

Women's Prisons

Kirsty was in her early thirties. She had been released automatically halfway through a five-year sentence but breached the terms of her licence and had been recalled to prison to serve the rest of that sentence there, along with an additional two-year sentence. She had been in and out of prison for offences related to her heroin addiction for over a decade. She traced the origin of her problems with drugs back to abuse in her teens by a foster parent. Kirsty's youngest child had been born in prison at the start of her current sentence, and 'handed out' to her mother before the end of the full period that the baby could have remained with her.

When I started [my five-year sentence] I was pregnant and I was on the M and B.¹ [I had the baby with me for] five months. They wanted separation before six months because of [the length of] my sentence, [and because] the baby was getting attached. [It was really hard,] but I'm trying to use this sentence to my advantage. I've just done four years of a five-year sentence. It's a long time to be away, especially when my little girl is not that old. She's three-and-a-half now, nearly four, but my mum has had her from five months old and it's just all been taken away from me. Yes, the biggest part of it, I blame the prison system because regardless of what they were saying, I still should have had Katie till she was nine months old. They could have given me that at least. I wasn't asking for eighteen months, I was asking for nine months.² But then they'd all gone behind my back – my mum, Social Services, the prison, having meetings without me. I didn't know my mum was coming up, sometimes, to the prison, having meetings behind my back. I wasn't aware of any of that and it made me see some of these people for what they really were. Even the governor was involved in it. And then they were giving me just two days to separate with her.

I wish I was just separated straight from birth because it's caused so much fucking heartache in my life now. That little girl is never going to come back to me now – she's with my mum, my mum has taken over. And I do blame the fucking prison system for that. Girls aren't having a choice whether their baby gets adopted, and they can't do anything about it. Even if you go to a court and fight it, the courts are still going to side with the prison, Probation, Social Services. Nine times out of ten, if you get refused a place on this Mother and Baby Unit and there is nobody to look after that baby, they will not consider long-term fostering. Who's to say that's going to destroy the child later on in life? If anything it's going to fuck

¹ 'M and B' or 'MBU': Mother and Baby Unit.

² Depending on the length of a woman's sentence and the risk she is seen as presenting, babies can live with their mothers in different units for up to nine or up to eighteen months.

that child up more thinking, 'Well why didn't my mum ever want me?'. Care is not always the right thing – I had a really bad experience with my foster dad that I wouldn't wish on anybody – but if you're doing over a twelve month or a two-year sentence, your baby will be adopted if you haven't got anybody to look after that child, and that right has been taken away from you. I've seen that happen on three occasions now in the last few years and it has torn those people apart. Torn them apart. It's no wonder they're going back out there for the drugs – what else have they got? They've lost.

[I think officers' opinions of women in here vary]. Some of them think that we've gone just a little bit fucked up in life, do you know what I mean? They look at us like some of us have had a really sad life, because the majority of us have. I brought most of my life on myself. [I put myself into Care], but it was just everything that came with it when I went into Care and everything. It destroyed me basically, but there's always somebody else that's got a sadder story to tell than me. But some [officers] look at us like we're scum, we're the lowest of the low. At the end of the day, some people can't help going out there and having to commit crime. Do they really think we like going and breaking into people's houses? Sometimes it's the only thing you can do to survive out there when you've a habit. It's not nice having a heroin addiction because it's not just mental, it's physical with heroin and crack, it's the pain of withdrawal symptoms – you're in agony. But [some officers] just look at us like the lowest of the low. I'm not particularly fucking arsed what any of these prison officers think of me or any of these prisoners – it's just the people that I care about and the people that I've done wrong to, do you know what I mean? I wish I could fucking give them back everything I've robbed off them, but I can't. I know I've done wrong; I'm paying the price for that.

