Relationship Satisfaction for Significant Partners of the Incarcerated: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Carrie Elizabeth Lund

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RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION FOR SIGNIFICANT PARTNERS OF THE INCARCERATED: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

by

Carrie Elizabeth Lund

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Counselor Education and Supervision

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Dedication

First and foremost, I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my grandfather, Frank Samuel Cowart. Without his guidance and continuous support of all things educational, I would never be where I am today. I pray that he is looking down and is proud of the therapist, student, mother, and wife I’ve become. Secondly, I’d like to dedicate this study to my wonderful and beautiful support system. To my husband, TJ, who has never given up on me and has never allowed me to give up on myself. For many nights and weekends, you had to play the role of “single parent” so I could hide in a room and complete school work. Any time you saw a need, you stepped up to meet it. You have been my very best friend and motivator, so THANK YOU. I love you and this wonderful, crazy life we’ve built together.

To our beautiful children, Hudson and Amelia, you two are the reason I’ve pushed so hard to get to this point in my life. You make life so much more fun and worthwhile just by being your sweet, goofy selves. You both have kept me grounded through this busy season of life in more ways than you’ll ever know. Thank you for existing and for loving me through this paper. And Hudson, thank you for stopping me constantly to ask if you can push the “H” button. It was such a sweet reminder to slow down and laugh at the little things.

I would be doing a huge disservice if I didn’t take the time to say thank you to my friends who are more like family. To Katie, Jessica, Crystal, and Skylar (and many others not listed): You have never failed to root me on every step of the way. You knew my heart before I ever started this journey and your unwavering support and unconditional love are what have motivated me to keep pushing to be the person you’ve always known I could be. Thank you for showing me grace and allowing me the space to be a distant friend on the days I couldn’t focus on anything other than research.
Acknowledgments

I’d like to acknowledge my incredible dissertation committee: Dr. Frances Ellmo, Dr. Melanie Burgess, Dr. Patrick Murphy, and Dr. Leigh Holman. These four individuals have worked tirelessly to see me walk across the stage in May. Though the timeline was unconventional and I had to push at the last minute to meet deadlines, we did it! Drs. Ellmo and Holman have known me and supported me since my first day in graduate school. For that, I am forever grateful. Their guidance and feedback has been instrumental in the ways in which I teach and provide therapy even now. What an honor it has been to work alongside so many world changers!

Secondly, I’d like to thank the participants of this study. For so long, incarcerated individuals and their families have felt as if they have to hide in the shadows in shame. I don’t take for granted the strength and vulnerability it took for my participants to open up and share their stories with me. For that, I am eternally grateful. You made this study possible.

Finally, I have to acknowledge the role that Dr. Leigh Pitre has played in my successes. She was my site supervisor through both practicum and internship and genuinely made me the counselor I am today. She taught me that counseling isn’t always “warm and fuzzy” and that not challenging clients to grow is a disservice. So, thank you for that lesson; I needed it! She really fueled my fire to continue my efforts towards my doctorate after seeing her do it and supported my passion for the incarcerated population and their families. I’m so thankful for all the guidance she provided during one of the strangest years ever, 2020, so thank you!
Abstract

The United States incarcerates more individuals than any other country in the world (The Sentencing Project, 2023). Because of this, it is imperative that counseling professionals understand the lived experiences of those impacted by incarceration. Though research exists focusing on the effects of incarceration on children and families, there is still only a small body of research dedicated to understanding how incarceration impacts significant partners of the incarcerated. This study examined the lived experiences of eight significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs) to better understand the ways in which incarceration impacted their romantic relationship satisfaction. Through the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) techniques and the lens of Social Constructivism, five main themes emerged. These findings add to the field of counseling, including currently practicing counselors, future counselors, counselor educators, and counselor training programs.
# Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction  
- Purpose of the Study 1  
- Statement of the Problem 2  
- Significance of the Study 3  
- Definition of Terms 3  
- Theoretical Framework 4  
- Organization of the Study 4  

Chapter Two: Literature Review 6  
- Mass Incarceration 6  
  - Multicultural Considerations of Mass Incarceration 7  
  - Mass Incarceration and Mental Health 8  
  - Mass Incarceration and Physical Health 9  
- The Effects of Incarceration on Children and Families 10  
- The Effects of Incarceration on Significant Partners 11  
  - Co-Parenting During Incarceration 14  
  - Mental Health Complications for SPIs 15  
  - Termination of the SPI-Inmate Relationship During Incarceration 16  
- Relationship Satisfaction and Incarceration 16  
- Limitations in Current Research 18  
- Relevancy to the Counseling Profession 19  
- Rationale 20
Chapter Three: Methodology  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Design and Rationale</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducting IPA Research</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bracketing</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Approach</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Sample</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Recruitment</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Interview</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member-Checking</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up Interview</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Management</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness and Goodness</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declaration of Conflicting Interests</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter Four: Research Findings  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Profiles</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant #1</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #2</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #3</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #4</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Development of Themes

Reading and re-reading

Initial noting

Developing emergent themes

Searching for connections across emergent themes

Moving to the next case

Looking for patterns across cases

Taking interpretations to deeper levels

Incarceration was a Shock (Theme #1)

Before Incarceration, Things Were Good

My Trust Has Been Broken

My Mental Health has Suffered (Theme #2)

There are No Resources

I Feel Isolated (Theme #3)

No One Understands

Keep it to Yourself

Having Support is Important (Theme #4)

My Spirituality Has Helped

I’m Sticking it Out
Chapter Five: Discussion

Discussion of Themes and Connection to the Literature

Theme #1: Incarceration was a Shock
Theme #2: My Mental Health has Suffered
Theme #3: I Feel Isolated
Theme #4: Having Support is Important
Theme #5: I’m Sticking it Out

Additional Areas of Interest

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Implications for Future Research and Clinical Practice

Continued Research
Support Groups
Community Resources

Conclusions

References

Appendices

Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire
Appendix B: Informed Consent
Chapter One: Introduction

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate relationship satisfaction for significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs) and the ways in which mental health professionals can assist. Mass incarceration has proven to be a source of racial inequity since the 1970s and African-American men living in poor neighborhoods have been a target for this phenomenon for nearly five decades (The Sentencing Project, 2023). Across all of the minority populations represented in state and federal prisons (women, people with disabilities, etc), people of color are arrested more frequently, charged with more severe crimes, and sentenced to longer prison terms (Morgan et al., 2023).

Incarcerated individuals face a wide range of threats to their mental and physical well-being (Vallas, 2016; Tadros et al., 2022). In fact, one in five incarcerated individuals suffers from a serious mental health disorder (Vallas, 2016). Each year, the chance of someone with a diagnosed mental illness being incarcerated goes up by 1% (Tadros et al., 2022). These mental health disorders are only exacerbated by conditions within state and federal prisons, such as overcrowding, a lack of stimulation, and reduced contact with loved ones (Tadros et al., 2022). Incarcerated individuals with mental health challenges are also more prone to bullying and violence (Cnaan et al., 2008; Schnittker & Bacak, 2016; Tadros et al., 2022).

Inmates are also more at risk of violent attacks, sexual assault, infectious diseases, and substance use disorders (Cnaan et al., 2008; Schnittker & Bacak, 2016; Tadros et al., 2022). This risk only increases with the presence of a mental health disorder due to a perceived weakness of the individual with the diagnosis (Cnaan et al., 2008; Schnittker & Bacak, 2016). Hepatitis B and
C, HIV, AIDS, and Tuberculosis (TB) are all commonly spread diseases within prison walls and many of these go undetected and untreated due to high turnover rates in prison populations (Cnaan et al., 2008; Bureau of Justice, 2022; McKoy, 2023).

In addition to those impacted by incarceration directly, the left-behind children, families, and significant partners of the incarcerated suffer indirect consequences as well (Chui, 2010; Arditti, 2016; Taylor, 2016; Wakefield et al., 2016; Bailey, 2018; Brown & Gibbons, 2018; Song et al., 2018; Wells, 2020; Condry & Minson, 2021; Lee & Wildeman, 2021; Tadros et al., 2022; Yeboaa et al., 2022; etc). These consequences are often referred to as secondary punishment in the literature and can include feelings of criminalization, financial difficulties, increased risk of mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD, reduced emotional development, and physical health complications such as asthma, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease (Chui, 2010; Arditti, 2016; Wakefield et al., 2016; Bailey, 2018; Song et al., 2018; Wells, 2020; Condry & Minson, 2021; Lee & Wildeman, 2021; Tadros et al., 2022).

**Statement of the Problem**

Considering the overwhelming amount of research discussing the effects of incarceration on prison populations and their loved ones, there isn’t much to guide mental health professionals on how to assist in these complications. According to Tadros et al. (2022), partners of incarcerated persons, specifically coparents, endure stressors such as financial strain, stigmatization, a lack of social support, physical and mental health complications, etc. Chui (2010) and Yeboaa et al. (2022) found that therapeutic treatment for the emotional and psychological impact of incarceration on SPIs would be greatly beneficial. Though incarceration has detrimental effects on the relationship due to a reduced level of contact between partners, research has shown that relationship maintenance and higher levels of emotional support for the
duration of incarceration can significantly reduce the rate of recidivism for the ex-offender (Chui, 2010; Einat et al., 2015; Taylor, 2016). Currently, there is a gap in the literature regarding how romantic relationship satisfaction is impacted by incarceration and furthermore, how mental health professionals could help.

**Significance of the Study**

This interpretative phenomenological analysis aims to explore and understand the lived experiences of significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs) and gauge their levels of relationship satisfaction. Gaining an understanding of this population may provide context for counselors to provide services to better meet SPIs’ needs. Analyzing the lived experiences of human subjects and providing an interpretation in the context of therapeutic treatment can shed light on how counselor educators can better prepare future counselors to work with this population as well.

**Definition of Terms**

**Mass incarceration:** Mass incarceration began in the 1970s as a “War on Drugs” that increased the use of mandatory minimum sentences and policies; this resulted in a large number of individuals being incarcerated for drug offenses. 50 years later, the United States still incarcerates more individuals than any other country in the world (The Sentencing Project, 2023).

**Relationship satisfaction:** Relationship satisfaction is a scale of contentment or fulfillment for individuals based on their partner’s ability to meet their psychological needs in a relationship (Halford et al., 2023).

**Significant partner of the incarcerated (SPI):** In this study, significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs) are those in a romantic relationship with an individual who is incarcerated.
Theoretical Framework

In order to appreciate and create a better understanding of the lived experiences of significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs), I will be taking a social constructivist approach. Social constructivism was founded by Lev Vygotsky who felt that individuals learned best through the use of engagement, conversation, and cooperation with others (Naidoo & Mabaso, 2023). This theory posits that researchers create knowledge through the use of active listening, investigation, and reflection (Naidoo & Mabaso, 2023). This goal will be met through the use of individual interviews with participants, extensive research, researcher bracketing, and thoughtful interpretation of the data. Participants’ opinions of their lived experiences will be explored further through the use of member-checking and follow-up interviews to ensure that their stories are shared in a meaningful way so that others, especially those in the field of counseling, may learn from it as well.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is presented in five chapters. Chapter one includes the purpose of the study, statement of the problem, significance of the study, definition of the terms, theoretical framework, research questions, and limitations of the study. Chapter two includes a review of the literature, which includes mass incarceration, multicultural considerations of mass incarceration, mass incarceration and mental health, mass incarceration and physical health, the effects of incarceration on children, families, and significant partners of the incarcerated, co-parenting during incarceration, mental health complications for significant partners of the incarcerated, termination of the SPI-inmate relationship during incarceration, relationship satisfaction and
incarceration, limitations in current research, relevancy to the counseling profession, and rationale for the dissertation.

