of loved ones from their daily lives—a spiritual hold.

Lastly, many of the pains of imprisonment relate to a loss of social power. Mid notes that relinquishing control was the hardest thing for her to adjust to. On the outside she was "in control" of her job and her life. Prison, in stark contrast, is an environment where

I am in a place with no control of anything, my life, nothing. Adjusting to knowing and hearing what is said to you.

She goes on to state that "knowing that they're the boss and boss is always right" was, as she put it, "the real punishment." Punishment is thus defined in three ways: physical confinement, social exile, and now, a loss of agency. Marabella understands how deeply the loss of agency affects

many women in prison. She suggests that life without agency is torturous. Life in prison often leads to two kinds of death: a “civil death” described by Goffman (1961), wherein an inmate may face not only “a temporary loss” of civil liberties and privileges, but “may have some of these rights permanently abrogated” (Goffman 1961: 16); and a literal death. Marabella asserts,

You know, there’s a lot of ways to kill a prisoner. Life by torture, death by imprisonment. It doesn’t have to necessarily be an electric chair or a needle. You can literally rot away and die in [prison].

A way to regain control and resist the hold the prison system has is to fight and to survive. In the following sections, I will explore the ways in which women resist the hold of the penal system and survive life in prison through their coping strategies.

In this project, I frame coping the as a process of becoming a survivor. There is considerable research that indicates that the difference between identifying as a victim and identifying as a survivor has a lot to do with the social support an individual has after the traumatic experience (Maercker and Müller 2004; Morrow and Smith 1995; Scarce 2002). Trauma is any experience that overwhelms a person’s sense of safety and exhausts pre-existing coping mechanisms (Morrow and Smith 1995). I treat prison as an on-going traumatic experience because of the extreme deprivation of personal freedom and liberties experienced by inmates and their consistent need to create new coping mechanisms in this unfamiliar environment. Remarkably, these women participated in the survival process as the traumatic event was occurring, instead of afterwards. These five women engaged in coping strategies to transform the trauma of prison life into an experience of learning and growth and created social networks of women who shared similar processes as a way to form their own social support system. This is not to suggest in any way that prison is inherently a positive or learning

experience, only that the survivors in this sample identified the need to engage in positive activities in order to survive.

The process of becoming survivors happened in two ways for these women: first, while they were in prison, they utilized multiple coping strategies on which this study elaborates and second, they engaged in anticipatory socialization to prepare for successful lives outside of prison. Inside, the way the women in my sample “did” their time was a mode of becoming a survivor (Scarce 2002); that is, instead of engaging in rule-breaking, fighting, or simply becoming complacent, these women sought out resources to improve their lives. While they managed to survive the crowded and sub-standard living conditions, bad food, and inconsistent health care systems, they also survived the emotional strain involved in being a ward of the state. They appear to be remarkably compassionate, intelligent, funny, *whole* women. Part of the process of surviving is having the courage to try to improve future conditions; they became ready to face the different values, beliefs, schedules, and rituals of the free world. While in prison, the respondents partook in any and all activities that might have benefited them while incarcerated or in the future; for example, when available, the participants enrolled in college courses, held steady employment, and participated in various clubs and therapy groups in order to begin to adapt to life “outside.” Therefore, before they were even released, these women were well on their way of becoming survivors inside and outside prison walls. Surviving, then, is not simply about living through traumatic events; it is a process of transforming those events into catalysts for change.

In my sample, three primary coping strategies emerged: staying positive, staying busy, and maintaining a sense of self. I will elaborate on each of these strategies, focusing on the

circumstances under which each strategy occurs, the consequences of each and the gender specificity of each.

Staying Positive

Of the three strategies my participants discussed, staying positive was both the most salient and reportedly the most empowering. Staying positive means occupying prison time with activities and people that they perceived would, ultimately, lead to shorter sentences and improve their lives both inside and once out of prison. For these women, “positive” was an adjective to describe any ventures that kept inmates out of trouble and helped them to focus on their particular goals. As Mid explains her survival strategy she says,

So, you have to review yourself and evaluate [decisions] and know that immediate circumstances are not your future circumstances. You have to work towards the end goal, not the present goal. And you have to listen to that whether its right, wrong, because your goal is having good behavior, good reports.

Strategies for staying positive occurred for the duration of the sentence, but often took a few years to realize. Staying positive involved both *engaging* in activities—like seeking out emotionally beneficial friendships—and *refraining* from certain interactions—such as homosexual relationships.

Staying positive for these five women was necessary for keeping up hope and realizing the goal of not only getting out early, but also coming out a better person, which is part of the process of becoming a survivor. As Mary describes her goals while incarcerated, she says,

I wanted to survive but like I said, I wanted to do more than just survive. I wanted to turn it all around.

Mary’s use of the word survival, like many of the other respondents’, is two-fold: first, she wants to simply get out of prison; secondly, she wants to use her time for personal growth to “turn it all around.” Because the process of survival is often communal these women entered into

friendships with people with similar goals and interests. Mid describes her rubric for choosing women with whom to make friendships when she states,

I did find friends. A couple friends that had come from a similar background and similar interests and had children and [were] working towards some of the same goals.

People with whom to make friends were chosen based on the level of commitment they had in also staying positive. The research participants distinguished friends from acquaintances (Greer 2000), with the main distinction being that friendships were rare and few in number (Jiang and Winfree 2000). Friendships were helpful in building inner-strength and alleviating loneliness. As Mid reflected,

[Friendship] helps because you built sort of an inner strength towards each other, because they understand what you left and where you are now. That helps you both to have a meeting of the minds of the same type of situation.

It is important to note, though, that because these friendships are so rare, because the activities friends do together were not always available to them, such as when they were isolated from their friends during mandatory lock-downs twice a day, and because inmates are often surrounded by other inmates whom they distrusted, many of the women still felt alone much of the time, which is what Mid was expressing when she said she felt alone despite having “hundreds of people around.”

The activities friends did together were often strategies for personal growth. Friends encouraged journal writing or reading to help the respondents focus their energies on self-improvement and empowerment. Additionally, the respondents spoke of such friendships as “family-like,” with friends taking the role of mother and sister figures (Owen 1998); almost all women spoke to having a relationship that resembled family, particularly the youngest members of my sample, Kim and Mary both spoke about fellow inmates as “mother-like.” Kim illustrates this when she discloses:

This one lady that's home now that lives in New York and one that's still there, they were both old enough to be my mother and they were both like mother figures to me. They helped me a whole lot. If it wasn't for them, I don't know...it made a big difference, a big difference having them in my life.

“Mother-like” figures would provide guidance and advice, as well as emotional nurturing for these respondents, which they associated with traditional “motherly” characteristics.

Family-like bonds tended to be formed among the lifers, that is, those women with life or indeterminate sentences. The women in my sample were hesitant to form relationships with other women who had shorter sentences than they did, mostly because, at least initially for some women, friendships are formed around the length of inmates' sentences. Agnes explains,

I never, when I first went to prison, I didn't even want to meet someone who only had a year to do. I hung out strictly with the lifers.

Many women coped in this way in order to lessen the amount of sadness they often felt; after all, to make friends with a woman who would be getting out in a few years would lead to yet another loss in an environment where loss is a constant and the threat of being transferred to another far-away facility is always present. It should be noted though, that while many respondents described friendships as “family like,” none described these relationships as literally as being a “pseudo-family.” Kim and Agnes, two of the sample who were mothers prior to incarceration, also noted that bonds among lifers helped alleviate the sense of loss they felt over separation from their children, which, in turn, helped them to focus on release from prison and so ensured that all their actions were positive in nature. In fact, Jiang and Winfree (2000) argue that ties to family and forming family-like bonds in prison tend to decrease the amount of write-ups or “tickets” (official reports of rule infractions) an inmate gets. Additionally, some respondents found support groups useful in maintaining a positive attitude and finding women with whom to

create meaningful friendships, particularly Mid, who, when saying that prison-sponsored support groups helped her cope, revealed,

Yes, in some ways I did find them helpful. I found them helpful because you feel like you can express yourself, because you don't know where all these people are coming from. It was good to hear that other people are going through things and adjustments also.