Over the years, my mum and [the rest of my family] have [supported me], but not any more. They've had enough. They thought I'd really cracked it when I came out this time: I got myself a job; I stayed away from everybody. It was only because Probation made me do a course that I had to do out there. Once I'd started that course it was game over. I met up with Steve, one of the old heads, and it was back to the old routine. My mum just can't tolerate me at the minute because I've had it and just fucked it all off. And she thinks that she's there to fund me every time I come to prison, like she has done every other time: make sure the money's there every week, make sure my new clothes are there. She's not doing any of that this time. She is making me suffer and it's killing me. She's been to see me once in nearly four months, brought my kids up *once* to see me. And that's hurting me more than any of these can hurt me.

Naomi was a life-sentenced prisoner from a relatively comfortable background, a lone parent whose young child was now living with grandparents. Although she was materially and emotionally well-supported by family and friends outside, she was geographically isolated from them, the prison being several hundred miles and a day's drive from home.

A wing like [the one I live on] can change so much. I can phone friends at the beginning of the week and be completely fine, everything's going fine, and by the end of the week it can all change again, so it's very up and down. You tend to find you just start to get to know everyone and then a big influx of other people will come in, new people, and you're like 'Oh my God, new people everywhere'. I think you can make good friendships [in jail] but at the same time things seem to change so quickly. People sometimes will be there when they need you around and they can change very quickly because it's all about survival, I suppose.

I think people get too involved with other people's business as well. The girl I'm seeing was always in trouble and she's really tried [to keep out of trouble] since we got together, [because] I said to her that there was a lot I couldn't put up with because [I'm a lifer and] you're guilty by association in prison. She's really tried, [but] she finds it hard to say no to people. People tried to give her hooch to hide at one point and she didn't want to do it. Rather than say no to them, she [took] it to an officer and [told] the officer to catch her with it, because she didn't want to get in trouble but didn't want to be seen to be letting these so-called friends down. So she's kind of got in trouble but not got in trouble, but then she's done the ultimate sin to the friends by grassing on them but they don't know about it! It's like, rather than do a simple thing like say no in jail, people [find] devious ways around it because they don't want to lose face.

I watch new girls now and I feel so sorry for them because they'll sit down somewhere where they think it's an empty table and someone will come along and just go, 'People sit here, love'. Then they'll get up and sit somewhere else and it will be 'You can't sit there, someone sits there'. Or some people are even worse. New girls will sit down and they'll come along and go, 'People are f-ing sat at our table! What do you think you're doing?'. And then they'll move again, but if you're new you don't know how it works and there's no allowances made for you. I think it took for me to be in my room for a good four days probably, not eating properly, not going out, not doing anything, just being in bed all the time for an officer to come in. She introduced me to [Sue,] an older woman on the wing, and was trying to sort me out and that really helped, but it was left to another prisoner to help me.

It just feels horrible. It's not like you're in your hometown, or you're with your friend and you're lost. You're completely on your own. You don't know anybody, you don't know the

surroundings, you don't know the staff, you don't know anything at all and you feel like a little kid again. And perhaps some people can cope with it but I found it really, really hard.

Once you are settled in there and you've got your particular little groups of friends, it's very hard to go out of your way to make the effort with somebody else because it's almost you feel like you have to look out for them then and you only get that hour a day to associate. I'm as bad as anyone else, but part of you just doesn't want to do it and it's awful because you've been there yourself and you know how hard it is, but it's just not that easy because people aren't very accepting of just allowing someone else into a group that you're with.

Josie is the first girlfriend I've ever had. I didn't ever think I'd get involved in a relationship in jail but I have, and you don't realise that you're constantly under the watch of everyone. I mean, when Josie and I have had arguments before, you have nowhere to just go off and sit down quietly and sort it out, absolutely nowhere on that wing where there isn't one other person listening in. Everyone always knows everything that's going on – you can't have any secrets in this place. It's a favourite line in here with everyone: 'I'll tell you but don't tell anyone'. You know that ten minutes later ten other people know it. People can't help it. They think they're only telling one other, but then that one other is telling one other and everyone just finds out.