Chapter three describes the methodology utilized in this dissertation. It includes research design and rationale, theoretical approach, participant sample, participant recruitment, inclusion and exclusion criteria, data collection including primary interviews, follow-up interviews, and member-checking, data analysis, data management, trustworthiness and goodness, a declaration of potential conflicting interests for the researcher, and funding. Chapter four provides the study’s results including those from demographic information and interview questions. Chapter five is a summary of the dissertation, findings from data collected, future implications, and conclusions.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

This literature review aims to provide context for counselors providing therapeutic services to significant partners of the incarcerated (SPI) based on their lived experiences with relationship satisfaction post-incarceration. It will explore and analyze existing literature related to the incarcerated population, their families, and their significant partners. It will further explore the effects of incarceration on left-behind significant partners, especially as they relate to relationship satisfaction and their mental health. There is a great deal of research dedicated to assessing the needs of the children and families of the incarcerated (Snyder, 2009; Chui, 2010; Arditti, 2012; Beckmeyer & Arditti, 2014; Taylor, 2016; Wakefield et al., 2016; Song et al., 2018; Enns et al., 2019; Wells, 2020; Condry & Minson, 2021; Lee & Wildeman, 2021; Tadros & Durante, 2022; Morgan et al., 2023), but there is limited research available specifically discussing the effects on the incarcerated population’s significant partners (Bailey, 2018; Tadros et al., 2022; Yeboaa et al., 2022).

Mass Incarceration

The year 2023 marks 50 years of the United States of America’s participation in, and dependence on, mass incarceration (Lee & Wildeman, 2021; The Sentencing Project, 2023). According to the most recent statistics, the U.S. still has the highest incarceration rate in the world (The Sentencing Project, 2023). Mass incarceration began as a “War on Drugs” in the 1970s that has led to major racial inequities with people of color (POC) being arrested more often, charged with, and convicted of more severe crimes, and receiving longer sentences than their white counterparts (Morgan et al., 2023; The Sentencing Project, 2023). In fact, one in 81 Black adults in the United States are currently serving time in state prison (The Sentencing Project, 2023).
Since the start of mass incarceration fifty years ago, there has been an increase in the rate of state and federal imprisonment every single year (Nagin, 2022). Though there has been a decline in the incarcerated population since 2010, it has been a modest one of only about 12% (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2020). This decline was accomplished by reducing the number of individuals imprisoned for drug and property offenses (Nagin, 2022). As of today, both state and federal prison populations are still four times higher than they were in the 1970s (Nagin, 2022).

**Multicultural Considerations of Incarceration**

A significant multicultural consideration when discussing mass incarceration is the considerable race discrepancies found in incarcerated populations. African American men living in poor neighborhoods and with little education were impacted the most by mass incarceration (Lee & Wildeman, 2021). Data collected by The Sentencing Project (2023) showed that though Latinx men are 2.5 times as likely to be incarcerated as white men, black men are six times as likely. In fact, African Americans born in the year 1990, twenty years after the rise of mass incarceration, had a one in four risk of parental incarceration. White children born in 1990 had a one in thirty chance (Condry & Minson, 2021). A more recent study found that the chances of Hispanic children having an incarcerated parent was 2.3%. That number was more than cut in half for White children at 1% and more than doubled for African American children at 7.5% (Tadros et al., 2022).

A population that is often overlooked when discussing the topic of incarceration is that of American women. The United States is responsible for incarcerating 30% of the world’s female population and has incarcerated women more than any other country in the world (Enos, 2017). Female incarceration has not only increased significantly (i.e., “eight-fold”); the rate at which women are incarcerated has also declined less rapidly than the rate of male incarceration since
2009 (Hickert, 2022). When considering the intersection of gender and race, Black women are six times as likely to be incarcerated than white women and two and a half times as likely than Latinx women (Enos, 2017). Incarcerated women are more likely to face sexual abuse behind bars and are more likely to be parents than incarcerated men (Enos, 2017). They also face the added stress of having their infants taken away immediately after birth if arrested during pregnancy (Enos, 2017).

A final multicultural population to consider is incarcerated people with disabilities (IPWDs). In the United States, this population is overrepresented in the correctional population with as many as 32% of those in prison reporting a disability (Ruffin et al., 2022). These reported disabilities range from physical (e.g., cancer, diabetes, etc.) to cognitive (e.g., learning disorders, Autism, etc.). One of the most common types of cognitive disabilities found in the incarcerated population is mental health complications, with 23% of inmates reporting at least one diagnosis of a mental health disorder (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021).

**Incarceration and Mental Health**

According to Vallas (2016), one in five incarcerated individuals has a serious mental health disorder. Each year, the chance of someone being imprisoned instead of receiving psychiatric treatment at an appropriate facility increases by 1% (Tadros et al., 2022). In fact, there is a higher percentage of individuals in the prison system with a serious mental health disorder (11%) than in the general public (4.2%) in the United States (Tadros et al., 2022). Mental health conditions are worsened because of the conditions present in state and federal prisons. These include, but aren’t limited to, a lack of family contact, lack of mental stimulation, bullying, negative relationships with prison staff and other inmates, overcrowding, and isolation (Tadros et al., 2022).
According to Tadros et al. (2022), incarcerated individuals suffering from a mental illness are more likely to be assaulted and incur injuries during their imprisonment. This risk is even higher for male offenders with mental health disorders, particularly depression (Tadros et al., 2022). Schnittker and Bacak (2016) suggest that there is an increase in the risk of inmate-on-inmate violence due to mental illness of about 60 to 70 percent. This increased risk is believed to be caused by mental health stigma and the idea that the presence of a mental health disorder makes an inmate weaker and, ultimately, more vulnerable to victimization by other inmates (Cnaan et al., 2008; Schnittker & Bacak, 2016).

**Incarceration and Physical Health**

Inmates are not only at risk of mental health complications; their physical health takes a toll as well. Though there is a commonly held belief in society that incarcerated individuals spend most of their time working out or watching television (Cnaan et al., 2008), the truth is that imprisonment is difficult and can have a range of negative effects on inmates’ physical well-being. As mentioned previously, inmates with a mental health disorder are more likely to be attacked violently due to perceived weakness (Schnittker & Bacak, 2016). According to Cnaan et al. (2008), prison culture reserves the expectation that its inmates are tough, strong, and capable of protecting themselves. When it is discovered that this is not the case, the inmate becomes more susceptible to bullying, intimidation, and attacks (Cnaan et al., 2008; Schnittker & Bacak, 2016; Tadros et al., 2022).

Inmates are also at a disproportionately increased risk of sexual assault, chronic and infectious diseases, and substance use disorders (Cnaan et al., 2008; Tadros et al., 2022). In 2005, it was estimated that about one million inmates were victims of sexual assault (Cnaan et al., 2008). The rate of reported sexual assault in prisons was so high that in 2003, President George
W. Bush signed the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) into law, requiring correctional facilities to provide accurate sexual assault data (Cnaan et al., 2008). In the prison population, there is also a higher chance of inmates getting diseases such as Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, Tuberculosis (TB), HIV, and AIDS; these diseases are typically spread through shared utensils or needles and sexual contact (Cnaan et al., 2008). The World Health Organization estimated that the incarcerated population experiences TB at a rate of 100 times more than the general population (Cnaan et al., 2008). A more recent study found that nearly half of TB cases go undetected in prisons due to the turnover of inmates between facilities and a lack of general healthcare (McKoy, 2023). According to the Bureau of Justice (2022), there were an estimated 11,940 inmates with HIV and 114 AIDS-related deaths in state and federal prisons in 2020.

**The Effects of Incarceration on Children and Families**

Inmates aren’t the only ones who suffer from the effects of incarceration; their children and families suffer as well. Condry & Minson (2021) found that family members often suffered collateral consequences, secondary punishment, and symbiotic harms as a result of their loved one’s incarceration. These include, but aren’t limited to, stigmatization, disrupted education and/or employment, addiction, financial stress, shame, and a loss of relationships with friends and family (Condry & Minson, 2021). Incarceration often leaves family members and children feeling as if they are just as guilty of the crime their loved one committed due to unfair treatment from society, loved ones, and prison personnel during visitations (Bailey, 2018). They are also subject to feelings of criminalization due to idioms such as, “the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” or “like father, like son,” (Wells, 2020). Parents of the incarcerated may face an increase in societal judgment and blame as their parenting of the incarcerated individual comes into question. Their everyday life may change as well as they adjust to parenting grandchildren (i.e.,
if the incarcerated child is an adult and/or parent themselves) and/or assuming financial responsibilities (Condry & Minson, 2021).

According to the literature, children of the incarcerated may experience differential treatment due to their parents’ incarceration by society (e.g., teachers, family members, neighbors, etc.). They are also at an increased risk for internalized and externalized behaviors (e.g., aggression, depression, anxiety, etc.), reduced emotional and educational development, health complications, and incarceration themselves (Chui, 2010; Arditti, 2016; Wakefield et al., 2016; Song et al., 2018; Wells 2020; Condry & Minson, 2021; Lee & Wildeman, 2021). Data from 2015 showed that children of incarcerated fathers were 23% more likely to be involved in criminal activity than their peers (Well, 2020). Considering the fact that more recent research has shown that 92% of incarcerated parents are fathers, this statistic becomes even more concerning (Tadros & Durante, 2022; Tadros et al., 2022).

The Effects of Incarceration on Significant Partners of the Incarcerated (SPIs)

Significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs), yet another population impacted by the incarceration of a loved one, are often referred to as “passive victims” in the literature (Vickers & Rutter, 2018; Yeboaa et al., 2022) because of the stigmatization, or courtesy stigma, they face due to their association with the incarcerated individual (Burkholder et al., 2020). Though incarceration of a significant partner can serve as a respite for those in a dangerous and/or violent relationship (Yeboaa et al., 2022), current research has overwhelmingly shown that incarceration has mostly negative effects on the relationships between the incarcerated population and their significant partners, such as co-parents and romantically involved couples. In a study conducted by Chui (2010), it was found that significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs) often go through a three-phase process alongside their incarcerated loved ones. These steps include: (1) coming to
terms, (2) keeping in touch, and (3) surviving the sentence (Chui, 2010). The length of time an SPI spends in each of these phases will vary based on duration of court proceedings, length of sentence, and stability of the relationship.

The first phase for SPIs is accepting the fact that their partner has been incarcerated. The processing of their loved ones getting arrested is described as a shock to both offenders, who have no thoughts of getting caught, and their families (Yeboaa et al., 2022). Some partners may have been unaware of, and even surprised by, their loved one’s involvement with criminal activity (Chui, 2010; Yeboaa et al., 2022). This can lead to feelings of “criminalization” in which the SPI feels as if they should have seen it coming (Bailey, 2018). SPIs may also endure the sometimes lengthy court proceedings which can lead to financial strain due to travel, time off work, court fees, and childcare if needed (Chui, 2010).