Staying positive, then, involves both the friendships they sought out as well as taking advantage of opportunities that would potentially help them to grow.

A distinction that the women made between friends and acquaintances is that while friendships are a source of self-esteem and strength, relationships with acquaintances are less intimate and are sometimes maintained with women the respondents considered to be manipulators. Mary talks about women she considered to be manipulators but who she nonetheless kept as acquaintances when she says:

I don't know, I had some friends actually that I thought were manipulators, too... I had friends in prison that I could not get away from as long as I was in prison so it was better for me to be their friend than to be their enemy because they were so manipulative and so dangerous. At the same time, when I was around her, in small dosages, I kinda had fun because she had good conversations. I like you, but I can only see you once a week in yard. Through the week I'm busy.

Thus, because the prison environment forces interaction, as a coping strategy, it is often better to remain friendly around others that the women ordinarily would not associate with than to live in a hostile or tense environment. These types of relationships were reportedly much less intimate than friendships and often involved keeping the perceived manipulators at arm's length.

The incidence of "manipulators" in prison was reportedly high and a daily source of negativity in the inmates' lives. Manipulators were defined as women who were trying to get something out of everyone in the form of money, drugs or cigarettes, or social power. In many

cases, this involved “hustling,” which is charging fellow inmates money for simple things, like, as Agnes described, assisting with court appeals:

Well, I would, I never charged anyone for reading over their paperwork or nothing and you know, I was charged, that was a hustle.

People would charge money for helping with cases?

Oh yeah. You get nothing for free in there.

Additionally, manipulators, instead of focusing on reducing their sentences, focus on what Owen calls “in prison pursuits, such as drugs, girlfriends, and fighting” (Owen 1998: 179). Manipulators gain a level of respect by some inmates for being someone who can acquire contraband and information; alternatively, the chances of getting out on good behavior for manipulative women are dramatically diminished. Consequently, in order to stay positive in prison and achieve the goal of becoming a survivor and getting out early, women have to actively refuse to participate in relationships with manipulative inmates.

This web of manipulation and distrust—Owen calls “The Mix” (Owen 1998)—is “continuing the behavior that got you here in the first place” (quoted in Owen 1998). Essentially, “the Mix” is any involvement in any behavior, relationship, or activity that causes problems for other inmates or staff for the sake of personal gain (Owen 1998). Engaging in manipulation is itself a coping mechanism, comparable to staying positive, as it is a way to accomplish goals, albeit not goals of self-improvement. Being in the Mix brings a sense of power and respect that is denied inmates in the administrative operation of the prison system. On a practical level, inmates are denied many of the choices allowed on the outside, like cigarettes, money, and recreational drugs. Therefore, manipulation in prison exists as a source of control, ownership, and respect that often even life outside cannot always afford. For this reason, friendships are considered risky, as Kim suggests,

Most people get involved in relationships with each other for all the wrong reasons. It's to use or to gain commissary. It's always for a reason.

According to Kim, then, entering a friendship with someone takes a great amount of trust, as it is difficult to determine which women are only interested in friendships “for a reason.”

Because the entirety of my sample had the goal of getting out and staying out of prison, it is not surprising that they strictly avoided the Mix. Though Owen characterizes the Mix as the formation of an underground economy of drugs, cigarettes, and commissary goods, she also notes the influence of the “homosexual mix” (ibid: 184), which is the aspect of the mix that the whole sample found to be the most dangerous. Kim notes the disingenuous nature of most homosexual relationships in prison:

None of them are genuine, none of them are genuine. It's everyone trying to get something, its survival. I haven't seen one genuine relationship in there in 10 years.

That's too bad because so many women in there are coming from abusive places.

And that's why I said I couldn't understand. I know a lot of women's stories that are there from being in abusive relationships and they get there and the women abuse them worse than the man did physically. And I'm like, that's why you're here! That's why I don't understand it. That's why I'm so against it, why you're locked up because you got too much garbage. First of all, everyone has some baggage. But when you get to that point where you got locked up, its time to have a reality check right here right now and let's get that together. And then you add this on top, who do you think is coming out? When they get released from prison, what kind of person is being released?

Both older studies (Giallombardo 1966; Ward and Kassebaum 1965) and contemporary studies (Owen 1998; Smith 2006) have indicated that homosexual relationships do, to some extent, alleviate the loneliness and other pains of imprisonment. The respondents of this study, though, with the exception of Marabella, provide a more one-dimensional and negative understanding of same-sex prison relationships.

Furthermore, the study respondents make a distinction between lesbians, who come into prison as lesbians and heterosexual women who only engage in homosexual activity once they're there—commonly referred to, as Kim put it, as “gay for the stay.” Those who are perceived as

“real” lesbians—those women who were lesbian before incarceration—are respected more as lesbians, compared to those who engage in same-sex intimacies only once inside. The respondents perceived the feminine girlfriends of the “real” lesbians as the ones who were hustling and manipulative, in contrast to the reportedly “real” lesbians. Respondents claim that it is possible to distinguish between these two categories of women who participate in same-sex relationships by their dress and appearance. Again, Kim notes stereotypically, that the true lesbians “really looked like men;” she elaborates:

You can tell certain ones, the ones that are looking really, really masculine look like that for years, they’re the gay women. They’re not just the ones that are gay for the stay. I have more respect for them than I do for someone who’s just doing it because they’re there.

In Kim’s opinion, the relationships in prison are disingenuous because only half of the dyad is “really” homosexual. The lack of authenticity of the relationship is in the perception that women who engage in same-sex sexual relationships once entering prison have duplicitous intentions.

There is a notable study exception in Marabella, who although reported on the “mouthiness” of women, did engage in a relationship with a woman for fifteen years of her incarceration. Though the constraints of the interview did not permit her to elaborate fully, Marabella described her partner as someone she “deeply cared” for. She also reported witnessing many other relationships she understood as “phenomenal.” Marabella further described many non-sexual relationships in prison as “intense” and noted that above any other factor, that the mental health of inmates affects the intensity and quality of friendships, and not the authenticity of a partner’s sexual orientation. The prison population has a large number of mentally ill inmates. Similar to life on the outside, many women who are mentally or emotionally unwell form relationships that are also unstable. Marabella’s understanding of same-sex relationships illustrates that sexuality in prison, as well as on the outside, is rife with a

myriad motivations and intentions. While some relationships in prison do take on an abusive nature, Marabella indicates that the disingenuous motivation is not all embracing.

The respondents' perceptions of homosexuality are complex in a number of ways. They indicate prevalent expectations of gender and sexuality expectations while simultaneously demonstrating an understanding of the complexity of sexuality. It is interesting that while men who engage in manipulation or coercion are traditionally considered strategic (such as men in the business world who often use dishonesty for personal economic gain), women who do the same are considered manipulators. In fact, Agnes mentions she would rather have a male guard, despite the threat of sexual abuse, because,

They don't PMS, they don't have periods, they don't have emotions that women have. They're bigger and I can pay no attention to them, I didn't have a problem with them.

Thus, because gender is constructed on out the outside in such a way that men are given almost universal, unquestioned power over women, it is expected that men will be coercive and authoritative. Women who engage in behavior that is traditionally not enacted by women, such as appearing tough or "in charge," whether they are guards or other inmates, are perceived negatively (Britton 2003; Owen 1998).