There's one [officer on the wing] that a lot of girls don't get on with. He'll give out warnings for the silliest things, but when he gets funny with me I've learnt to just play it as a joke and he plays along with it then and he doesn't get funny, whereas if someone backchats him he'll then get worse. So a lot of it, I think, is about learning how to be with each officer. There's different ways of being with each one and once you find the way you're generally okay. In here, you have to get them on side to make your life easy. I stand there and laugh at officers' jokes and pretend to listen to them. And they're not funny, and they're not interesting, but if you do that then they're a bit more okay with you than if you just don't. You just have to try and strike up some kind of rapport with them and it's the only way it can work. Some girls just won't do that because they say why should they, but the ones that won't are the ones that get their life made a bit more difficult for them. You just have to bite your tongue and smile sweetly and let them think that they've won. If they always feel that they're in control then they'll be alright with you, it's when you start questioning their authority and it turns into an argument, and then what? That officer that you've had an argument with is the one you then need to do something for you the next day and they're not going to. You're easier just letting everything go and then you might manage to get on okay.

Lisa was a young prisoner, a mother of two small children, who was several years into a life sentence. Although intelligent and insightful, she had had a difficult upbringing and left school early. She had a long history of self-harm. At the time of the interview, her relationships with wing staff were under strain, and she was struggling with the compromises that she felt were demanded by the prison regime in order to progress smoothly through her sentence.

A lot of the time I will challenge things [that seem unfair]. Not in an aggressive way, but if somebody says, 'Do this', and I'm thinking, 'Well why do you want me to do that?', or 'Why have you done this?'. But I think it is a survival thing as well; if somebody's saying, 'You've done something wrong', you're going to question it when you know you haven't. And I don't see why I should just say 'Yes' when I know that they're wrong. And I find it very hard to just go, 'Yes it's my fault; lock me behind my door'. I find it difficult not to say – but I know that's something you have to learn.

If I didn't have a parole sentence, I'd challenge everything and probably go to the governor and say, 'This is out of order', but I'm a parolee and everything that I do gets written down. And if these officers decide, 'I don't like you', then they're not going to write nice things in your file. My file's going to be terrible and I've got to think about that when I'm involved in anything; they can write anything and it can mess the rest of my life up. For a lifer as well, every single thing you do gets written in your file and then it gets looked at deeper – I couldn't just have an argument with somebody, a friend, on the wing, it wouldn't just be, 'Lisa had an argument'. That argument would go in my file and would be looked into so deep by Psychology and everything as me having a problem with my anger issues: *I'm a risk to society*. So therefore I might not be moved on.

Psychology is a big, big part of your sentence plan. Now personally from me – but this is my comment – I think psychology is a bit over-rated, because psychologists can stand there and say, 'Right, I've read this out of a book' [and] this particular person [is] boxed off into [that category]; this person's categorised as being like this, and that's the end of it. And what a psychologist says can have a tremendous impact on that person's life and how they perceive them. If a psychologist says that they think you're manipulative or that they think you're aggressive, for a lifer that can have such an impact and that is just one person's perception of you. Now somebody could describe you as being an aggressive person when you're not necessarily aggressive, that's just the way you're expressing yourself; you're emotional about a situation.

You'd think you'd come into jail and the positive things would be thrown on you, do you know what I mean? They'd be wanting you to do courses; they'd be wanting you to better yourself; they'd be wanting you to do well. If you want to do things the right way, you feel like you constantly have to fight to try and get somewhere. You constantly have to fight to do education; you constantly have to fight to keep your head down and be good, because they're fighting against you all the time. It feels like they're just wanting to knock you down; it is hard to do things the right way and you'd think that it wouldn't be. You'd think if you sat there and went to someone, 'Right, I want to do things the right way, tell me what to do', they'd be like, 'Oh right. Great. Well there's this course, there's that course, this is what - '. No. It's easier to just say, 'Right, well, fuck it.'