The second phase SPIs encounter is “keeping in touch,” during which communication and visitation experiences are explored. Communication for SPIs and their incarcerated loved ones most often includes phone calls and letter-writing (Chui, 2010), both of which cost money and have limited privacy. Visitations to correctional facilities can often lead to feelings of humiliation, degradation, and sorrow due to seeing their loved ones in a diminished condition (Yeboaa et al., 2022). Many SPIs have shared that they felt as if they were treated like criminals during their visits due to strenuous security procedures (Yeboaa et al., 2022). In addition to the uncomfortable environment of visits to correctional facilities, SPIs have reported travel costs and time and a lack of childcare as reasons for limited visitations (Yeboaa et al., 2022). In a study conducted by Einat et al. (2015), it was found that 60% of state inmates and 80% of federal inmates were imprisoned more than 100 miles from their homes. The physical separation caused by incarceration can lead to a decrease in marital satisfaction, an increase in the number of
disagreements between partners, and a reduction in the number of visits by SPIs (Einat et al., 2015). In fact, as a significant partner’s time behind bars increases, research has shown that SPIs visit them less frequently and, ultimately, their relationship often fails (Einat et al., 2015).

The third and final phase that SPIs face is “surviving the sentence.” The most difficult part of this phase is the massive role change that is required when an SPI’s loved one is incarcerated (Yeboaa et al., 2022). This includes, but is not limited to, an adjustment to the physical, financial, social, and emotional absence of their partner (Chui, 2010; Arditti, 2016; Bailey, 2018; Tadros et al., 2022; Yeboaa et al., 2022). These issues are exacerbated when the convicted partner is the sole breadwinner (Yeboaa et al., 2022) or when the left behind SPI has pre-existing mental health issues (Tadros et al., 2022).

Health disparities in SPIs are exacerbated by the incarceration of a loved one (Tadros et al., 2022). Significant partners and coparents experience a significantly heightened risk of stress-related conditions such as asthma, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease (Tadros et al., 2022). There is also an elevated risk of HIV infection in SPIs visiting their incarcerated loved ones, especially in women (Tadros et al., 2022). Financial strain is a topic that is mentioned frequently across the literature when discussing SPIs’ adjustment to their loved one’s absence during incarceration (Arditti, 2016; Bailey, 2018; Brown & Gibbons, 2018; Chui, 2010; Condry & Minson, 2021; Lee & Wildeman, 2021; Song et al., 2018; Tadros et al., 2022; Taylor, 2016; Yeboaa et al., 2022). Financial constraints arise as a result of losing a second income, the cost of visitations, legal fees, and communication, and childcare (Arditti, 2016; Chui, 2010; Tadros et al., 2022; Yeboaa et al., 2022).

Social and emotional losses can cause a massive strain on relationships between SPIs and their incarcerated loved ones (Tadros et al., 2022) as incarceration can limit, and sometimes
prevent, emotional connections between them (Einat et al., 2015). Incarceration is viewed as a psychosocial loss because the person the family members knew is no longer there (Bailey, 2018). Left-behind SPIs typically must endure a grieving process related to this psychosocial loss without much support from society as a loss due to incarceration is viewed as an ambiguous one (Arditti, 2012; Bailey, 2018). Ambiguous loss occurs when the SPI’s loved one is physically absent, but psychologically present (Arditti, 2012) and society disapproves of the loss being grieved (Bailey, 2018). This usually leads SPIs to socially isolate, especially when others believe they had a hand in, or knowledge of, their loved one’s criminal activity (Bailey, 2018). The result of this lack of social support and denial of empathy is known as disenfranchised grief (Arditti, 2012; Bailey, 2018; Brown & Gibbons, 2018; Baker et al., 2021).

**Co-parenting During Incarceration**

SPIs who are also co-parenting with an incarcerated loved one deal with even more complications as they have a child, or multiple children involved. Around 1.7 million children in the United States have an incarcerated parent (Tadros & Durante, 2022). In fact, the majority of state (52%) and federal (63%) inmates are parents in the United States (Tadros & Durante, 2022). Over half (53%) of those are parents of minor children (Tadros et al., 2022) and 92% are fathers (Tadros & Durante, 2022).

As mentioned previously, a lack of visitations between incarcerated individuals and their loved ones is detrimental to the relationship (Einat et al., 2015). With the majority of both state and federal inmates being imprisoned more than 100 miles away from their home (Einat et al., 2015) and mothers viewing prison visits as “unsuitable for children” (Chui, 2010), visits become less of an expectation for imprisoned parents. In fact, in a study conducted by Einat et al. (2015), it was found that more than half (57%) of male state inmates never had a personal visit with
children and only 25% reported having weekly contact through communication resources such as phone calls or written letters. This lack of physical (visitations) and emotional (communication) contact creates a degradation to the inmate-SPI relationship and ultimately decreases the amount of supportive parenting provided by the non-incarcerated parent (Song et al., 2018). Non-supportive parenting has been found to create a significant increase in the amount of externalized behaviors exhibited by their children (Arditti, 2012; Song et al., 2018).

**Mental Health Complications for Significant Partners of the Incarcerated (SPIs)**

In addition to the previously mentioned ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief, SPIs face a great deal of mental health complications (Einat et al., 2015; Bailey, 2018; Wildeman et al., 2019; Tadros et al., 2022; Yeboaa et al., 2022). These include, but are not limited to: anger, guilt, shame, helplessness, family conflict, and low self-esteem (Bailey, 2018; Yeboaa et al., 2022). There is also an increased risk for trauma disorders associated with the traumatic separation of the inmate from their significant partner (Arditti, 2012), especially if the SPI was a witness to their loved one’s incarceration (Yeboaa et al., 2022). Left-behind SPIs are more likely to be women and women with an incarcerated partner are more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression (Wildeman et al., 2019). Female partners of the incarcerated face a 25% greater risk of developing Major Depressive Disorder, or MDD (Tadros et al., 2022).

In addition to these mental health disorders, SPIs are more likely to experience a phenomenon known as disenfranchised grief. Disenfranchised grief is a repressing of one’s grief due to a lack of social support during someone’s process of grieving (Arditti, 2012; Bailey, 2018; Brown & Gibbons, 2018; Baker et al., 2021). Incarceration of a loved one is considered to be an ambiguous loss as the person the SPI is grieving hasn’t actually died (Arditti, 2012). It involves limits to openly acknowledged grief and public mourning as if the SPI also took part in the crime
their loved one committed (Bailey, 2018; Baker et al., 2021; Brown & Gibbons, 2018). As a result, SPIs are left with a lack of validation for the grief of losing their loved one(s) to incarceration and experience higher rates of anger, vicarious guilt, and confusion (Brown & Gibbons, 2018).

**Termination of the SPI-Inmate Relationship During Incarceration**

One potential effect of incarceration on a relationship between SPIs and inmates is the ending of their relationship through breakup, divorce, and/or family splitting. The risk of divorce and separation in marriages significantly increases during incarceration (Chui, 2010). According to Einat et al. (2015), 86.3% of female inmate participants in a 1980 study blamed incarceration/imprisonment for the demise of their marriage. Only 13.7% felt that it had more to do with the combination of incarceration and their partner’s personality (Einat et al., 2015).

Einat et al. (2015) also found that the termination of an SPI-inmate relationship may be a reflection of the gender of the partners. Their research found that imprisoned males usually maintained intact marriages while incarcerated women were often faced with abandonment by their partners and termination of the marriage (Einat et al., 2015). This may be related to a lack of physical intimacy and meaningful time spent together (Einat et al., 2015). A further consequence of incarceration is a decision by the left-behind SPI to remarry. This decision is typically made as a result of unmet physical and/or emotional needs and a desire for more emotional affection or future children (Yeboaa et al., 2022).

**Relationship Satisfaction and Incarceration**

When considering the reasons for which couples stay together or decide to terminate, the topic of relationship satisfaction is an important one. Halford et al. (2023) found that major changes in our society have caused a shift in what people look for when seeking out a partner.
Due to an increase in potential mates (e.g., through the use of online dating), individuals now have the privilege of being more selective (Halford et al., 2023). According to their research, relationship satisfaction, which used to be based on the ability to meet a potential partner’s survival needs, has progressed into a desire for a partner who meets their psychological needs instead (Halford et al., 2023). They also discovered that individuals divorced more often because their psychological needs were no longer being met (i.e., “I felt like we had grown apart;” Halford et al., 2023). This feels exceptionally relevant when tying it back to previous research on SPIs (Einat et al., 2015; Yeboaa et al., 2022), which found that a lack of meaningful time together, unmet emotional needs, limited emotional connection, and a desire for more emotional affection during incarceration were primary reasons for participants’ divorce from their incarcerated partners.

Building off of what is already known about incarceration’s effects on significant partners (Arditti, 2016; Bailey, 2018; Chui, 2010; Einat et al., 2015; Song et al., 2018; Tadros et al., 2022; Tadros & Durante, 2022; Yeboaa et al., 2022), it is important to consider how SPIs’ overall relationship satisfaction changes during their partner’s incarceration. According to Ascigil et al. (2023), changes in relationship satisfaction are mostly based on sex life satisfaction, perceived stress for both partners, levels of conflict and irritation, and how “on the same page” they feel. Researchers have also found that the more support individuals receive from their partners, the more satisfied they are in their relationship (Eller et al., 2023). Providing support to partners can become more difficult during stressful life transitions, leading to burnout or even an inability to continue providing support (Eller et al., 2023). This lack of support eventually leads to a decrease in relationship satisfaction.
Couples with lower levels of relationship satisfaction tend to feed off of their partners’ negative emotional states and ultimately fight more than relationally satisfied couples (Timmons et al., 2023). Keeping the factors that contribute to relationship satisfaction in mind (e.g., sex life, stress, conflict, and support during stressful life transitions), it is crucial to also examine how these topics might intersect with the fact that only 15% of SPI-inmate relationships last beyond the inmate’s prison term (Cnaan et al., 2008). The small number of enduring relationships may point to a lack of satisfaction for SPI-inmate relationships.

Research has previously found that a lack of visitations and/or communication is detrimental to the relationship (Einat et al., 2015). Though visitations and communication are important to the relationship, research has also shown that financial strain that occurs as a result of incarceration may keep SPIs from participating in either or both (Chui, 2010; Einat et al., 2015; Bailey, 2018). Even if financial strain wasn’t a factor, the majority of state (52%) and federal (63%) inmates are imprisoned more than 100 miles away from their homes (Einat et al., 2015). This distance could have a direct impact on feelings of support for inmates, sex life satisfaction, and levels of conflict within the relationship. Considering that incarceration is also a “stressful life transition,” relationship satisfaction for SPIs may be affected negatively by incarceration (Cnaan et al., 2008).

**Limitations in Current Research**

Though there is a growing amount of research dedicated to the relational effects of incarceration, they are mostly focused on the perspective of the inmate, specifically male inmates (Einat et al., 2015). There is also a great deal of research focused on the effects of incarceration on children (Snyder, 2009; Chui, 2010; Brown & Gibbons, 2018; Song et al., 2018) and families (Arditti, 2012; Taylor, 2016; Wakefield et al., 2016; Wells, 2020; Condry & Minson, 2021; Lee
& Wildeman, 2021; Tadros & Durante, 2022). Thus far, there is limited research on the complications faced by significant partners of the incarcerated (Bailey, 2018; Tadros et al., 2022; Tadros, Presley, & Gomez, 2022; Yeboa et al., 2022) and the research that does exist focuses mostly on female partners of incarcerated individuals or the perspective of male inmates. (Chui, 2010; Tadros et al., 2022). Only one research article was found that focused on the reasons that husbands stayed married to their incarcerated wives (Einat et al., 2015). Therefore, more research is needed to explore the impact that incarceration has on significant partners, especially as it pertains to their relationship satisfaction.