Secondly, traditional gender stereotypes are pervasive in perceptions of homosexuality in prison. Since "real" lesbians are consistently described as butch or masculine in appearance and dress and their feminine girlfriends are the ones that are only "situational homosexuals" (Eigenberg 2002)—that is, individuals who engage in what is traditionally considered homosexual behavior due to the constraints of their environment—the alleged "natural" connection between real femininity and heterosexuality remains unchallenged. In other words, because "real" women desire men, in prison they must "settle" for those who merely resemble men. Ironically though, the term "gay for the stay" puts sexuality on a gender-behavior

continuum and affords it more flexibility than do dominant understandings of sexuality. “Gay for the stay” suggests sexuality is not static or a biological given, nor a choice, but is rather a fluid aspect of a woman’s personality that is affected by environment. It also asserts that same-sex relationships in prison are common because they serve as outlets for material gain in the form of money and contraband, and emotional gain, like a succor for loneliness.

Staying positive has markedly gendered implications. First, staying positive, for most of my respondents, involves relationships—either participating in positive ones or refraining from negative ones. According to one study by Caldwell and Peplau (1982), women tend to engage in conversation about thoughts, feelings, emotions, and self-disclosure, which helps to foster a sense of intimacy and connectedness. In a prison environment, this kind of conversation can be a source of strength and mutual understanding. Though there are studies that support the conclusion that men form bonds and relationships with other men in prison (Jewkes 2005; Sabo, et al. 2001), the axis around which men bond is, primarily, one of physicality. In other words, the friendship a male, whether in prison or not, may develop is one where he may lift weights or play sports with another male; rarely will he share personal feelings or emotions (Caldwell and Peplau 1982; Sabo, et al. 2001). In fact, the emotion work that women can often do externally with other women, is often done internally for men, which forces many male inmates to “withdraw—literally and emotionally—into their private self” (Jewkes 2005:55). The construction of femininity, on the other had, affords women the opportunity to express emotions with other women. This enables women, then, to engage in strategies of staying positive that involve forming friendships and bonds on emotional levels.

Not surprisingly, then, the participants of this study acknowledge that forming friendships with positive women help to develop or maintain their femininity. Being surrounded

by positive female role models defines femininity and what it means to be a woman. Because Mary was committed as a 17-year old adolescent and served 17 years, the kinds of talks often given by female family members about sex and puberty were absent and instead happened during the first few years of her incarceration. In her own words,

Well, as you may know, as you mature from a girl to a teenager to a woman your body experiences different things and you may have your mom or an older aunt or someone to go and talk to and I didn't have that. I had these women who were probably old enough to be my mom and I asked them questions, you know, why do I feel this way? I noticed that I cry a lot around my cycle, *they told me a lot about being a woman* (my emphasis).

One way to understand what it means to be a woman, as defined by Mary's close friends, is to have a familiarity with menstruation and female bodily functions. She later explains how these women taught her about make-up and dress:

I remember them teaching me about make-up. When you're a teenager sometimes you just grab lipstick because it looks nice, not because it compliments your skin. I remember these two particular women saying you know, "with your skin tone you should wear colors like this." I didn't have the opportunity to go through those things with my mom because I didn't have my mom. So they took that role.

Learning about being a woman, then, also means understanding how femininity ought to be performed.

Finally, the reportedly malevolent characteristics of the inmate culture are also gendered. The low incidence of violence is a noticeable difference between men's and women's prisons for visitors, guards, and inmates. The real violence, most of this sample noted, was verbal; threats of violence and overall manipulation and distrust are the characteristics of the negative culture of women's prisons (Giallombardo 1966; Owen 1998; Britton 2003). Research indicates that the majority of incarcerated women have at some point in their lives been victims of abuse and that many have spent time on the streets with the constant threat of physical violence or exploitation (Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2003), where self-sufficiency was crucial for immediate survival. It is

of little surprise that an “every woman for herself” culture has emerged. However, though many incarcerated women have rejected particular manifestations of femininity, like the dependence on a male figure for emotional and material support, it is clear through the respondents’ explicit acknowledgment of the lack of violence, that the avoidance of physical altercations as a conflict management strategy is upheld. In other words, it is the combination of histories of gender-specific threats and experiences, as well as dominant understandings of what it means to be a woman—namely, that women shouldn’t participate in physical fights and should instead use “feminine wiles” to get access to power—that create a negative subculture for women in prison. By utilizing the perceived positive aspects of femininity, such as the capacity to form close, emotional bonds, the women in my sample have developed a very gendered, useful, and meaningful strategy to avoid negativity in order to survive prison life.

Keeping Busy

It is not enough to just stay positive to get through time in prison, it is also necessary to fill the days with activities. The most day-to-day survival strategy for the women in my sample was to stay busy. This strategy is related to staying positive, as many of the ways women occupy their time were also ways to actively avoid negativity and to foster hope, but is markedly unique in intention. Though fostering positive attitudes was a residual effect of keeping busy, the women utilized it specifically to get through the day. Working prison jobs, developing hobbies, and continuously writing appeals were the most common strategies to occupy their days in prison.

Keeping busy involves neutralizing the prison environment. As all the women of this study describe, prison life is in stark contrast to the lives they had prior to incarceration. Neutralizing their environment makes prison seem “normal” in that they attempt to make prison

resemble the lives they had on the outside. Staying busy with hobbies, classes, and work serves this purpose. When asked why they chose to work or take classes, many of them responded that they had always done these things; doing everyday, routine things, then, helps to numb the degrading reality of prison life. Hensley (2000) explains the importation model as suggesting that inmates' outside roles are brought into prison "along with their criminal ones" (Hensley 2000: 2). Thus, if a woman was a student, worker, or hobbyist before incarceration, she will often find ways to do similar activities while incarcerated.

Prison jobs, when the respondents could find them, were the easiest way to fill the day with something to do and normalize their lives. Inmates are not required by the prison to be employed, but for many women, employment is their sole source of income. Though the jobs pay only a few cents an hour and often involve tedious or manual labor, the entire sample noted being thankful for being occupied for several hours each day. Marabella says working in the law library and going to school was the best way to get through the day: "The way that I was able to deal with everyday was to work and go to school, and that's what I did." Mid also notes that having a job helped normalize the prison experience, particularly since she worked full time prior to incarceration. This understanding is particularly useful in adjusting to the transition from the outside world to prison. Britton (2003) reports that 74% percent of female inmates come from working class backgrounds; roughly 37% had previous work experience in "clerical" work and 37% came from "technical, sales, or service" work. The majority of this sample worked in the law library, but often started doing menial jobs, like janitorial work. Also, because the majority of the sample found working in prison jobs to be a liberating experience, work seems to be one of the habits of pre-prison life that is imported into prison life (Hensley 2000).

Similarly, the constant process of writing appeals for both themselves and other inmates occupied many hours of the study participants' day. They explained that they acquired these skills by spending a lot of time in the law library asking paralegals questions and looking up how to file appeals in the available books. In fact, when possible, inmates would eventually seek out employment in the law library so that they could work on their appeals and earn money at the same time. Appeal writing is not a strategy employed by the average inmate; the women in this sample were unique in that they developed the research and writing skills necessary for filing long and dense appeals, actively participated in the appeals process, and strove to help other women with their cases. Though the law library is available to every inmate, it takes personal motivation and determination to begin to figure out law jargon and to navigate through the hundreds of dense law books. Agnes describes her first time in the library as,

I, uh, when I couldn't get any help [from the outside] and I ran out of money and I didn't have anything else that's when I went to the library and said look, help me find these books, help me look this up, how do I find these other cases? And they [paralegals in the library] told me and then I just did it. And I'm not overly bright, I was just overly desperate.

Marabella notes that the ability to understand the complicated and convoluted legal system is also an access to power:

I was the go-to. I was like control center in the law library. After a while that really worked for me because I'd be sitting out in the yard and then someone from the guard's union would come up and it would be someone I would talk to for hours about his experience. And periods of time would come when he would say, "Hey, I heard that they're filing false charges against so-and-so, saying [accusations of harassment, sexual assault]" and I'd look at him and say, "He did. And he did this and this and this." And he'd look at me and say "ok" and the next thing I know the guy would be out the door. It was a way of being able to control what was going on and to alleviate some of the suffering as well.