When I first came in I used to self-harm. I haven't done it for two years, but [recently] I was having problems at home and on the wing with officers. It was getting on top of me and I self-harmed. I was put on an ACCT,³ and they ask you in the ACCT, 'What do you think we can do to make things better? Is there anything we can do?'. And I said, 'Put counselling down.' I've been to the doctors, I've said I want counselling; no-one's come back to me with anything. I've been to the officer and said I want counselling and I've not heard anything back from it. I know I need it soon. I'm not at the point where I'm beyond reason and I'm that depressed that I can't see clearly, but that's why I want it now in case I get like that. Things do get bad before anyone will listen to you. You've just got to chase it and chase it and chase it. I think that's the only time that things do get responded to is when you don't let them drop, but it's tiring on a daily basis. It's tiring and frustrating.

I know there are a lot of people that are struggling [in here]. For me personally, [self-harm] is my way of dealing with stress. Whereas somebody else might go out and they might have a drink, or they might go cry their eyes out to their family, or they might throw something. If things are getting on top of you and you feel like you can't cope any more, and there's no other way, that's why you do it. And it feels like it's a release, and it just helps you get by. So [people] don't self-harm because they always self-harm, they self-harm because circumstances have brought them to self-harm; circumstances in jail; circumstances in the past but yes, this jail, this environment makes people more stressed out and more likely to self-harm.

I think there should be more support. It all comes down to them giving a shit though again. You can't make people give a shit at the end of the day really, can you? And like I say, a lot

³ ACCT is an abbreviation of 'Assessment, Care in Custody, and Teamwork', the Prison Service's protocol for prisoners regarded as being at risk of suicide or self-harm.

of these [officers] don't seem to; they think that you're a hassle, like, 'Oh my God, more paperwork'. You even get the jokes like that, but you know that they're serious. Like, 'Oh my God, you should have seen the amount of paperwork I've had on you today'. And you laugh with them and they're laughing, but you think, 'Yeah. I know that you're being serious about that deep down'.

Commentary

Prisoners arriving in custody are often in crisis: struggling with chronic problems of addiction, or detoxifying from drugs or alcohol; anxious about what might happen to their home and children while they are in prison; traumatised by the circumstances of their offence, or reeling from the shock of arrest or trial⁴. Many prisoners have histories of personal and social disadvantage that heighten their vulnerability in prison. Both men and women in prison are disproportionately likely to have experienced abuse and instability in childhood, to have been in local authority care, run away from home and left school with few or no qualifications. Concentrations of particular kinds of experience in women's prisons reflect patterns of gender relations in society as a whole. A third of women prisoners have been sexually abused, for example, and over half have been victims of domestic violence. Women in prison are more likely than male prisoners to be a lone parent to dependent children, exacerbating the impact of a sentence on their households and families (Prison Reform Trust, 2010).

Prison officers who have worked in establishments for both men and women often remark that, 'Men do their time on the inside; women do their time on the outside'. By this they mean that women prisoners seem to remain more preoccupied with the problems and responsibilities of home and family. Although arguably overstated, this perception is perhaps unsurprising, given that a woman's greater likelihood of having sole care of dependent children increases the chance that, when she receives a custodial sentence, her children will have to be looked after by someone other than a parent. Fewer than ten percent of children with a mother in prison are cared for by their father (Prison Reform Trust, 2010). The scenario of forcible adoption described by Kirsty attracts a special sympathy among women prisoners with children; the loss of children in this way is almost universally regarded as the most serious collateral consequence of imprisonment. However, as Kirsty's experience also

⁴ Audrey Peckham's (1985) *A Woman in Custody* (Fontana) gives a vivid first-hand account of the personal crisis that resulted in her imprisonment on remand, and the disorientation and disempowerment she experienced on entering the criminal justice system.

illustrates, in order to avoid this, prisoners may have to make substantial compromises in the arrangements they make for the care of their children during their sentence. Prisoners often have to rely on people with whom they have either a tenuous relationship (a child's father's family, perhaps, or an ex-partner's ex-partner), or a fraught one (family members who are unsympathetic to their own problems, a child's violent father). Kirsty's access to her children is mediated by, and entangled with, her chronically strained relationship with her mother, charged with the resentment she feels at what she regards as her mother's collusion with prison and probation authorities to remove her daughter – born in prison – before the full nine months she could have been allowed with her had elapsed. Her anger at what she sees as not just the premature, but also the irrevocable, loss of her child is palpable. She perceives this as a harm inflicted by the Prison Service, dovetailing with the perverse effect she attributes to the community-based offending behaviour course she was obliged to attend on her last release from prison, which made it more difficult to desist from drug use by making it impossible for her to cut her connections with others with similar problems.