**Relevancy to the Counseling Profession**

According to the American Counseling Association (ACA), counselors are expected to serve as advocates for their clients. Both the ACA and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) describe the duties of counselors as incorporating acts of advocacy and social justice (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2015). In fact, the ACA Code of Ethics specifically states that “when appropriate, counselors advocate at individual, group, institution, and societal levels to address potential barriers and obstacles that inhibit access and/or the growth and development of clients” (ACA, 2014, Section A.7.a., p. 5). It also states that counselors are to gradually increase their “knowledge, personal awareness, sensitivity, dispositions, and skills pertinent to being a culturally competent counselor in working with a diverse client population” (ACA, 2014, Section C.2.a., p. 8).

It is believed that the encouragement of relationship maintenance between inmates and their families is the most beneficial for all involved (Einat et al., 2015). In fact, male inmates who lived with their wives (i.e., after their marriage survived incarceration) post-release had significantly limited involvement in illegal behavior (Einat et al., 2015). According to Chui
(2010), support for both the psychological and emotional well-being of the significant partners of the incarcerated would be beneficial and should be made available. SPIs would benefit greatly from the therapeutic treatment of the psychological disturbances caused by incarceration (Yeboaa et al., 2022).

As mentioned previously, everyone directly or indirectly impacted by incarceration could benefit from mental health treatment (e.g., incarcerated individuals, left-behind children, left-behind parents, left-behind co-parents, and left-behind SPIs). The research has shown over and over that the risk of anxiety, depression, grief, PTSD, etc. increases for each of these individuals due to the effects of incarceration on mental health (Bailey, 2018; Einat et al., 2015; Tadros et al., 2022; Wildeman et al., 2019; Yeboaa et al., 2022). In addition, left-behind children, families, and SPIs may face financial strain, societal isolation, and feeling of criminalization, all topics that could be processed with the help of a mental health professional.

**Rationale**

In conclusion, this literature review has explored the population of the significant partners of incarcerated (SPIs) and the ways in which their relationship satisfaction is affected by the imprisonment of their loved ones. Literature focusing on the history, multicultural impact, and ethical considerations of mass incarceration were examined and the importance of communication and visitation between inmates and their loved ones was discussed. Limited research exists that focuses solely on the survival of significant partner-inmate relationships during imprisonment and even less research focuses on the left-behind male partners of the incarcerated. Knowing how to approach this population as a counselor is of utmost importance as the research has shown that counseling not only benefits the psychological and emotional
well-being of inmates and the significant partners, but it also has the potential to increase relationship satisfaction, improve family functioning, and reduce recidivism rates.

Currently practicing counselors, counselors-in-training, and counselor educators are all held to a standard in their profession to do what is best for their clients. This includes advocating for clients of all walks of life, including incarceration. It also means that counselors have an unspoken obligation to participate in some form of formal education and/or training so that they can best serve the needs of not only the incarcerated, but their loved ones as well. Currently, this is not a requirement in counselor education programs (Burkholder et al., 2020). Relationship maintenance and satisfaction for SPIs has been shown to reduce recidivism and increase overall well-being for both inmates and the left-behind partners (Einat et al., 2015). Because of this, this dissertation focused on the ways in which the counseling profession could take part in the therapeutic treatment of left-behind SPIs in a way that helps to improve relationship satisfaction, increase relationship maintenance, and, possibly, reduce recidivism in the long run.
Chapter Three: Methodology

The issue of mass incarceration is that its effects spread far beyond just those who are incarcerated. As research has shown, families and significant partners of the incarcerated suffer from the incarceration of their loved ones as well (Arditti, 2016; Bailey, 2018; Brown & Gibbons, 2018; Chui, 2010; Condry & Minson, 2021; Lee & Wildeman, 2021; Song et al., 2018; Tadros et al., 2022; Taylor, 2016; Yeboaa et al., 2022) been responsible for imprisoning more people than any other country in the world (The Sentencing Project, 2023). Inevitably, this means that there has also been a considerable impact on children (i.e., about 1.7 million) and significant partners of the incarcerated (Tadros et al., 2022).

The problem for practicing mental health professionals is that there is currently a lack of training in counselor education programs for working with the families of the incarcerated specifically (Burkholder et al., 2020). The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to understand the lived experiences of significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs) as it pertains to their relationship satisfaction and provide interpretations that help future counselors and counselor educators to prepare for work with this population. The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question One: What are the lived experiences of significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs)?

Research Question Two: What are the SPIs’ perceptions of relationship satisfaction since their partner was incarcerated?

Research Design and Rationale

Relationship satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, during the incarceration of a loved one is a phenomenon experienced by all left-behind partners; because of this, phenomenological research
was the best fit for this qualitative study. As mentioned previously, the purpose of this study was to shed light on this topic for counselors, counselors-in-training, and counselor educators. The premise of phenomenological studies is to explore, and attempt to understand, the perspective of a particular experience through the lens of those who have experienced it (Chui, 2010; Neubauer et al., 2019). To take it a step further, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) has two goals: (1) to make sense of individuals’ lived experiences and (2) to give a detailed interpretation of the data in order to understand the shared experiences better (Tuffour, 2017). A primary architect of interpretative phenomenological analysis, Jonathan Smith, found that humans are naturally prone to self-reflection (2018). He also believed that when participants were able to share their experiences related to a specific phenomenon, they gained a better understanding. Therefore, I utilized semi-structured interviews with questions pertaining to the lived experiences of participants.

The role of a researcher utilizing a phenomenological design is to approach the topic with an open mind, to be flexible with the data without implying preconceived ideas, and to make meaning of the participants’ lived experiences (Padgett, 2008; Yeboaa, et al., 2022). In accordance with the beliefs of the original founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, interpretative phenomenological analysis requires that researchers “set aside” any previous knowledge they may have about the phenomenon through a process known as bracketing (Tuffour, 2017). Bracketing involves not only abandoning any fore-knowledge; it also encourages researchers to detach from any prejudices based on personal experiences related to the topic being researched (Tuffour, 2017). Ultimately, the goal of an IPA researcher is to make sense of the participants’ understanding of their own lived experiences (Tuffour, 2017).
Conducting IPA Research

The following seven steps were developed by the original founder of Interpretative Phenomenological Research and outlined by Charlick and colleagues (2016). These steps guided the current research:

1. Reading and re-reading: During this step, the researcher is expected to completely immerse themselves in the data.

2. Initial noting: This step includes free association and exploration through the use of note-taking, journaling, etc.

3. Developing emergent themes: During the third step, the researcher is expected to focus on previous note-taking alongside transcripts as a way to analyze any possible themes that may come up.

4. Searching for connections across emergent themes: During this step, the researcher will start to integrate overarching themes.

5. Moving to the next case: Before moving on to the next set of data (i.e., interview transcription), the researcher must bracket any discovered themes as a way to approach the next interview with an open mind. This step ensures that each individual case is given due diligence and respect without assumptions and biases. This step is especially important as it honors the concept of individuality and full representation of participants’ lived experiences, which is a large component of interpretative phenomenological analysis.

6. Looking for patterns across cases: This step involves the researcher taking the time to find any patterns that might have come up across cases.
7. Taking interpretations to deeper levels: Finally, this step allows the researcher to deepen their understanding of the data through the lens of a specific theoretical approach.

As the researcher, my aim was to ensure that each participant experienced autonomy and felt as if their voices were being heard and reflected in the data. After transcribing each case and sharing the transcription with the participants, I then read and re-read the data, took notes as I was reading through the interviews, developed emergent themes (e.g., visitation, communication, financial strain, etc.), searched for any connections in the themes, bracketed in between each set of data to allow for an open minded approach to the data, and looked for patterns that came up (Charlick et al., 2016). Finally, I applied not only a social constructivist lens but a therapeutic one as well as a way to interpret the collected data (Charlick et al., 2016).

**Bracketing**

As mentioned in the previous section, bracketing is an opportunity for researchers to not only abandon any preconceived ideas about the material they have before conducting interviews, but it also allows for more credibility and rigor in the data (Tuffour, 2017). Because of my own personal experiences with incarceration and working with the incarcerated population, it was important to include the process of bracketing in my research as a way to maintain subjectivity when collecting and organizing the data. My reflexivity statement was as follows:

> According to research conducted by Thomas and Sohn (2023), qualitative researchers must take additional steps to ensure an unbiased phenomenological attitude. To enhance rigor and trustworthiness in this study, I will participate in self-reflection through the use of journaling and member-checking. These steps will be taken to maintain researcher subjectivity and as a way to rid myself of any preconceived knowledge or interpretations of the subject of incarceration. Some intersections with the data that I must consider are both personal and professional. On a
personal note, I acknowledge that I have been incarcerated myself and on a professional note, I acknowledge that I have worked closely on a therapeutic level with individuals who had been incarcerated before coming to treatment. Though these experiences can serve as assets to my dissertation, they may also create some vulnerabilities and biases. While working with the significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs), it is imperative that I continuously participate in bracketing to separate my own personal and professional experiences from the phenomenon of incarceration. As a white female, I must also consider how my own intersecting identities might impact my personal views and responses to the data. With this, I can ensure a more rigorous study and richer data.

Theoretical Approach

The paradigm underlying this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was social constructivism. Constructivism on its own is based on a genuine curiosity and openness to the experiences of others; it is also an approach meant to be interpretive and contextual in nature through the use of empathy (Pratt et al., 2023). According to Carl Rogers, empathy is a necessary component when forming the therapeutic relationship for practicing counselors, counselors-in-training, and counselor educators (Clark, 2010). The relationship between the researcher and the study’s participants are of utmost importance, much like that of the therapeutic relationship, as this enhances overall understanding of their lived experiences (Pratt et al., 2023).

According to Naidoo and Mabaso (2023), social constructivism creates an opportunity for researchers to actively learn through the use of investigation and reflection. It allows for the “construct” of comprehension, relevance, and meaning through collaboration with others (Naidoo & Mabaso, 2023). Another tenet of social constructivism is that researchers make
meaningful time for, after having discussions with participants about their lived experiences through human interaction and collaboration, learning at the individual level (Naidoo & Mabaso, 2023). In the context of this dissertation, it helped to describe how practicing counselors, counselors-in-training, and counselor educators could utilize this learned information in their treatment of significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs).

Participant Sample

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), phenomenological studies typically involve three to 15 participants who have all experienced the phenomenon being researched. In order to stay in alignment with the traditional IPA approach, I recruited a smaller sample size (Charlick et al., 2016). According to the original founders of IPA (Smith et al., 2009), smaller sample sizes allow for more purposeful and careful selections and richer representations of the lived experiences of participants. Therefore, I recruited 8 participants. This participant sample aligned with both traditional and interpretative phenomenological research.