Marabella's example shows the symbiotic relationship between inmates and guards. A defining characteristic of a total institution is the strict division of authority between inmates and

institutional personnel. However, because inmates comprise the overwhelming majority of the population of the institution, it would be near impossible for the guards to fulfill all their responsibilities without the help of, at least a few, inmates. Likewise, without the guards' role as the bearer of power and access, the privilege that comes with navigating the legal system in order to provide information to the guards would be obsolete.

Another method of staying busy was participation in courses, either academic or vocational, though they were infrequently conducted. Every woman in my sample earned at least some college credits while incarcerated; Mary even earned her Master's degree. In addition to keeping themselves busy throughout the day, the motivations behind taking these courses were many, but involved either a neutralizing of the prison environment or a way to improve their social positioning outside of prison. Marabella, when asked why she participated in college classes, responded,

I had always gone to school and I wanted to go to school, I had always been a good student; I had liked school and I wanted to keep going.

Mary, when describing her interest in college classes said,

Every time I achieved a goal I felt so much better about myself and that feeling is what kept motivating me to feel that feeling again.

Additionally, while not always so topically interesting, vocational courses were occasionally offered and many women participated simply as something to do.

Unfortunately, women in prison today do not have the access to education that the women of this study enjoyed. In 1994, President Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (VCCLEA), which denies inmates access to federal Pell Grants, which are federal, need-based grants awarded to undergraduates in order to access postsecondary education. Consequently, shortly thereafter the VCCLEA passed, Michigan passed a law that

makes it illegal to conduct college courses for college credit at taxpayer expense. Attending college courses was a powerful survival strategy for women who chose to participate in them because rates of recidivating are significantly reduced when inmates have a college education. A study conducted by the Education Resources Information Study found that “correctional education participants” had a reduced re-incarceration rate of 21% compared to 31% for non-participants (Steurer and Smith 2006). Women who are invested in rehabilitation and success after release benefited immensely from these college programs.

Finally, with so much unscheduled time, women enjoyed doing activities that both sharpened their minds or skills and facilitated bonding with other inmates. They often had to creatively adapt to the prison’s resources and invent ways to enjoy hobbies they enjoyed prior to incarceration. Marabella and Mid, for example, described cooking as a way to enjoy their friends’ company, pass the time, and escape the food served in the prison’s cafeteria; they often had to invent no-bake recipes and take ingredients from the kitchen in order to accomplish this. Another activity inmates could do together was knit or crochet while watching TV. Similarly, Mary found it helpful to exercise everyday in order to stay busy. While prisons legally must have gym access for inmates, permission must be granted in order to use them. This is yet another incentive to have good conduct and remain in relatively high favor with guards, which is often facilitated through staying positive and keeping busy strategies. It was important for these women to occupy themselves with productive hobbies and chores as a way to resist “mental incarceration,” which is the state of complacency many inmates enter to numb or make easier the prison experience; according to Kim, the way to avoid being “locked-up mentally” is by:

Reading, staying in touch with the outside world through newspapers, magazines, talking to my daughters, and not accepting it. That’s the thing, that’s the mental part. From day one I was like I’m not doing this time, I’m getting out of here. It took me 10 years but I didn’t do 20, that motivated a lot of other women and they remember when I came and

told them I'm not doing that time and then eventually, you know, it happened. I didn't just say it I'm going to be here, I'm going to do it how I do it. That's a lot of women's mentality when they get here, I'm here, I'm just going to do it how I want to and they accept it.

Incarceration, for Kim, is two-fold: it involves physical isolation, which cannot be avoided, but also a hold on the mind, which is what keeping busy resists. Being mentally incarcerated means believing in the institution's definition of what an inmate is: someone who needs to be controlled, monitored, and who is inherently deviant or chaotic (Goffman 1961; Britton 2003). Keeping busy resists mental incarceration by facilitating the time necessary to develop skills and hobbies as well as interpersonal relationships.

Rik Scarce (2002) describes prison life as divided into three separate times: the institution's time, the inmates' collective time, and individual time. Institutional time is the daily schedule that is decided by prison authorities. It involves daily lock-downs (periods of about 90 minutes twice a day where inmates must be in their cells), scheduled lights-off time, and meal times. Individual and collective time is what is described in this section: inmates have a hand in their own schedule by choosing employment and courses, and communally, inmates as a group structure social time by arranging activities like cooking or playing cards that they do together. Goffman's model of the total institution describes the ways in which inmates' individual and communal time is limited by the prescribed schedule in order to make the institution run most efficiently. When asked what the most important thing I should know about life in women's prisons is, Marabella responded:

The big difference [between prison and the outside] is noise and time. You run life on the prison clock so there's so many times a day you have to do things, on your bunk, your detail, at school. A lot of the culture and the rhythm of the place is controlled by the clock because they've literally taken the clock and turned it into an instrument of institutionalization. So the rhythm of the place is run on the clock.

Keeping busy, then, is a way to normalize prison life and ignore, if only temporarily, the control of the institutional clock.

The inmates describe no negative consequences of this strategy; in fact, above all other advice to incoming inmates was the dictum “stay busy;” Mid urges,

“That’s another issue: for survival is to stay busy, stay busy, as busy as you can make it. Get a job if you possibly can, take groups, and then also reading.”

Staying busy is the primary strategy used by most of the women in this sample to cope with the day-to-days of prison life.

The positive consequences of staying busy are, of course, extensive. First, occupying time with activities makes the day go by faster; many of these women had life sentences—some served up to 30 years—and when there is that much time to face, day by day is the easiest way to face it. Secondly the ability to neutralize the prison environment provides a powerful solace. Staying busy by developing hobbies or bonding with other women, as Kim mentioned, helped to alleviate the loneliness due to missing children, parents, and other family members (Jiang and Winfree 2006). Prison as a total institution (Goffman 1961) has a hold on nearly every aspect of their daily lives and the only things the women truly control are their bodies and minds; for this reason, the most daily survival strategy eased the monotony of prison life and served as an opportunity for women to retreat into their own world, which provides an opportunity for self-soothing and communal coping

This strategy is also gendered in a number of ways. On an institutional level, the courses and classes offered to women inmates are designed to introduce them to stereotypically female-dominated occupations: janitorial, cooking, and secretarial skills were among the most frequently offered courses. Mary describes the perceived difference between the courses offered to men and those offered to women:

The men have different courses. I do know that some of those courses are offered at the men's facility but they're designed differently.

So they're geared towards women and geared towards jobs that women traditionally do?
Mm-hmm. And we have tried to ask for different things, like we wanted a computer repair class and mechanics and I think they fought for mechanics and got it for a year, but took it away again. But yeah, they are definitely gender specific.

Marabella recalls a lawsuit that addressed discrimination in courses offered to women. *Glover v. Johnson* (2:77-cv-71229 E.D. Mich.) was filed in 1977 by five female inmates detained at a federal women's prison in Southeast Michigan. The plaintiffs claimed that the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) violated the constitutional rights of the inmates by "failing to provide rehabilitative opportunities to female inmates equal to those provided to male inmates. Specifically, the plaintiffs alleged disparities in educational degrees available, vocational courses, library facilities, law library facilities, [etc.]" (Washington University Law Civil Rights Litigation Clearinghouse). Marabella explains the context of the case in her own words:

We didn't have a lot of the college programs. At that time, they were putting men on a bus and sending them to the night owl program at [Jackson Community College] and we didn't have anything close to that. Some of our prisoners had taken the same introductory classes over and over and over. So I clearly saw that there was a lot of discrimination at the time. I didn't know of the extent of the unconstitutionality, that I knew instinctually was not right, that this was not fair. I got the same sentence as my husband so why is he going to school and why is he in the work internships and he's able to participate in all the ways that I wasn't and I'm here standing with a toilet brush with a defunct sewer system.