Entering prison for the first time, it is common for prisoners to describe feeling disorientated and alone; prison routines and practices are often inscrutable and those whose expectations are shaped by the representations of prison in popular culture are often fearful. A larger proportion of female than male prisoners – almost a third – are serving prison sentences for a first conviction, and few women in prison are 'career criminals', for whom the risk of a prison sentence is often an occupational hazard. Most women serve short sentences for non-serious offences; in 2008, most women in prison were serving sentences of six months or less, and in 2007, more had been convicted of shoplifting than of any other offence (Prison Reform Trust, 2010). A large proportion of women prisoners, then, have little prior experience of the criminal justice system. Recalling their sense of vulnerability on entering prison, for example, first-time prisoners commonly remark that the only time they felt completely safe during their first days in prison was when locked in their own cell. Even established prisoners observe that it is time spent 'behind your door' that passes most quickly in prison, because that is the only time it is possible to be completely relaxed and unguarded. Nevertheless, women serving a first sentence generally comment with surprise on the discovery of warmth and mutual support among prisoners. Prisoners commonly remark that, 'You think it's going to be like "Bad Girls" but you get here and it's nothing like that'. For many prisoners, other inmates are a crucial source of practical and emotional support when they first arrive in custody, or at a new prison. It is inmates who understand most precisely the nature of a new arrival's need: the tenor of the reassurances that will answer her fears; the information about the wing routine that she was perhaps not given by staff or was too overwhelmed to retain. Only prisoners are in a position to be able to provide small material comforts and necessities such

as coffee and sugar that a new prisoner will not be able to secure for herself until she has her own money and canteen.⁵ Even relatively weak ties among prisoners offer important forms of support, and many emphasise that support can exist among prisoners even without deep friendship⁶. It is customary for those being released, for example, to leave behind items such as toiletries, which are valued and difficult to procure, for other prisoners.

At the same time, however, prison relationships can present inmates with a host of risks. Much of day-to-day life for women in prison is concerned with attempting to ensure that the relationships they form in order to avoid isolation and secure support do not bring exposure to a different set of risks. Even those who are grateful for offers of help from other inmates on arrival describe a sense of vulnerability in accepting advice and support from prisoners, who are not just strangers, but often at first assumed to be an untrustworthy source of information. As Naomi suggests, prisons often foster cultures of prurient interest in the affairs of others, and a new arrival is likely to have to field approaches from others wanting to know what she is 'in' for, and 'how long she got'. Gossip and rumour spread quickly in prisons, perhaps gathering some embellishment along the way; offences and sentences may be discussed and compared, perceived unfairnesses picked over and resented. Naomi makes a connection between high levels of need and distress among prisoners and instrumentality in prison relationships⁷. At its extreme, prisoners in need and lacking alternative sources of support, or those who are opportunistic, may view others as a material resource. A woman who has just arrived from court may have drugs that can be bought (or perhaps coerced) from her, or she may herself be in sufficient need of tobacco or drugs that she can be induced to trade desirable items for very little.

Although relationships with staff and other prisoners can be stressful, complex and sometimes threatening, they can also be a vital resource for coping with the collective and private pains of imprisonment. Emotionally expressive and affectionate friendships, and romantic and sexual intimacies between prisoners, are common and accepted in women's prisons. Most women prisoners socialise primarily with a small group of friends, with looser constellations

⁵ 'Canteen' refers to goods purchased from the prison 'shop'. Prisoners can order goods weekly from a list determined by prison managers. The order is delivered to the prison by a centrally contracted company and delivered to prisoners on the wing.