Participant Recruitment

I recruited participants for this study using both purposive sampling (e.g., Facebook groups, websites, CESNET, etc.) and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling worked well for recruitment as it allowed me to seek out participants who would provide insight into their lived experiences concerning the phenomenon I’m studying: relationship satisfaction during incarceration. Following IRB approval, I recruited study participants through the use of social media platform discussion boards (e.g., Facebook, Reddit, etc.) created specifically for significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs). I also utilized an IRB-approved scripted email and flyer to advertise my intent for this study. These sampling methods recruited a total of eight
Participants were provided with a $25 Amazon gift card as a form of compensation for their time during interviews.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for this study was adults (i.e., 18 or older) who were currently in a romantic relationship with an incarcerated individual. I wanted to exclude co-parents as having a child together alone didn’t ensure that a relationship existed between them. Since there was a wealth of literature discussing the effects of incarceration on children and families (Arditt, 2012; Baker et al., 2021; Beckmeyer & Arditti, 2014; Brown & Gibbons, 2018; Condry & Minson, 2021; Enns et al., 2019; Graham & Harris, 2013; Lee & Wildeman, 2021; Morgan et al., 2023; Snyder, 2009; Song et al., 2018). already in existence, I wanted to focus specifically on the effects on relationship satisfaction for significant partners following the incarceration of their loved one. Screening, through the use of a demographic questionnaire, was utilized as a way to ensure inclusion criteria was met before moving forward with interviews.

Data Collection

Scholars of interpretative phenomenological analysis suggest the use of semi-structured interviews for collecting data from participants. This format allows for flexibility on the part of the researcher while maintaining focus on the research questions (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Speiers & Smith, 2019; Smith et al., 2022). First, I talked with each participant via email to obtain information and schedule an interview. Interviews were conducted via a HIPAA-compliant Zoom call. After going through the data collected in the interviews, I provided a copy to each participant for member-checking.
**Primary Interview**

As mentioned previously, interviews were conducted via a HIPAA-compliant Zoom platform. The goal for primary interviews was to elicit the type of rich data required by interpretative phenomenological analysis (Speiers & Smith, 2019). Interviews included questions related to the lived experiences of significant partners of the incarcerated as they pertained to relationship satisfaction. The leading questions were as follows:

1. Tell me about your relationship with your significant partner before incarceration.
2. Tell me about your current relationship with your incarcerated partner.
   a. How satisfied are you with your relationship currently?
   b. What would improve your relationship satisfaction?
   c. If unsatisfied, what motivates you to stay with your incarcerated partner?
3. In what ways, if any, has your relationship changed?
   a. Tell me about any challenges your relationship has experienced due to incarceration.
4. What resources have you utilized that have been helpful?
   a. Are there any additional resources that you haven’t utilized that you think might be helpful?
   b. How could therapy help your relationship, if at all?

**Member-Checking**

Following the primary interviews, I participated in member-checking. Member-checking involved a process during which participants were provided with transcripts following their interview(s) so that they could correct any errors and eliminate any information they wished to
not be included (McKim, 2023). This process granted more autonomy to the participants so that they had control over the ways in which their information was represented in the data. Aside from the member-checking questions, I asked that the participants respond within a week’s time (7 days). One downside with utilizing member-checking was that participants did not respond to the request even though the researcher made it clear that this was part of the process (McKim, 2023). This could be due to lack of time or interest but was something the researcher had to consider.

In addition to the transcripts, members were provided with the following questions to prepare for a follow-up interview with me. The questions, listed below, have been modified from McKim’s (2023) suggestions:

1. After reading through the transcript, what are your general thoughts?
2. How accurately do you feel that your thoughts were reflected in the transcript?
3. What could be added to the transcript to reflect your lived experiences better?
4. Is there anything you’d like to change? If so, why?

*Follow-Up Interview*

Follow-up interviews increase the validity of findings in qualitative research (McKim, 2023). To ensure my data was the most accurate representation of the participants’ lived experiences, I let participants know that I might need to schedule a second round of semi-structured interviews via a HIPAA-compliant Zoom platform. These interviews were intended to increase autonomy for participants and allow for a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the data. Below are the questions that would have been included in the second interview, but none were necessary in this study:
1. Please tell me more about (selected topic) that we talked about in our first interview.

2. I would like to make sure I understood what you meant when you said (selected topic). Tell me more about that.

3. Since our last interview, have you experienced or thought of anything else pertaining to relationship satisfaction during incarceration that you think might be meaningful to add?

**Data Analysis**

Once the data was collected, I utilized the encrypted software TurboScribe to transcribe from recorded Zoom interviews. I stored all recordings in a password-protected file with pseudonyms to protect participants’ identities. I read through transcripts while listening to recordings to ensure accuracy of the transcriptions and noted any non-verbal gestures in a password-protected electronic journal. Immediately following each interview, I participated in journaling as a way to record any thoughts, feelings, or personal reactions I may have had as a way to practice researcher reflexivity (Dodgson, 2019). These notes were utilized to provide data that contextualized the interviews (Smith et al., 2022).

**Data Management**

As mentioned previously, pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of participants. For additional safeguard measures, all electronic data was contained in a password-protected file on a password-protected laptop. Any hard copies of transcripts, interview notes, etc. were kept in a locked file cabinet. Electronic materials utilized to document researcher reflexivity were kept in a password-protected document as well. After completing all analyses, the electronic files were deleted indefinitely.
Trustworthiness and Goodness

Quality is viewed through the lens of Trustworthiness and Goodness. Trustworthiness holds the position that we cannot separate ourselves from what we know in our search for objectivity and goodness is created through commonly held political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values, which allows research to expose them (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The criteria utilized to ensure quality related to the research process was as follows:

- **Criticality:** This involves the researcher being engaged in critical analysis. In order to do this, I will participate in personal journaling and reflection so that I am approaching the data from a purely objective standpoint.

- **Reflexivity:** This is a consideration of the researcher’s perspective. I have to consider my own personal experiences with the justice system and the biases that may have been formed. I also must take into account how much experience I have working with the offender population and how this can benefit my research.

- **Honesties:** This allows the researcher to acknowledge truths while also avoiding prejudices. In order to ensure fairness towards participants, I must take into consideration that I am a white female in early adulthood. Because of this, I have privileges and biases that other researchers and/or participants may not have.

- **Integrity:** This concept states that the researcher will provide a new take to the current data. Though research has highlighted the negative effects of mass incarceration, this dissertation was conducted in a way that brought attention to the impact incarceration has on relationship satisfaction for significant partners of the incarcerated. In addition, its aim is to provide more context for currently practicing counselors, counselor educators, and counselors-in-training.
• *Verisimilitude*: This simply means “truth-likeness” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). A large part of my dissertation research will include my professional code of ethics and the values held by CACREP standards.

The criteria for ensuring quality related to the research product includes: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. All of these things should be something that qualitative researchers include in their data collection and interpretation as the data has to be truthful, believable, and testable.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The researcher had no potential conflicts of interest with the research.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research of this dissertation. All funding was provided by the author.
Chapter Four: Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of the significant partners of incarcerated individuals (SPIs) especially as they pertain to relationship satisfaction and incarceration’s impact. The narrative of the participants supported different themes that were discovered during the analysis phase of the study. These themes serve to shed light onto the lived experiences of the participants. The results of this study are based on eight semi-structured interviews conducted with individuals who identified as romantic partners of someone currently incarcerated. All participants interviewed were recruited using the recruitment techniques approved by the IRB (listed in Chapter three).

Participant Profiles

The participants all identified as individuals who had a currently incarcerated romantic partner. All participants met the research criteria minimums which included that they were 18+ years of age, English-speaking, and had a romantic relationship that began prior to incarceration. Relationship statuses ranged from “In a Significant Relationship” to “Married.” None of the participants had any association with the researcher, nor were their stories known by the researcher prior to the interviews. The study participants’ ages ranged from 24-38 and all but one identified as either “Black American” or “African American.” The remaining participant identified as “White.” Since the race of their partners was unknown, it was impossible to tie it back to the research discussing the ways in which incarceration affects some races compared to others. According to Wildeman et al. (2019), left-behind partners are more likely to be women. Based on the participants’ self-identified gender in this study (i.e., seven of eight participants being women), this statistic was well-represented.
Participant #1

Participant #1 identifies as a 30-year old African American male who had been with their incarcerated partner for two years and had a relationship status of “Engaged” at the time of their interview.

Participant #2

Participant #2 identifies as a 23-year old Black American female who had been with their incarcerated partner for three years and had a relationship status of “In a Significant Relationship” at the time of their interview.

Participant #3

Participant #3 identifies as a 26-year old Black American female who had been with their incarcerated partner for four years and had a relationship status of “In a Significant Relationship” at the time of their interview.

Participant #4

Participant #4 identifies as a 33-year old African American female who had been with their incarcerated partner for five years and two months and had a relationship status of “Married” at the time of their interview.

Participant #5

Participant #5 identifies as a 23-year old Black American female who had been with their incarcerated partner for three years and had a relationship status of “In a Significant Relationship” at the time of their interview.

Participant #6
Participant #6 identifies as a 24-year old African American female who had been with their incarcerated partner for three years and had a relationship status of “In a Significant Relationship” at the time of their interview.

Participant #7

Participant #7 identifies as a 24-year old African American female who had been with their incarcerated partner for three years and had a relationship status of “In a Significant Relationship” at the time of their interview.

Participant #8

Participant #8 identifies as a 46-year old White female who had been with their incarcerated partner for twenty-six years and had a relationship status of “Married” at the time of their interview.

Table 1 below shows a summary of the demographic characteristics of the participants including their age, relationship status, self-identified race, and length of time with their romantic partner prior to incarceration.

Table 1. Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Relationship Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant #1</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African Am.</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>In a Sig. Rel.</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #3</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>In a Sig. Rel.</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #4</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African Am.</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>5 years, 2 mo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>In a Sig. Rel.</td>
<td>3 years</td>
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<td>24</td>
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<td>African Am.</td>
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<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #7</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African Am.</td>
<td>In a Sig. Rel.</td>
<td>3 years</td>
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Development of Themes

In accordance with the guidelines of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, I completed the following seven steps in order to analyze my collected data and develop themes:

1. Reading and re-reading,
2. Initial noting,
3. Developing emergent themes,
4. Searching for connections across emergent themes,
5. Moving to the next case,
6. Looking for patterns across cases,
7. Taking interpretations to deeper levels.

Reading and re-reading. Once each semi-structured interview was complete, I took the time to listen to each audio recording again to ensure transcription accuracy. Transcripts were created by three methods: Zoom’s automatic transcription based on closed captions during the interview, Otter AI (an external transcription service), and TurboScribe (a second external transcription service). Three transcription services were utilized to ensure overall accuracy and understanding. I compared all three transcripts as an additional measure of accuracy.

Initial noting. Once reading and re-reading were completed, I printed out each transcript to begin note-taking. I started taking notes on each final transcript based on things that stood out to me (i.e., repeated words or phrases, emotional expression, etc). Some examples of this included: “depression,” “love,” “family,” “mental health,” “moving on,” etc.

Developing emergent themes. Following initial noting, I started to develop emergent themes. These themes were based on the repeated words and phrases mentioned in my initial note-taking. Examples included, but were not limited to: incarceration being a shock to the significant partner of the incarcerated (SPI) regardless of how long they had been together, a reduction in relationship satisfaction because of incarceration, the presence or absence of support systems and how that contributed to their experiences, etc.
Searching for connections across emergent themes. Once these themes started to emerge, I began searching for connections across these themes (i.e., themes that could potentially be sub-themes of the major topics at hand). For example, the majority of participants mentioned that their partner’s incarceration was a shock and that their trust was broken. Instead of having two separate themes for these experiences, I listed “shock” as the major theme as this was one that came up in every single interview and listed “broken trust” as a sub-theme of that as it was another response to their partner’s incarceration.