The Michigan Court found the plaintiffs' accusations to be substantiated and ordered the Department of Corrections to implement college courses in the women's facilities. In 1987, courses became available, though, at least the vocational courses, such as secretarial and domestic skills, are gender-oriented and uphold the gendered division of labor.

Similarly, on an individual level, the hobbies women most often use to occupy their time are gender-specific: there are many opportunities within the inmate culture for cooking, crocheting, knitting, and creative writing, which are traditionally thought of as feminine

activities. Secondly, this strategy, like staying positive, is more of mental exercise than physical. Unlike men's prisons where much of their free time is spent lifting weights or playing basketball (Sabo 2001), women's preferred method of staying busy was to focus on mental occupation. Due to women's social status outside of prison, perhaps the focus on mental improvement is to help increase their social positioning upon release in order to reduce chances of recidivating. In 1994, 67.5% of released prisoners were rearrested for a new crime within three years of release; 57.6% of those rearrested were women (Langan and Levin 2002). Kim explains her understanding of why women recidivate; she claims that prison does not prepare them for the outside world and unless they prepare themselves through taking classes and developing skills, recidivating is almost inevitable:

So it's important to get yourself together because when you get out of here, there's a life going on whereas in there it's all about you... No one prepares you for reality or even gives you a heads up. First time when I first came home I went to a job fair and I felt like everyone was looking at me and I was about to start crying. Today I know they weren't looking at me but I felt like I had a sign that said I just got out of prison. That's how you feel, you're out of touch with things for so long it's hard to adjust. And that's something [Michigan Department of Corrections is] not preparing you for. And we used to always get angry when we see someone get released and come back into prison and I thank God I'm not going back but I understand how they get out and end up going back. I understand now.

Keeping busy with positive mental activities, then, is a way for women to ensure they will have enough skills, talents, and the right mind set to not recidivate.

Because the prison is a gendered institution, meaning it is involved in the creation and maintenance of gender ideologies and expectations, and because so much of modern gender roles are still rooted in the division of labor, it is of little surprise that the resources available to women both institutionally and culturally are gender-specific (Britton 2003). Institutionally, the courses and skills offered to inmates reinforce the division of labor. Prisons have historically been invested in providing opportunities to women that perpetuate this division; the antiquated

notion of the best way to “reform” female inmates is to teach domestic skills that will “foster both piety and domesticity” (Britton 2003: 38). Remnants of this gendered rehabilitation model exist today in the form of the types of courses and skill sets taught to women in prison.

Functionally, teaching skills like cooking, cleaning, and clerical work prepares women for the jobs they historically and, still, typically do. However, these skills are mostly housekeeping skills and do not provide women with the labor market skills they need to succeed outside of prison. Thus, by not providing what many female inmates consider to be adequate preparation for the job market, unless she seeks out these skills on her own, recidivism is almost guaranteed.

Gendering happens on a cultural level as well as an institutional level, though, and inmates’ available resources largely influence the choices they make while in prison. Examples of this are the availability of knitting supplies, which is a traditionally female-dominated chore, but no reports of chessboards or games typically associated with intellect, which is a traditionally masculine trait. Gender ideologies permeate the inmate culture, which, as this sample shows, results in gender typical hobbies. As Mary suggests, many women would like to see more variation in available activities and courses, but are forced to work with what they have; consequently, when women leave the prison, they are prepared to participate in low paid, female-dominated occupations that reinforce and maintain the gendered division of labor. However, the women of this study also demonstrate a resistance to the division of labor by involving themselves in activities that will prepare them for more opportunities upon release. The skills acquired in writing appeals prepared the respondents for jobs in the professional arena.

Staying busy by actively using their minds in the form of researching, learning, writing, bonding, or any of the various other methods this sample describes appears to serve two purposes simultaneously: they ease the monotony and discomfort of the prison environment and prepare

them for life outside of prison. For the women of my sample who are in the process of becoming survivors, seem to be invested in filling their day with positive, productive activities.

Maintaining a Sense of Self

The final coping strategy employed by the formerly incarcerated women who participated in this study is the process of maintaining a sense of self. This strategy is related to the other two, as deploying strategies to stay positive fosters a positive self-image and many of the ways women keep busy involve self-esteem building activities. Maintaining a sense of self is less obvious a strategy than the other two; while no participant directly mentioned developing a sense of self, they all did discuss behaviors that contribute to doing so. Compared to the previous two strategies, this one is less purposeful, though not less important.

Foucault (1977) posits that the modern carceral system's strongest hold is that over a person's subjectivity; furthermore, a defining characteristic of the total institution (Goffman 1961) is the dispossession of an inmate's "identity kit" (20). An "identity kit" is all of the tools a person uses to maintain her "personal front," such as clothing, hairstyles and cosmetics. Eliminating access to the resources necessary for an individual's identity kit is a "personal defacement" that contributes to the mortification of an inmate and is one tactic of the institution to control the inmate. Thus, to survive incarceration means, in part, to forge a sense of self and resist the carceral hold. According to Goffman, for many people, those incarcerated and otherwise, maintaining a sense of self generally translates to keeping up outward appearances and this was evidenced in many of the responses given by this study's participants; wearing make-up, doing their hair, and wearing their own clothes are ways that women individuate themselves. When asked why she continued a beauty ritual in prison, Agnes answered,

It made me feel better to get up in the morning and bathe and put on my make up and go to work because that's what I did at home. I didn't want to lose that. You can lose things; you lose your identity a little bit.

If keeping busy is a way to keep minds from being, as Kim put it, mentally incarcerated, then, according to Agnes' understanding, maintaining appearances is a way of owning your body. The participants who had been incarcerated during the period of time when inmates could wear their own clothes mentioned how much more confident women felt during that time. The inmates' rights to their own clothes was denied following a class-action law suit filed in 1998, *Cain v. Michigan Department of Corrections* which focused on the rights prisoners have over property while incarcerated (as told by Marabella). Kim notes the importance of owning and wearing her own clothes:

When I first got there, we could have clothes and then they wound up taking the clothes and you could only have jogging suits in the unit or rec room. And you could wear regular clothes on a visit or to take pictures. And, to be honest, you do feel like being in there and coming out a part of you is missing in terms of being a woman. You need that to be validated because for so long you didn't have it. You don't have anything else but to keep yourself up. You go to school and go to work and all, but it's all about you. In my opinion, you have no choice but to keep yourself up with hair and they sold make up and all that, basics. You do lose part of being feminine in there if you spend a long time. I can only speak for myself, I did 10 years and you do lose part of that, you do.

Kim goes on to say that she maintained her outward appearances for herself in order to feel confident and not lose an important part of her identity: a feeling of femininity. Because gender is a performative act (Butler 1990), it requires an amount of set-up, or what Goffman calls "props" (Goffman 1959). Examples of gender props are hairstyles, manners of dress, types of make-up, or amount and location of body hair. Without all of these props at their disposal due to restrictions in wardrobe, hair accessories and supplies, and access to razors, "doing gender" for these inmates was challenging, when not impossible. Furthermore, because gender is a locus of

identity, the struggle to maintain the habits of gender performances was not only to engage in familiar habits, but also to sustain an essential component of identity.