⁶ See Teresa Severance's (2005) "'You know who you can go to': Cooperation and exchange between incarcerated women' (*The Prison Journal*. **85**: 343-367) for a discussion of relationships among women prisoners using 'strength-of-weak-ties' concept.

⁷ Naomi's observation relates to both private, 'imported' sources of distress and need, and that which arises as a result of institutional characteristics. Kruttschnitt and Gartner's important (2005) study, *Marking Time in the Golden State: Women's imprisonment in California*, is relevant to the latter of these, demonstrating a link between institutional conditions and the nature and quality of women's relationships in prison.

of friendly acquaintances or associates beyond them. As Naomi explains, the boundaries of these social groups are often carefully controlled to protect against the risks of confiding too widely in what is often effectively a 'community of strangers', in which trust is highly circumscribed. Many prisoners argue that the best way of 'doing prison' is with 'just one good friend' to provide support while minimising exposure to gossip, instrumentality and instability. Those serving indeterminate or parole sentences who want to progress smoothly through their sentence also often seek to avoid associating with individuals who are likely to attract negative attention from prison staff. Naomi repeats the saying, common to both staff and prisoners, that one is 'Guilty by association' in prison: it is generally accepted that inmates' friendships and associations will be used as an indicator of their own character and behaviour⁸.

Prisoners are divided on the extent to which 'real' friendship is possible in prison. Many describe becoming progressively more guarded in their relationships with other inmates over time. During the course of their sentence, prisoners serving long sentences will see many 'generations' of inmates serving shorter terms come and go. Distress at seeing friends or girlfriends leave leads many to avoid close involvements with others. Repeated disappointments in friends who have promised but failed to maintain contact on release leads many to take a relatively sceptical view of prison relationships, as do the breaches of confidence described by long-term prisoners. Women who have spent long stretches of time in prison often relate stories that are emblematic of the limits to trust in prison relationships, including such grave violations as attempting to sell stories about their offence or family to the tabloid press. Women serving long or repeated sentences, then, more often describe their relationships in prison as 'associations' rather than 'friendships'. For many, the social and spatial dislocation of the prison make it difficult to feel that one can ever 'really know' anyone else. Some, however, do describe deep and sustaining friendships with other inmates, characterised by high levels of emotional and material support, and by markers of trust such as the reciprocal sharing of information whose disclosure entails a degree of vulnerability, such as offence details. For those who have lived with controlling or abusive partners before being sentenced, it might be the first time in years or decades that they have been able to access the friendship of other women. Despite the obstacles to doing so, some prisoners

⁸ For a recent ethnographic account of the life of a women's prison in the US that addresses some of the social pressures discussed in this chapter, see Barbara Owen's (1998) *In the Mix: struggle and survival in a women's prison*. (SUNY).

succeed in maintaining contact with friends once they have moved to another prison or been released, and some released prisoners provide important material support to those still inside⁹.

Although staff-prisoner relationships in women's prisons are somewhat freer than in men's, prisoners often comment on their surprise at finding that their relationships with staff are in many respects more ambivalent and harder to manage than those with fellow prisoners, as both Naomi and Lisa describe. There is no blanket injunction in women's prisons on sociable contact between prisoners and prison staff, and interactions are often informal and friendly. For many prisoners, officers and other staff are an important source of practical and even emotional support. While there is no systematic hierarchy of prisoners based on offence type in women's prisons, women convicted of certain crimes, such as offences against children, will generally be at best ostracised by other prisoners, and at worst at such risk of assault that they can only live safely in segregation from the rest of the population. The support of officers and other staff is particularly important for these women. Women prisoners generally regard it as part of the officer's core role to give support when needed. It is not uncommon for women prisoners to solicit support from staff on behalf of other inmates, approaching officers to draw their attention to a friend who is in need or struggling to cope. Similarly, officers co-opt prisoners' informal social networks – for example, to help induct new prisoners onto the wing, as Naomi describes – in order to provide support.