Moving to the next case. Once connections were made, I would bracket the previous case in order to move on to the next one with an open mind. According to research conducted by Thomas and Sohn (2023), qualitative researchers must take additional steps to ensure an unbiased phenomenological attitude. This process included journaling after each participant’s interview. I would take personal notes about what I had learned, what surprised me in the participant’s response, and any emotional response that came up as well. This journal was deleted at the end of the day but served as a way to clear my mind before interacting with the next participant so that I was interviewing without bias.

Looking for patterns across cases. I then started searching for patterns across the cases. There were five major themes that came up with each of the eight participants with sub-themes helping to support the point each theme was making. The major themes that were chosen were those that came up in each interview as a result of the participants’ partners being incarcerated.

Taking interpretations to deeper levels. Finally, I took the interpretations to a deeper level by including my analysis of the data based on my own lived experiences and my experiences as both a counseling student and counselor.

Table 2. Themes
Incarceration was a shock (Theme #1)

The first theme, *Incarceration was a Shock*, refers to the participants’ initial reactions to the incarceration of their significant partner and coming to understand that their partner had potentially committed a crime. Some words that came up in regards to this topic were “shock,” “surprise,” and “disappointment.” These feelings were a shared experience for all participants whether they had an idea that “something was going on” before the incarceration of their partner or not. Participant #1, who was engaged at the time of his partner’s incarceration said:

I was very angry when I found out. She had a job...she had steady income from her job. And you’re going to commit a crime of this magnitude knowing fully well what the end result might be. She still did it anyway. I don’t have a word to describe the disappointment I felt when I found out.

Participant #2, who has been in a significant relationship for three years shared feelings of “confusion” and “disbelief.” When asked about her initial response to hearing her partner had been arrested, she responded with:

I was like...how do I even deal with this?
Participant #3, who is also in a significant relationship with her incarcerated partner, expressed feelings of “surprise,” “doubt,” and “hurt.” She said:

I was actually very surprised because I doubted that he would actually do something like this…something to hurt us. So, I would say I was disappointed because I was worried about a child having to grow up knowing that her dad had not been so straightforward…knowing that her dad would not be a part of her life. So, I would say it was a really hard pill to swallow.

When Participant #4, who was married to her partner at the time of his arrest, was asked about her reaction, she said:

It (partner’s arrest/incarceration) came as a shock to me because I wasn’t expecting it. It made me a little bit withdrawn…We kind of took a break so there was no contact for some time…So, when I found out, it was a big shock to me.

Participant #6, who was in a significant relationship, said of her response to the trauma of witnessing her partner’s arrest:

I would say it was a big shock because I didn’t believe he would do anything to actually break the law…I didn’t believe someone who always comes to our worship place would actually do something like that…I was very, very surprised. I cannot forget that day because we were together and then suddenly I’m hearing the cops saying that he’s under arrest so that was actually the worst shock of my life…I still reminisce back on that incident. It still flashes through my eyes like it happened yesterday. I was very, very disappointed. It was very, very scary. I cried like a baby because I just didn’t know what to do. I was just there, powerless.

Participant #7, who had also been in a significant relationship, said:
It was a really big shock. My partner is someone that loves peace. He loves peace...he’s just jovial. So, when the arrest happened, I was really shocked. I was like, ‘how?’...So, I didn’t really see that coming at all...I’ve never seen us being apart from each other because our plan was always to raise a good home with love...bring our kids up together. So, it was really a shock to me. I’m still trying to put myself together just for the kids and other people around me...It’s the fact that, I don’t know...like, what led him into the crime? I really don’t know. I don’t know where it came from....I wondered if it was a false accusation. I didn’t think my husband would do anything like that...anything that would lead him to prison and all that. So, I’m still shocked at the news. That is just something that I’m really shocked about.

Participant #8, who had been married to her partner for over 20 years at the time of his arrest, said this about her husband being accused of a crime:

This was absolutely (a shock). When he was arrested, I bailed him out almost immediately. And then we had the most hellish year of our lives trying to figure out what to do. So yeah, it was quite a shock.

There are two sub-themes which serve to give more insight to the participants’ experience of having their significant partner incarcerated. These include: *Before Incarceration, Things Were Good* and *My Trust Has Been Broken*.

**Before Incarceration, Things Were Good.** The first sub-theme describes the ways in which participants felt their lives were going with their partner prior to the “shock” and “disappointment” of incarceration. This sub-theme was included because it really highlighted the contrast of how they feel about their relationship post-incarceration. There is a common
experience of plans being made that had to change, feelings of trust and openness that dissipated, and undoubtable love.

Participant #1 said of his relationship with his fiancé prior to her incarceration:

So, I met my partner who is currently in prison while we were in high school.

After high school, I went to college in another state, but we still kept in touch. We got together when I finished college and were together for three years before she was arrested for credit card fraud…Before she went in, we had big plans but she made mistakes.

Participant #2 shared a description of the reasons she fell in love with her partner:

When I met my partner, it was love at first sight. We got along so fast and he was able to charm me.

Participant #3, who expressed feelings of closeness and plans of starting a family prior to incarceration, shared:

I would say it was very lovely…we had so much fun. We met at a very young age. We fell in love…and somewhere along the line, we decided to try things out to have a family together…Yeah, that was definitely a stronger relationship. We had a very close relationship.

Participant #4, who emphasized the trust she had for her partner before incarceration, said:

It (the relationship) was quite beautiful. We would hang out and do a lot of things together…he would share stories with me…there were no secrets between us. It was nice.

Participant #5, who described her relationship as “very happy,” said:
I would say we were in a very happy relationship. You know, I fell in love with him…I didn’t plan things to be this way.

Participant #6 shared that she had known her partner since childhood. She shared:

We were in love. We grew up in the same neighborhood going to the same worship place. It’s actually what brought us together. I found someone who would understand me and not discriminate because of who I am. I thought I found someone who loved me for who I am and not discriminate because I know that I have a lot of flaws.

Participant #7 described the level of trust she had with her partner:

We had an amazing relationship together….This year was supposed to make it the fifth anniversary for us, but unfortunately, he was incarcerated. We formed a relationship with respect, honesty, and open communication…We always made sure whenever we were mad at each other, we kind of resolved our issue. We never allowed it to, like, last for a long time because, you know, when it lasts for a long time, it’s going to result in something harmful or some end of the world…It’s just been an amazing time together.

Participant #8, who expressed that years before they had attended marriage therapy for different things, said:

Well, we had been married at this point for almost 23 years. And so we were married…we were pretty happily married. I mean, you know, there was some stuff going on that kind of led to all of this unexpectedly.
**My Trust Has Been Broken.** This sub-theme was included because it truly highlights how individuals felt as they went from self-identified “trusting,” “open,” and “honest” relationships to feeling as if the trust with and/or for their partner had been damaged.

Participant #1 shared that his partner may have doubts about his staying faithful while she was incarcerated. When asked about the effects incarceration has had on his relationship, he replied:

> Trust is very fragile and even if I trust her, she might not do the same.

Participant #2, who shared that trust was of utmost importance to her, said:

> You know, at first, I was like…there goes my trust…And what would make me leave now? If he wasn’t honest with me.

Participant #3 shared that she struggled with self-doubt and self-blame often. She said that she felt as if the two of them living separately allowed for her partner to hide more things from her. When asked about how his arrest and ultimate incarceration impacted her, she replied:

> I would say it (the arrest/incarceration of my partner) actually broke the trust in our relationship…You know, waking up one day and realizing that someone who you trusted so much turns out to be not that person. So, I would say I really tried a lot of times to forgive him and forgive myself for, I don’t know…Maybe I think I overlooked so many things that I shouldn’t have overlooked. Probably because I was in love with him. So, I got truly hurt along the line.

Participant #4 shared that her partner’s incarceration made her start to consider whether or not her partner had been dishonest with her in other ways. She expressed that she wished he would have come to her about the want/need to commit a crime so that she could have talked him out of it. Of incarceration’s impact on their relationship, she said:
I mean, if we had had a discussion about it (the crime), I would have understood but there was no discussion. I felt like there were more secrets to the relationship than this.

Participant #5 shared that she had concerns of the long-term effects that incarceration might have on her relationship with her partner. She shared that she worried about their trust even after incarceration since his crime was such a shock to her. Of the impact incarceration had on their relationship, she said:

When he does get out, it will be really hard for me to trust him again. So, I think that will be a very big problem because love is trusting. And when you don’t trust your partner, it might lead to bad stuff…I think in general, when someone you trust does something that you weren’t aware of, it’s hard to feel like you can trust them again.

My Mental Health has Suffered (Theme #2)

The second theme, My Mental Health has Suffered, refers to the emotional impact on participants of having an incarcerated romantic partner. Many participants shared that they experienced a range of emotions from “grief,” “depression,” “sadness,” and “anger.” While these feelings have been attributed to their partner’s incarceration, they have lingered long into their sentences. One participant (Participant #6) mentioned feelings of “hopelessness” at witnessing her partner being incarcerated in front of her with lingering flashbacks and those same feelings of hopelessness as she recalls that event. This could indicate the presence of a traumatic stress disorder.

When Participant #1 was asked about the way he felt when he thought about his partner’s incarceration, he responded:
There are some situations where I feel grief. It seems I lost someone because even though she might come back when she’s released, I actually don’t know how I’ll act around her… I actually feel a bit of grief thinking about the situation sometimes.

When discussing incarceration’s effects on Participant #3, she shared feelings of “depression” and that she felt as if she changed as a person entirely. Participant #3 reported the following:

I would say it was really hard for me to deal with depression (as a result of my partner being incarcerated). You know, it’s so hard knowing someone you love…something you’ve known for so long… and then suddenly, he’s no longer there. Not that he’s dead, but he’s just missing. He’s missing in your everyday life. Because I would say, he used to be my reason why I wake up every day…. It makes you do crazy stuff… So, I would say I was depressed at first… Having an incarcerated partner has really changed a lot about me. I used to be an outgoing person, you know? I used to really have fun and now, I don’t think I can have that kind of fun again because I’m actually so broken.

Like Participant #3, Participant #5 also described feelings of depression and a sense of heaviness with thoughts about her incarcerated partner and their relationship. She said:

At the initial stage, I was very depressed, and I was yearning to actually see someone to talk to. But, I think a place where you actually go to talk your heart out… that would really help. I really wish I could actually see someone to talk to on a daily basis… someone who can actually help me to give me or remind me reasons why I shouldn’t give up on him because it’s really heavy on me… I’ve
looked for a therapist, because my mental health is really at stake here. It’s really broken me down.

Participant #6 shared that they have experienced feelings of depression and extreme sadness. She also reported feeling as if no one was there to care for her during this time of need. Her response to my question about the effects of her partner’s incarceration was:

I do feel very sad sometimes. I close myself indoors and cry and cry. I just don’t know what to do other than to cry because I feel I am not powerful enough…I am not strong enough to continue going through all of this. I feel even more powerless now than before…That’s why most times we usually undergo depression and since we don’t usually have anybody around us to continue caring for us, it’s actually very, very bad. We don’t have anywhere to go to talk to people about what we are going through and that really hurts a lot.