Naomi Wolf's iconic work, *The Beauty Myth* (1991) conceptualizes the rituals of beauty as a tool of patriarchy. As Wolf understands it, the beauty economy as a whole functions to disempower women and keep us in the private sphere—where we do not have to be taken seriously or even heard—even when working or living in the public one. Essentially, the “beauty myth” is a political tool that promotes the idea that women's self-worth is a reflection of their ability to achieve an unachievable beauty standard. Debra Gimlin's *Body Work* (2003) takes a different interpretation of the desire for women to maintain standards of beauty, which is the interpretation with which I agree. “Body work,” the umbrella term Gimlin uses to describe beauty and fitness rituals, is a process in self-identification. Because beauty standards are undeniably problematic, the ways in which women maintain beauty is a negotiation of unrealistic beauty standards and their understandings of their own selfhood; it is in this negotiation that identity can be formed (Gimlin 2003: 7). Adhering to standards of beauty is not simply giving in to a political tool that oppresses women; it is a powerful process in which women carve out their own values, standards, and identities. The women of this sample are, undoubtedly, invested in maintaining beauty rituals because the society in which they were socialized told them they have to be beautiful to matter. However, they are also involved in a powerful act of reclaiming and reinterpreting an identity the prison system strips from them.

Though outward appearances sustain feelings of individuality and femininity, they are also a source of social identity and unity (Goffman 1959). Because gender is a rhetorical identity, meaning others have to identify a performance as properly gendered, a single performance functions to validate the meaning of all performances of femininity (Goffman 1959:

77). Teaching someone the “correct” way to perform gender unifies the collective performance, making it easier to identify what is feminine and what is not. Similarly, by having a cohesive definition of femininity, it is possible to decide who “counts” as a woman and form an identity-based social group, like “womanhood.” Mary learned “how to be a woman” in prison and thus the rituals and practices of putting on make-up and doing hair was a way for her to create and bond with mother-like figures. As I previously discussed, Mary’s creation of a mother-like bond revolved around learning proper gender performances. Not only did she learn “how to be a woman,” but her learning process was an important means to form strong social bonds. Bonding also occurs around doing hair. Mid recalls,

Oh inside they help each other. One girl will do another girls hair, and so willingly. They will go in a grooming room and do each others hair and surprisingly some will just volunteer and its amazing how they compliment each other. They work on their hair sometimes 2-3 hours.

Even when inmates are not explicitly teaching proper modes of femininity, as in Mary’s example, they provide access to a gender prop, like hairstyles.

Besides being a source of bonding and companionship among inmates, a focus on appearances also serves as a social identifier. For Mary, the ability to put effort and energy into appearances was a way to gauge a person’s success in prison; in other words, because prison is such an emotionally draining place, taking care of oneself is a challenge. Not doing so was, in Mary’s opinion, a sign of giving up. When asked why she felt so strong about keeping herself up, she answered:

To make me feel good about myself because I’m a person and I want to be presentable and I want to take care of myself. And there were people who I saw that would not comb their hair, their hygiene was bad and they were depressed and sat in front of the TV all day watching soap operas and eating cheese casseroles and they, by the 3rd or 4th year had gained 100 pounds and had nothing to show for their time being there.

Appearance, then, in Mary's estimation, is a way to gauge a person's emotional or mental state. For Marabella, basic hygiene and personal maintenance was also a way to identify a person's mental health. Reflecting on a neighbor who would smoke cigarettes until her "hands and fingers were copper" and bathed and brushed her teeth infrequently, she says,

That's the kind of person that is mentally ill. But you know things aren't right with her mental status. So how you care for yourself tends to reflect a lot on the state of your mental health.

The fact that appearances function as a kind of social identifier is an example of the rhetorical nature of gender; in other words, femininity is done in a way that other inmates will recognize it as femininity and will also use it to determine a person's social location. Marabella and Mary demonstrated that there is a level of judgment that occurs among those who take care of themselves and those who don't. In most cases, taking care of oneself is accomplished through common and traditional modes of femininity. Putting on make-up and doing hair are such modes. The affirmation of their femininity by other inmates helps to solidify their identities and foster their senses of self and builds self-esteem. As Kim remembers, losing a part of her femininity while in prison was a source of sadness; by keeping herself up and having other women recognize her pride in her appearance was a way to reclaim her femininity.

On an individual level, this coping strategy does encourage a sense of purpose and belonging and ultimately and genuinely maintains self-worth. Again, it normalizes the prison environment; keeping some semblance of the beauty routine they had outside of prison softens the reality of their environment and provides opportunities for renegotiating identity (Gimlin 2003). The logic behind the importation model is that not only do inmates carry with them ideologies and expectations held prior to incarceration, but they do so in order to alleviate the pains of imprisonment (Hensley 2000).

On an institutional level, this way of coping in prison reinscribes and reinforces gender norms on the one hand, and transforms it into a source of empowerment on the other. By fostering self-esteem through outward appearance, women inmates echo the archaic and patriarchal notion that women should be seen and not heard; that is, what we *look* like is more important than what we *are* like (Wolf 1991). The prison world, after all, is not a vacuum and is of course affected by the backgrounds and experiences of the inmates who create it and for the majority of women, self-worth is fostered by physical appearance. By allowing these outward displays of femininity, even though they are limited, the prison is encouraging traditional forms of femininity. As Britton and I have demonstrated, this is not outside the *de facto* jurisdiction of the judicial system. However, the world inmates create is not so one-dimensional that the culture inside exactly mimics that of outside. On the outside, much of the energy spent on doing femininity is done in relation to hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005); at the very least, many beauty rituals are conducted under the premise of attracting a male, heterosexual mate. In many regards, femininity is simply not-masculinity, and vice versa. In prison, however, creating a relational gender system is simply not possible as most of the inmates' social sphere is single-sex. Because none of the women in this sample mentioned an imagined or potential sexual partner as motivation for maintaining a presentable appearance, the acts of body work are performed for themselves and for each other and therefore transcend the notion that beauty rites are solely an effect of patriarchy. The women of this sample, then, are involved in a renegotiation of femininity; they, in many ways, challenge the relationship of femininity to masculinity. Because this is such a powerful coping strategy, it seems clear that that these daily rituals are sources of empowerment for many inmates. They gather strength from and form communities around gender identities; furthermore, maintaining a sense of self

motivates these women to engage in the coping strategies previously discussed. In the next chapter, I will elaborate on the relationship between femininity outside of prison and inside of it and alternative interpretations of femininity women in prison suggest.

Chapter Four: Discussion and Conclusions

Mental incarceration refers to the state of complacency that occurs with some women in prison, often resulting in bad or destructive behavior due to a “who cares?” attitude. It also means believing in the carceral system’s definition of an incarcerated woman. Prisons define incarcerated women, both historically and concurrently, as “double deviants:” they are less than women because *real* women are incapable of committing crimes and, simultaneously, they are worse than male offenders because only “madwomen,” or the extraordinarily deviant women, would be able to commit offenses (Britton 2003: 29). Inherent in this definition is a depiction of female inmates as conniving, malicious, manipulative, and hysterical (Linders and Van Gundy-Yoder 2008). Therefore, in the eyes of the penal system, only the worst of the worst kinds of women find their way to state custody. The femininity the penal system constructs for female offenders is one of disingenuousness, shrewdness, and duplicity. Interestingly, the adjectives used in the institutional framework are the same adjectives the participants in this project used to describe women who allowed themselves to become “mentally locked-up.” Kim argues that “the women who accept [incarceration]”—“accepting it” meaning ambivalence towards their in-prison decisions or pursuits—are the ones who “get into the negativity.” The women in this study reject mental incarceration and engage in activities that are perceived as atypical by the prison institution, such as applying for appeals and creating deep and intimate friendships. The femininity these women perform does not resemble the femininity of the institution’s definitions. Therefore, by refusing to adhere to the carceral conceptions of female inmates, these five participants perform gender as a strategy to resist the institution’s hold on their subjectivities. The women of this study “do” gender as a mode of resistance in two ways: first, they actively avoid negative women and behaviors that would reinforce the institution’s definitions of an

incarcerated woman; second, they engage in activities that “proper”—and therefore not incarcerated—women participate in, which challenges the institution’s conception of prison femininity, which sees incarcerated women as doubly deviant.