One of the effects for prisoners of living in what Goffman calls a 'total institution'¹⁰ is that social relations can take on a 'panoptical' quality, whereby both prison staff and inmates are highly aware of other people's activities: who is talking to whom; which relationships have been formed or broken off; where and how people spend their free time. The awareness that even private social encounters may be observed and noted by others means that prisoners often become circumspect in the ways they manage their relationships. For example, while friendliness with officers is generally acceptable to women prisoners, 'grassing' is not tolerated. For this reason, many avoid private conversations with prison staff that might be misconstrued by other prisoners. Naomi's account of managing a romantic relationship in prison illustrates not only her awareness that staff are attentive to relations among prisoners, but the heightened sense of caution that stems from having an indeterminate sentence, which means that her behaviour is particularly closely monitored, and with greater potential consequences. This is demonstrated in Naomi's anxiety that her girlfriend's behaviour and

⁹ For a recent account of prisoner relationships in a US prison that has some resonance with the UK context, see Kimberly Greer's (2000) 'The changing nature of interpersonal relationships in a women's prison' (*The Prison Journal*, 80(4):442-468).

¹⁰ See Goffman's classic (1961) text, *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates* (Penguin).

reputation may reflect badly on her. The imperative for ‘impression management’ in dealings with both staff and inmates means that prisoners may need to develop complex strategies, such as that described by Naomi, in order to maintain equilibrium in their social relationships and negotiate conflicting social and moral demands. Thus, although relationships inside prison offer women a crucial coping resource, managing them can be taxing; while relationships with others mitigate the risks of isolation, they are themselves risky, making living in prison in part an ongoing negotiation between two unstable states.

Both Naomi’s and Lisa’s accounts of their interactions and relationships with prison staff illustrate the inescapably and pervasively social nature of prison life. As both women suggest, the delivery of even very basic aspects of prison regimes is socially mediated, and is therefore contingent on the quality of relationships¹¹. Where relationships are good and procedures clear and consistent, transactions between staff and prisoners take place smoothly, without prisoners *feeling* officers’ power; where they are poor, it can be difficult for prisoners’ to access entitlements and services, from getting a toilet roll, to seeing a doctor or a counsellor, or getting information about educational opportunities or housing on release.

Prisoners’ need for staff support, combined with prison officers’ responsibility for security and reporting on prisoners’ progress, can give rise to a degree of distance and guardedness in prisoners’ attitudes to and interactions with officers, even where relations are generally positive. It is perhaps worth noting that, despite the apparent freedom of staff-prisoner relationships and the relative lack of disruption and violence in women’s prisons, there is evidence to suggest that women prisoners are more closely disciplined than men (Prison Reform Trust, 2010). Naomi’s account illustrates the very active ways in which many prisoners manage their relationships with staff, taking care to maintain goodwill as a kind of insurance for a time when they might need staff support. Naomi’s sophisticated approach to this extends to developing individualised ways of approaching different officers. She states explicitly that prisoners who are unwilling to ingratiate themselves with staff are more likely to find officers obstructive. Furthermore, as Lisa implies, where conflicts arise between prisoners and officers, prisoners lack the power to hold staff directly to account. Both argue that because officers need to maintain an authoritative persona, many find it difficult to be challenged by prisoners. This can foster a sense among prisoners that they are not treated fairly. More fundamentally, perhaps, this can feel as though the individuals charged with delivering the regime are actively undermining the ability even of prisoners motivated by

¹¹ Little published literature exists on the subject of staff-prisoner relationships in women’s prisons. For insights into how the care of prisoners by prison officers is mediated by social relations, however, see Sarah Tait’s (2008) *Prison Officer Care for Prisoners in One Men’s and One Women’s Prison* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge).

ideas of self-improvement or rehabilitation to address problems and develop skills, and thereby comply with the professed goals of imprisonment.