Participant #7 shared that she felt a multitude of things when thinking about her partner’s incarceration that surprised her. Her response was:

(There have) been sad and happy moments. Happy moments because sometimes I go visit him and I kind of bring back that happiness. But whenever I come back…it could be two days, I just go back to my shell. I feel lonely, sad, and angry. So, it’s just been a mixed feeling because I didn’t see that happening. I didn’t see that coming.

She also shared that even though she felt as if she had a supportive family, she still felt “down and sad.” This is what she had to say about her mental health:

I feel like, you know, that period when I was, like, down and sad…and it doesn’t mean I don’t have any support system from my family…Because some people
really don’t have many family members around them. So, I feel like when a therapist is around, they can, like, come through for that person…play the role of family for that person…At least support, advice, and try to, like, engage that person in one or two activities…tell them the necessary things to engage in what will make them not feel that bad and lonely. But for me, I think I got all the support I need. I don’t really need a therapist at this period, because I have people around me that can help me. For someone that doesn’t have anybody? I think a therapist would be, like, helpful for that person.

Participant #8 shared that though she was sad “most days” from missing her partner, she tried to see the silver lining in the situation at hand. She said:

If we just focus on the negative of it all the time, then I’d just be miserable all the time. And I could be mad and I could be upset and I could be angry at him for what his role in it was, but it doesn’t do anyone good.

The sub-theme, *There are No Resources*, was created because each participant shared the experience of feeling as if there were no resources available to them, especially those intended specifically for romantic partners of incarcerated individuals. Participant #8 shared that she felt as if the spouses of the incarcerated were the “Invisible Population” because no one seemed to care about their wellbeing while trying to continue their lives without their partners. Out of the eight participants, only one (Participant #8) was receiving services from a clinical mental health therapist. Whether this was because of a lack of awareness, lack of availability, or lack of resources to do so, it was made clear by the participants that they felt as if it would benefit the significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs) somehow.
There are No Resources. When participants were asked about resources available to them in their area, each one denied knowing of any local resources.

When asked about this, Participant #1 responded with:

Resources? Well, I haven’t seen any resources that could be helpful in this situation…I did find a subReddit for ex-cons…and I’ve been, I’ve been kind of looking at this resource and I’ve been trying to formulate ways I feel I might be able to cope when she eventually comes out of prison…I don’t know who these resources are being tied to. Maybe it’s for, um, the spouses of the people that have been incarcerated or the incarcerated inmate, um, themselves when they are out of the prison…probably the ex-con…In my own opinion, when, um, the ex-con gets out or is being released, what they should be suggesting most times should be therapy, um, on how, um, they should be able to cope with each other and there should be, like, a kind of a way to monitor behaviors. Um, and if there can be a way a therapist might be able to suggest, or um, improve the already built relationship they had before the, uh, the spouse was incarcerated…So, those are the kind of resources I would definitely appreciate if they were available to me…It’s something I definitely would want to, um, be involved with.

Participant #3 put it plainly when she said:

No, no, we don’t. We don’t really have anything like that here.

Participant #4, while expressing the need and importance of such resources, shared that she wasn’t aware of any community resources available to her. She said:

...just with family and friends.
Participant #5 shared that she had sought out a therapist but couldn’t find any in her area who specialized in working with the partners of incarcerated individuals. She said:

No, I don’t think there’s something like that here. It’s more like everyone is minding their business. No one wants to talk about anything…But I’ve really not…I don’t really know because I usually just stay on my own, you know, closed down. And I don't want people to talk about stuff like that. And I’ve looked for a therapist…I haven’t really seen anyone around…especially someone who deals with cases like this…not just the mental health, but, you know, support groups for people whose partners are incarcerated.

Participant #6 also expressed the need for such resources, but sadly shared that no one really made the time for the significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs). She responded with:

No, everybody has their own problems so I don’t think anyone would make time for people like us…If I had a community like that, I would really, really love to attend and make more friends…knowing that you have people around you who support you, it would really, really help you to also build self-determination and to know you’re not alone in this journey…I do wish there were more resources like that.

Finally, Participant #8, the only participant receiving clinical mental health treatment, shared:

We go to this pretty big church…and they hooked me up with the guy who does prison ministry but it’s like, you’re not helping any families. So it’s like, I appreciate what you’re doing for the guys, but there is nothing for any family members…So, I would say no…Although, there is a program…that they do for
the guys inside. It’s like a weekend for people like women whose spouses or kids are incarcerated but they only have it like once a year.

I Feel Isolated (Theme #3)

The third theme, I Feel Isolated, refers to the experiences of the significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs) in feeling as if they have nowhere and nobody to turn to. Many of them expressed feelings of loneliness or abandonment by friends and family upon hearing about their partner’s incarceration. This isolation, for some of the participants, came as a complete surprise as they felt as if they had good relationships with these individuals while others, Participant #6 for example, felt as if their loved ones had been warning them before this that their partner wasn’t good for them.

This is what Participant #1 had to say about the challenges he had experienced:

It’s not been easy on me, because I’ve been kind of lonely. There are so many life challenges I’ve been facing and there is little to no support I have had. There is nobody I could share my day with or talk to. There is no emotional support I have had since she has been incarcerated. So, I feel like ever since she’s been incarcerated, there aren’t many people I can talk to about this.

Participant #3 said:

It made me feel lonely…and devastated, I would say…I’m so closed off from people because I don’t want to get judged. I don’t want someone judging me on my predicament.

Participant #4 shared similar feelings and said:

I mean if I treat myself differently because my partner is incarcerated, other people will also treat me differently. So, I consciously try to put on a smiling face
and you know, act normal…like we are living a normal life. But I don’t tell other people.

Participant #5 shared her feelings of frustration related to all of her friends and family turning their backs on her after her partner’s incarceration. She said:

So, I just..I just try to stay closed up to myself….And that has really f***ed me up. I don’t have friends or anyone by my side because everybody was like, they told me, they told me. So, I’m just here alone.

Participant #6 shared details of her mother disowning her following the incarceration of her partner because she had warned the participant early on about her partner’s behaviors. Her response was:

(My mother) refused to take my calls for the past three months. I haven’t really spoken to her because she warned me… I am very disappointed in my partner because it made me lose my family member’s love for me. I didn’t even travel home recently because I was scared of people judging me…Everyone is always discriminating against me and it made me not want to talk to anybody. It made me just want to stay on my own and not want anything to do with anybody…I really wish I had people around me who would talk to me…who would make me feel at home…who would actually make me feel like I belong in the community but nobody is doing that right now.

Participant #7 shared that she felt as if people assumed she was a bad person as well because of the criminal activities of her partner. She also talked about how her suddenly becoming the “breadwinner of (her) family” kept her busier and less likely to interact with, or try to meet, other people. She said:
It (incarceration) has really done a lot of things to me because sometimes it makes me, like, go back to my shell. You know, people don’t really want to associate with you because they feel like you’re a partner to someone that’s incarcerated. He has criminal records, so you must be bad too. So, it kind of makes you feel like you’re isolated. Even sometimes, you just have things like you’re automatically the breadwinner of your family. So, you try to cater to your family’s needs and pay taxes and all that. So, when you come back from work, you get so tired…Because you know that as you leave home and you come back, everything still remains the same…no one to assist you in the house chores and all of that.

Participant #8 shared that she and her husband went from knowing and interacting with many members of their community to feeling as if they had little to no support. She responded with:

So it’s hard and it is lonely…I think something that I’ve really, really had a hard time with was, I mean, people…you tell someone that your husband is in prison and all of a sudden, they’re judging you. I think we (spouses of the incarcerated) are just the invisible population in this whole thing. I think that there are more people who choose not to say something because it’s like when someone’s kid dies, you don’t know what to say so you say nothing. But, in turn, you’re kind of hurting that person because they want to talk about it. They feel like you’re not there. So, that’s kind of how I feel in some cases because he’s all I want to talk about. But people don’t ask and then you don’t want to be the person who brings it up. But there is definitely a strange level of grief. Like, you know, because he’s
gone right now and you can’t see him…it’s just the grief associated with him not being there and no one wanting to talk about it.

This theme includes two sub-themes: No one understands and Keep it to yourself. These sub-themes were grouped out of the main theme based on the experiences mentioned by participants of feeling as if they were all alone and no one really cared so they stopped reaching out about their problems.

No One Understands. Something that participants mentioned over and over again in their interviews was that they all felt as if no one truly understood what they were experiencing. They shared the belief that unless you had walked in their shoes and had someone you loved behind bars, others would never truly get it. The participants reported the following:

Participant #1, whose fiancé is incarcerated in a different state and who often diverts questions about her from family members, shared that:

Nobody can really understand unless they’ve been through this sort of thing. So, it feels like you don’t have emotional support…That’s how I feel.

When the topic of mutual understanding came up with Participant #4 to assess whether or not she felt as if people there understood her experiences, she said:

I get some understanding (from discussion boards), but not a hundred percent understanding.

Participant #5, who felt as if everyone she once considered a friend blamed and judged her for her commitment to her incarcerated partner, expressed the following:

I would say…nobody really understands me because I’m like…I really want to talk to people about it, but I’m just afraid of being misjudged and stuff like that.

Participant #7, who has children with her incarcerated partner, said:
I don’t think anyone can understand me. Like, apart from my family members, I don’t think outsiders can really understand what I’m going through. But some of them (social media support page members), they are even throwing shade at you. Like, ‘oh, your husband is this or that. He has a criminal record and all that.’ So, they don’t really feel what it’s like for you. Like, they don’t really understand what I’m going through. It’s only those that are closer…that are very, very close to you that can put themselves in your shoes. But outside of that, they even mock you. They even, like, make jest of you and others. They don’t want to, like, isolate with you. Yeah, they just feel like you just have this stigma around you. So, they don’t want to mingle with you. So, I guess everybody has their own way of thinking.

Participant #8 shared that because of her disbelief in her husband’s criminal accusations, she often feels as if she doesn’t belong even in discussion forums created specifically for partners of the incarcerated. She said:

Sometimes, I just find it easier to just be quiet. Sometimes, people ask questions and I’ll just, you know, tell them what I know…but I haven’t met anyone that I could share everything with…Whether it’s because I don’t open up or because I feel like I don’t belong…Who could possibly understand this, you know?

**Keep it to Yourself.** Most of the participants shared that they eventually, through self-isolation and feeling as if no one understood or supported them, started to keep details regarding their partners’ cases or incarceration to themselves.

Participant #1 shared that he never talked to coworkers, friends, or family members (aside from his mother and brother) about his fiancé’s incarceration. He shared the following:
I haven’t opened up to anyone about my partner being incarcerated because if they all know, I feel it might have some kind of impact on the way they look at me.

Participant #5, who feels as if her family has rejected her because of her choice to stay with her incarcerated partner, said:

I actually try to keep it private because I’m afraid of being judged and mocked. I don’t want anyone laughing at my predicament. So, I try to stay on my own and not try to talk to anyone.

Participant #7 shared that her silence on the matter of incarceration had more to do with her children’s ages (1 and 2) and not so much what others might think. She said:

I don’t really tell (our kids) about this. I don’t want them to have that notion. I just keep it within just me and my husband and then other people. I think they are still too young to, like, know about something like that. So, I kind of avoid it.

**Having Support is Important (Theme #4)**

The fourth theme, Having Support is Important, was created based on the shared lived experiences of the research participants. All eight participants described the importance of having access to some sort of support system while their significant/romantic partner was incarcerated. Five of the eight participants who were interviewed shared that family members (even if just one) had supported them while others appreciated support in the form of close friends.