The body of research that addresses the strength and influence of gender is rich within the Women’s Studies academy. Gender is, of course, a critical component of both self-identification and social location. The women participants in this project held on to their own conceptions of femininity in this deprivation environment as a way to retain their individuality. They perceived prison as a place where they could lose their identities, which often equated in their discussions to a loss of femininity, such as when Agnes told me that femininity and identity are things that you “lose in there.” The lack of potential male partners, the limited access to beauty rituals, and an environment that often encourages the exaggeration of what the study participants understood as the worst characteristics of femininity, like manipulation and coercion, resulted in their reinterpretations of “woman.” Because of these obstacles, the women in this study had to redefine what womanhood meant to them. While actively renegotiating definitions of femininity, the women were able to hold on to their understandings of self.

In as much as they emphasized maintaining their own definitions of femininity in order to preserve self-identity, they are following a normative framework for gender, as gender is organized in such a way that it is a critical component of identity for many people. The importation model of understanding behavior in prison³ (Hensley 2000) is validated in this study as the participants in this project, in many ways, demonstrated an adherence to several heteronormative ideologies; for example, they displayed a commitment to the idea of women as emotional and capable of forming intimate bonds by doing so with peers; they discussed the

³ The importation and deprivation models are explained in-depth in the “Prison Structure” section of the literature review.

desire to feel attractive and engaged in as much cosmetic maintenance as was accessible; and at least two women commented on the challenge of being isolated from male peers, which they felt was made easier by the presence of male correctional officers. Conversely, the deprivation model is equally validated, as these women illustrated a variety of ways in which pre-existing ideologies were modified to adapt to the pains of imprisonment, as in the case of women who engage in same-sex sexual relationships while incarcerated. According to most of the participants of the study, many women who engaged in same-sex relationships had never done so prior to incarceration and were only “gay for the stay;” thus, the need for both intimate companionship and access to resources were push factors for some women who engaged in same-sex relationships. The dichotomy of importation/deprivation, then, is not really a dichotomy at all, but a complementary paradigm, as both explanations are substantiated simultaneously, albeit to varying degrees and consistencies. Neither an importation nor a deprivation model alone entirely explains inmates’ behaviors, but together they provide a more complete and compelling analysis of meaning making in prison. It would be more fruitful to investigate which behaviors tend to be imported and which tend to be adapted. This would lead us to better understandings of the saliency of gender norms and expectations within total institution populations. Unfortunately, this exploration is beyond the scope of this project, but would be a worthwhile enterprise for future research.

Within the sex/gender system these participants described, a female gender polarity emerges that reflects the range of femininities available to women. On one end, the respondents described women who were manipulative, catty, “mouthy,” and generally untrustworthy. These so-called “negative” women reportedly engaged in sex with other women for monetary or material benefit; they also saw other women as competitors. Competition is the explanation the

study participants offered for the ways “negative” women often tried to disadvantage others by hustling. On the other hand, the women interviewed presented themselves as exhibiting positive aspects of femininity, such as the capacity to form intimate bonds and the ability to communicate troubling emotions. They demonstrated compassion, humor and self-motivation. This polarity resembles the prevalent Madonna/whore duality that pervades historical and contemporary constructions of femininity. Though developed as a model for women’s sexual scripts, it suggests that all women fall into one of two categories: the Madonna, who is chaste and pure, or the whore, who is deceitful, overtly sexual and cannot be trusted (Radford 1974; Conrad 2006). This duality suggests that gender performances must be relational: to achieve a recognizable performance, the audience has to understand both what the performer is doing as well as what she is not doing. In the prison environment described by the study participants, those who displayed positive aspects of femininity were decidedly and purposefully not participating in manipulative activities.

Some of the female inmates described by this sample, however, are also simultaneously challenging the Madonna/whore dichotomy by fitting into to neither category, as is the case with those described as “real lesbians.” These lesbians, through their gender performance, defied the institution’s definition of female inmates by not being heterosexual nor overly aggressive, and they challenged the categories defined by the other inmates, as they were neither chaste nor manipulative. This could explain the hostility and resentment many lesbian inmates face from prison authorities and inmate peers: they fall in neither category and are thus considered gender anomalies. Lesbians face similar hostilities outside of prison as well for challenging heterosexual privilege and refusing the alleged natural connection between femininity and heterosexuality; assuming an inherent heterosexual superiority could be yet another set of

ideologies or beliefs that are imported by some inmates. Those who are “gay for the stay” similarly challenge heterosexual privilege, as these women are both afforded a feminine (or femme, as a few respondents referred to them) identity and can all the while benefit from sexual pursuits with women. A role of sexuality in prison, then, is to resist the “whore” category by demonstrating the complexity and variability of sexual behaviors, preferences, and motivations.

Additionally, the ways in which so-called “positive femininity” was performed challenged the notion of the archetypal Madonna, who is devoted to her husband and is the queen of the domestic realm. Instead of being the sole emotional support for her husband and children, positivity in prison involves being emotionally available and supportive to other women. Indeed, those women who found surrogate masculine companionship (as in the case with femmes who partnered with so-called “butch” or “real” lesbians), were demonized as manipulators. Positive femininity in prison also involved many stereotypically masculine endeavors, such as researching, writing legal documents, and pursuing higher education and employment. This aspect of femininity reinterprets the “Madonna” category as describing a woman who, in addition to being sexually abstinent, pursues self-improving endeavors and prefers female-oriented companionship to intimacy with men.

Sexuality is seen, by most of the study participants, as a distraction and source of negativity, although only as it exists towards other women. In the stories of these five women, gender is a sort of barometer to determine who is the “good” girl and who is the “bad” girl—similar to conceptions of femininity on the outside. On the inside, as well as on the outside, gender transgressors are consistently considered bad women. Outside, those who transgress gender norms or boundaries, such as feminists, lesbians, and members of the trans community, challenge the patriarchal and heterosexist system by demonstrating that gender and sexuality are

constructed and not eternal. Inside, gender transgressors are those women who engage in same-sex sexual—“gay for the stay”—relationships, even when those relationships resemble normative heterosexual relationships. It is my understanding that these women are pigeonholed as “bad women” because they reinforce stereotypes of the overtly sexual, manipulative incarcerated woman that the media often portrays. Women in same-sex sexual relationships, furthermore, are perceived to undermine the positive femininity the women of my study try to create. Gender transgressors, in both the inside and outside of prison, call into question cultural expectations of how gender “ought” to be performed and its relation to sexuality.

Sexuality, then, is a site of resistance. First, conventionally, a woman’s traditional sexual role was that of reproducer or pleasure-giver; in prison, only that of pleasure-giver is a possibility. Because sex is between women, reproduction is implausible; similarly, the women who engaged in sexual behavior were, reportedly, doing so for material gain and satisfaction and not necessarily for physical pleasure, suggesting that prison sexuality is more self-oriented than other-oriented. Secondly, as expressed in Marabella’s interview, sexuality in prison challenged the prison cultural notions of same-sex sex. The prison culture, as reported by most of the participants, perceives same-sex sex as disingenuous; however, Marabella argues that some same-sex sexual relationships were very positive for those involved. Sexuality in prison has the potential to refuse heteronormative sexual scripts and call into question the generalizations of the inmate culture. An incarcerated sexual body, then, complicates the perceived motivations for sex and resists any one definition of prison sex.