Despite the intensely social nature of much of prison life, the experience of imprisonment is understood by most prisoners as an essentially solitary one. As discussed elsewhere in this volume (chapter x), the conditions imposed by contemporary prison regimes exert a significant individualising pressure on prisoners. While this is true for all prisoners to some extent, most agree that the rewards and sanctions available for those serving fixed-term sentences have a more limited capacity to incentivise compliance and regulate behaviour than for those with indeterminate sentences. These prisoners often feel subject to very close constraint, because they cannot progress through their sentence or be released until the parole board – informed by prison staff, especially psychologists – is satisfied that they have ‘addressed their offending behaviour’ and ‘reduced their risk’ to society. Although she claims to speak only for herself, Lisa echoes other prisoners, both male and female, when she expresses a sense of powerlessness that her future rests on apparently subjective judgements about her character and behaviour by officers and psychologists. The isolating effects of imprisonment are reflected in the common saying that, ‘You come into prison on your own, and you go out on your own’, which both acknowledges and sanctions a degree of self-interest among prisoners in managing their sentences¹².

Prisoners’ ability to negotiate the constraints and frustrations of imprisonment depends not just on support available in prison, but also on what sociologists of the prison term their ‘imported characteristics’. Many prisoners – male and female – have acute and chronic mental health problems that heighten their need for support, and hamper their ability to cope. Over seventy percent of women in prison suffer from two or more diagnosed mental health disorders, nearly forty percent have at some time attempted suicide, and close to a third have had a previous psychiatric admission. The incidence of disorders often associated with immediate environmental stressors is also high; women in prison are twice as likely as those in the general population to suffer from eating disorders and nearly half have a major depressive disorder (Prison Reform Trust, 2010). Many prisoners, then, are functioning at the limits of their capacity to cope, and rely on support from relationships outside in order to manage life *inside*. When Lisa’s difficulties inside prison converged with problems at home, she lacked both the power to resolve them and constructive ways in which to manage her frustration. She describes her feeling that self-harm was the only remaining coping strategy

¹² Researchers have paid little attention to the ways in which women prisoners’ experiences are affected by regime structures. However, the issues Lisa outlines resonate strongly with those described by male prisoners discussed in Ben Crewe’s (2007) ‘Power, adaptation and resistance in a late-modern men’s prison’ (*British Journal of Criminology*, 47:256-273).

available to her. Self-harm is endemic in women's prisons; although women prisoners represent just five per cent of the total prison population, they accounted for over half the incidents of self-harm recorded in prisons in England and Wales in 2008 (*ibid.*). On some prison wings, prison officers are required to confront and cope with prisoners harming themselves daily. While many officers provide vital support to prisoners at such times, some – as Lisa describes – seem to become inured to prisoners' distress, or distance themselves from it to the point of insensitivity. Many detach the hopelessness that prisoners express in harming themselves from the conditions of imprisonment altogether, which Lisa argues strongly is a misapprehension, or failure of empathy. Her overriding experience is of systems that fail to deliver the support they promise. It is painfully ironic that, while she experiences psychological assessment and monitoring as oppressive, she struggles to secure the psychological support she feels she needs.

Both Lisa and Naomi describe coping with a prison sentence as a question of 'survival'. Women's prisons disproportionately house those with chronic problems and in acute distress; they are austere institutions in which to find resolution to either. Imprisonment itself often leads to the fracturing of households and families, and imposes burdens of care and support on others that are liable to place relationships under intense stress. In intervening in what are often complex and constrained lives to punish women's offending, the criminal justice system may deepen the very problems from which it stems.

Further reading

There has been little detailed recent research conducted in women's prisons in the UK. However, Barbara Owen's (1998) ethnography of a Californian women's prison *In the Mix: struggle and survival in a women's prison* (SUNY) is an evocative account that resonates across jurisdictions. Women's experiences in UK prisons are perhaps best described in ex-prisoners' memoirs. Audrey Peckham's (1985) *A Woman in Custody* (Fontana) offers powerful insights into the experience of imprisonment and the social world of English women's prisons. The statistics in this chapter are taken from the Prison Reform Trust's (July 2010) *Bromley Briefings: Prison Factfile*. This snapshot of the England and Wales prison system draws on a wide range of sources and is collated and published online biannually by the trust.