As discussed at length in previous sections, the penal institution has long been invested in the maintenance of gender norms. The institution creates a framework within which women are allowed only two ways to “do” gender, either as a Madonna or a whore. On one hand, the

criminal justice system defines who is a good girl and who is a bad girl simply by their choices of whom to incarcerate and for how long. Women who can demonstrate that a certain level of womanhood exists in their crimes, such as theft to feed their children, often receive leniency in sentencing; those who can “prove” their womanhood may only be sentenced to a few years. Of course, many of the criteria for “proper” femininity are race and class based. Unfortunately, this means that poor women and women of color are often automatically considered less feminine than their white or privileged counterparts, which could explain some of the race and social class discrepancies in the prison population. Conversely, women who have defied traditional standards of proper female conduct, such as women who commit violent or sex-based offenses, are demonized in the courtroom and in parole hearings. Mary’s experience with the criminal justice system’s treatment of women during the sentencing process illustrates this point:

I think that [officials in the judicial system] have a mentality that all women in prison are there because they were crack addicts, addicted to methamphetamines, selling their body out in the streets or they were a gangster [*sic*]. They don’t look at us as we are: human beings who made a mistake. They label us in those categories because they think that we had to be doing those things in order to get there.

In Mary’s opinion, it is the court’s estimation that “real” women are incapable of committing offenses and those that do are undeserving of leniency.

On the other hand, the institution teaches incarcerated women how to perform “proper femininity” vis á vis its courses and vocational training. By looking at the skill sets the prison system encourages, such as secretarial and domestic skills, it seems as though the institution defines proper femininity as relating to the domestic sphere. Through these constructions, the criminal justice system sets women up for failure: they either believe the institution’s definition of who they are and resign themselves to a life in prison, or they believe the institution’s definition of a good girl and limit their opportunities for meaningful careers or lives of their

choosing once released. The resisters challenge these options by pursuing avenues that expand post-incarceration opportunities and defy what it means to be an incarcerated woman. Thus, the way some female inmates perform gender serves as a site of resistance towards conventional and institutional definitions of femininity. In many cases, as the women of this study have demonstrated, women in prison create gendered coping strategies that have the power and potential to transform definitions of womanhood while keeping a gendered identity an important component of selfhood.

To try to attempt to explicate the nature of gender is beyond the capabilities of this project. What I have unpacked, though, is a profound realization of the relationship of identity to gender. Even in a total institution, where bodies as well as subjectivities are objects of punishment and reformation, women cling to manifestations and modes of femininity. In fact, the process of inventing and interpreting femininity to adapt to different social structures is an important component to the process of surviving and, ultimately, of creating a non-stigmatized identity. The sex/gender system that was described by the women of this sample indicates that gender is the result of both importations of already-held ideologies, beliefs, and convictions as well as an adaptation and form of resistance.

Appendix A

[Date]

Dear [participant]:

I am an honors senior in Women's Studies and Sociology at the University of Michigan Ann Arbor. I am writing a term paper on the experiences and coping mechanisms of imprisoned women, or the ways that women deal with being incarcerated. I am writing to ask for your participation in this project. I believe talking to women who have first hand experience with this subject will prove very valuable to the research and to the outcome of my project.

If you agree to participate, I will interview you for 45-60 minutes. I will invite you to the University of Michigan Dearborn Department of Behavioral Sciences conference room for the interview. If that is not convenient for you, we will arrange another location, perhaps your home. For both choices, this will be just the two of us, one-on-one.

While there are no direct benefits to you personally for participating in this study, many people find sharing their stories to be a valuable experience. I hope that this project will, in the future, add to the ways that feminist theorists think about women's experiences in prison. As compensation for your time talking to me and for your travel expenses, I will give you \$20 in cash at the end of the interview.

Dr. Lora Lempert has agreed to be my advisor for my paper; she is providing academic support and oversight. I will be working closely with her this year.

Please note that this study is completely voluntary on your part, whether you participate or not will have absolutely no effect on your relationship with Dr. Lempert or with any criminal justice agency. It is also completely anonymous and your name, or any identifying information, will not appear anywhere in the paper. The only two people who will know your real name are Dr. Lempert and me.

I will contact you by phone within a week to see if you are still interested in participating in the study. At that time, we will arrange time and place for the interview that is convenient for the both of us.

My contact information is as follows:
Rebecca Halpern: rebhalp@umich.edu
Or: Dr. Lora Lempert
llemper@umd.umich.edu 313-593-5607

Thank you so much for considering this request. Again, your participation is voluntary, there are no consequences to your for non-participation.

Rebecca Halpern

Informed Consent Form
Study conducted by Rebecca Halpern
Exploring Female Inmate Coping Skills as Described by Ex-felons

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. I am a student at the University of Michigan Ann Arbor and this project is for my senior term paper in Women's and Gender Studies. The purpose of my study is to explore women's coping experiences as they deal with incarceration. I intend to interview 5-7 women who have also been previously incarcerated.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to participate, I will ask you questions about the ways that you coped with imprisonment. I will interview you one time only. I will give \$20 in cash compensation for your participation and for your travel expenses.

The face-to-face interview will be 45-60 minutes long. It will occur in a conference room at UM Dearborn, or in another location, like your home. You may choose to end the interview at any time. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer and still receive the \$20 compensation.

With your permission, I will record our interview. I will ask you to choose a name so that you cannot be recognized in any writing on this project. You will not be identified by your own name. The recording will be destroyed upon the completion of my project, unless you'd like to have a copy of the tape yourself.

Please be aware that if you disclose any illegal activity, it is possible that these materials could be subpoenaed by a government agency. For that reason, I will withdraw the question if any illegal activity is disclosed.

As a participant, you have the right to informed consent. This is the informed consent document. You have the opportunity to ask any questions you want regarding the study or your participation at the beginning of our interview before you sign this informed consent. Again, you have the right to refuse participation at any point during the interview.

You also have the right to anonymity and confidentiality. You will choose a name that I will use throughout the study. Finally, you have the right to refuse any or all aspects of your participation at any time with no consequences. You will determine whether the researcher has permission to use the information disclosed up to that point. If you do not choose to have it included, the researcher will destroy it. You will still be compensated if you end the interview early.

If you have any questions about this study you may contact me as follows:

Rebecca Halpern
C/O Dr. Lora Lempert
Department of Behavioral Sciences
University of Michigan-Dearborn
4901 Evergreen Rd.
Dearborn, MI 48128

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, or if you think you have not been treated fairly, you may also contact the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 540 E. Liberty Street, Suite 202, Ann Arbor, MI 48104.

Consent of the Subject:

I have read and been informed about participation in this study. Rebecca Halpern has answered all questions I may have had concerning this study. I hereby consent to participate in the study.

ADULT SUBJECT OF RESEARCH

Consenting Signature

Date

Printed Name

I agree to have this interview audio taped.

Consenting Signature

Date

Appendix B

Potential Interview Questions-Revised:

Exploring Female Inmate Coping Skills as Described by Ex-Felons

Principal Investigator: Rebecca Halpern, senior thesis project

1. In order to protect your identity in any writings that result from this work, what name would you like me to use? Please choose a name that will not identify you to potential readers.
2. How long had you been incarcerated? Tell me about the most difficult adjustment for you when you came to prison. (How did you handle it?)
3. Tell me what was the most difficult part of your life while in prison. (How did you handle it?)
4. As you can tell, I'm really interested in the ways that women deal with incarceration. What kinds of things did you do to pass the time? What sorts of things were most important in helping you cope with imprisonment?
5. Were there any activities or clubs available to you? Which ones did you belong to? If you didn't join any, why not? If you did, how did they help you cope?
6. Did you make friends while in prison? (If not, why?) If yes, please choose one and without telling me her name, tell me why you were friends. What sorts of things did you do together or talk about?
7. Are there networks of friends there? If yes, how do they operate? How does one join? What do they do or how do they benefit the members? Did you feel a sense of community while in prison?
8. For women in prison, a lot of time is spent being attractive for men. What does that look like in prison?
9. Was how you dressed or how you looked important to other inmates? What I mean, is how did your appearance affect people's perception of you, and how did their appearance affect your perception of them?
10. Is there anything else you'd like me to know that I haven't raised here? (If necessary, I'll point to something we talked about that could use elaboration.)

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