When discussing support systems, Participant #1 admitted that he would often change the subject or answer vaguely if family members extending beyond his mother and brother asked about his incarcerated fiancé. His description of this experience is as follows:
My mom knows about the situation and I think my brother so those are the family members that know about the situation. Apart from that, I don’t think any extended family knows the situation even though some of them might ask me ‘Oh, how is your partner?’ I always say ‘she’s fine’ and I try to play it cool. So they don’t even bother to make more inquiries.

Participant #1 also found some support through participation in online discussion forums, such as a “subReddit for ex-convicts.” This is what he had to say about the online communities of which he was a member:

I was able to join the ex-convict subReddit where most of the people that have been incarcerated come to share their experiences and the partners of people that were incarcerated come and share their experience…I’ve been kind of looking at this resource and I’ve been trying to formulate ways I might be able to cope when she eventually comes out of prison. But then some of those things are quite unpredictable because you need to actually experience some of this situation for you to know the best remedy you can use in tackling some of the problems.

Participant #3 shared that though her circle was small, she felt supported by the people still in her life after her partner’s incarceration. She shared:

I actually have a friend and my mom. She helps me at times…So, it’s just me, my child, my mom, and a few friends that we (my partner and I) both know.

Participant #4, who is married to her incarcerated partner, has found comfort in video calls with her friends and family. She shared the following:

I have friends around me. Most of my friends aren’t really close to me..within my area…so it’s mostly on the phone and video conference calls. I speak mostly with
my friends and sometimes, I engage my family into the discussion and we get to hear their opinions and solutions. They tell me ‘it’s not the end of the world.’

Participant #5 shared that she often feels as if she’s the only support she has. Her experience is as follows:

Since I’m the only one that’s got to support myself. So, I just try to stay strong for myself…And sometimes stay strong for him…It kind of seems like everyone (in my family) has rejected me because they were like ‘we told you.’ So, I feel nobody’s really there for me to talk to. I just try to keep myself together and hope someday everything goes back to normal.

Participant #6 shared that her sister was the only person who stuck by her side as a support. She said that her sister, along with her “worship center,” kept her strong. She shared:

I only had one sister who attended the same fellowship with me. During that time, she was actually the only one who wanted to stick around and keep on encouraging me, telling me that it was going to be okay.

Participant #7 shared that raising children alone after her partner’s incarceration had been difficult on her, so she was incredibly grateful for the support of her family and friends who would often work hard to fill the “gap” left behind by his incarceration. She said this of a support system:

Yeah, my family actually. They are really, really supportive. Sometimes, when they come back from work, they just come to my house to keep me company. They bring their kids to play together and just have a good time together. Then my friends…they are really amazing. They really come through for me, call every day to make sure I don’t feel that gap…(they) just cover that gap he left. So, they’re
always there for me…my family, my husband’s family…they try to support in their own little way…It’s really nice of them.

Participant #7 also said the following about her support system:

So, my family members knew that this was going to really affect me. That was why they came in full force to support me. They knew that I would be, like, lonely and all that.

Participant #8 shared examples of how others had shown her and her husband support after he was arrested and his charges were made public. This participant, whose husband was a respected member of their community, had the following to say about their support system after his incarceration:

Both of our families completely support him and us…his sister won’t talk to him…she read all the court documents and made a decision…I’ve had a few people, random people, reach out to me and say ‘I’m praying for you guys’.

**My Spirituality Has Helped.** This sub-theme was pulled from the major theme regarding support because several participants mentioned their faith and spirituality as something that assisted in their ability to move forward and stay strong. Some participants even shared that their partner’s incarceration was what led them to discovering their faith.

Participant #1 was one of the participants who never had a strong faith until his fiancé was incarcerated. He reported that they spent a lot of their phone calls revisiting what they had read in their Bibles that week. He shared the following about his discovery of faith and how it helped him to feel connected in his relationship:

But ever since she’s been incarcerated, I’ve been getting closer to God. I’ve been doing much more religious activities. I go to church and attend church services
regularly just to get closer to God….There was a time we were talking and she
told me she always attended the religious gatherings in the facility. So, I’ve been
doing this outside as a way of reconnecting even though we can’t do this
(together). But, I feel connected to her because she might be in there while I’m
going to my religious activities also. I feel like it’s a connection we’ve been
sharing.

Participant #3 has relied on her spirituality in a different way. Instead of feeling as if it
connects her to her partner more, she shared that her faith is what has kept her in the relationship
during incarceration. In her interview, she shared that she felt God was the reason she had stayed
because if He didn’t want her to stay with her partner, He would have told her to leave. She had
the following to say:

I wish something would have broken us up earlier…But I would say…since God
knows everything..He would have shown me a sign to break up with him and stay
on my own.

Participant #6 shared a much deeper relationship with her faith as it related to her
relationship with her incarcerated partner. The participant shared that earlier on (soon after her
partner’s incarceration), she felt as if she couldn’t go on with living. She shared that if it weren’t
for God’s grace, she wouldn’t have found the strength to not only move forward, but to forgive
her partner’s criminal actions as well. She said:

I just prayed to God to provide someone who would actually understand me and
then finally when the person is here, the person ends up going to jail without
me…It’s only God who kept me alive because I was down at the initial stage…I
just found solace with God because I constantly went to pray and it’s really helped
me a lot…God loves us and we should love ourselves so I know it is just God’s love and support because I know He does support me in ways that I may not see. I am still grateful to Him…I just ask God to give me the grace to be able to forgive him and to be able to love him 100% again.

Participant #7, in her interview, shared that she felt that God was a major support for her in addition to her family members. She shared that prayer allowed her to feel relief and encouragement when thinking about her relationship with her incarcerated partner. She said:

I think He (God) plays a role, too, in, like, supporting me. When I pray, I get this relief that God is going to help us through all of it… Sometimes, I go to my pastor, a church member, or my reverend…Sometimes, I tell him about some of the things I face that I really can’t tell my family people…he gives me encouragement…Sometimes, he just speaks the word of God to me.

Participant #8 shared that she and her husband had been going to church together with their two children before he was incarcerated. She had the following to say about her spirituality:

Because we do believe in God, we believe that this is happening for a reason.

I’m Sticking it Out (Theme #5)

The theme, I’m Sticking it Out, is in reference to the reasons for which the significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs) stay with their partners. Some participants even shared that they had family members or friends encouraging them to leave the relationship so they felt additional pressures beyond others mentioned so far. While some feel motivated to stay in their relationship because of promises they made to their incarcerated partner, others say that love alone has been enough for them to stick around.
Participant #1 shared that his word to his fiancé was important to him; he felt as if he owed it to her to see her through her incarceration before he made a decision about whether or not he wanted to stay with his partner. In fact, he shared that her actions beyond incarceration would serve as determining factors for him (i.e., her ability to avoid committing another crime, her willingness to seek out and receive help, etc). He had the following to say:

To be honest, I don’t feel much energy in the relationship but I’m still holding out nevertheless because before she was sent to jail, I made a promise that I would try my possible best to keep my word. When she comes out, we’ll probably start a life together and kick off things.

Participant #1 also said:

I’ve given her my word…I feel it’s a bond and I need to actually keep that bond.

Participant #2 shared that as crazy as it sounded, she stayed with her partner because of how much she loved him. She also shared that if it weren’t for love and their family, she didn’t think she could do it. In her interview, she said:

You know…it’s not easy to keep waiting for people, but I love him. Love keeps me waiting. Yeah, I know it’s crazy…Love’s crazy, right? The other thing is the support of his family…that’s why I’m here.

Participant #3 reported that the fact that she and her incarcerated partner had a daughter together influenced her decision to stay heavily. Aside from their child and not wanting her to grow up with a single parent, she shared that re-building their trust and open communication since his incarceration was also a motivating factor. This is what she had to say on the topic:
I’m actually trying to pull myself together for myself and my daughter…I mean, we are still working…we are still working towards being better. So now it’s a bit above average, but not like 100% there yet. I mean, if there’s more genuine trust and openness in the relationship…pouring out your feelings and your intention of yourself…I mean, you know, just being open. I think this might work out really well…I’m still hanging in there.

Participant #5 also felt as if love was keeping her in the relationship. This participant shared that the experiences of her partner’s incarceration had broken her trust completely so she was relying on her love for him alone to stay with him. She said:

Love has kept me in the relationship because I feel like he’s actually the only one that I’ve got. I think love kept us together. I would have said trust at an early stage, but I don’t really trust him now and I feel so sad about it…I just hope love is strong enough for me to wait for him.

Participant #6 shared that love had kept her in her relationship with her incarcerated partner because he was her first love. She openly discussed the difficulties of seeing individuals around her able to get married and move forward and feelings of frustration because she couldn’t have that. She said the following:

You see people getting married, you see people in love and then you just wish you could do that but then someone who you could do it with is not really there with you…Love has kept us together…That’s just it…my love for my partner because he’s actually the first person I fell in love with and I just don’t know how to move on without him.
Participant #7 shared that the “strong love” and “bond” she shared with her incarcerated partner helped her to stay in the relationship. Beyond these two motivating factors, the fact that they have children together has also influenced her decision. The participant shared that she wanted her children to know they were loved by two parents who stayed together. She said the following:

I do tell him that I’m always here for him, no matter what. We’re going to be waiting for him. We’ve always shared this strong bond. Like I said, we started off as high school lovers…We have always shared this strong love and all that. So, there’s something that tells me that I should just wait, that everything is going to come out well. It’s going to come true even with all these challenges. And then our kids (have kept us together) too. I don’t want them to experience single parents. And I want us to, like, grow, like, bring them together so they will experience what it means to be loved by both father and mother.

Participant #7 also shared that she felt overall that if she didn’t stay strong and couldn’t stay in the relationship, then nothing would be the same again. She shared that:

When it comes to my relationship, it’s still the same. I’m still trying to stand strong for him and for everybody. Because if I, like, lose that, that means that everything’s going to shatter and I don’t want that for my home. I want to be a solid home. So, I’m still strong. Yeah, I’m hoping that one day he’s going to come out from this whole situation.

One final thing that Participant #7 contributed to the theme of sticking it out was the promise of her partner eventually being released from prison. She shared that her family
members and friends would often tell her that she was too young to wait around for her partner, but she felt that visiting him helped to remind her of her reasons for staying. She said:

Sometimes people ask me ‘Why not just move on? The children need someone that is here to love them and all that. You’re still young. Why not just move on?’ Waiting for your partner when you don’t know when he’s going to come out…I just encourage myself that everything is going to be okay. When I visit my husband, I get his support. So, we kind of encourage each other, like, OK, let’s just stay strong for each other. He’s going to come out. So, that’s something that’s kept me going. And then the kids.

Participant #8 shared that she felt as if her husband was still her best friend. In her interview, she admitted that she didn’t believe he did what he was accused of doing so it made her more empathic to his situation. She said she couldn’t even imagine leaving his side because, to her, he was the same husband he had been before going to prison. She said the following:

There’s not even an hour that goes by in my life that I don’t want him home…I know he didn’t do what he’s in there for, so I have a lot more empathy. It’s not like he deserves to be there. We’re like best friends, so my best friend’s gone…but the fact is, this is what we’re dealing with and that’s why I stay…because, how do you turn…I would never turn my back on him if he’s no different than he was before he was arrested.

**I’m Keeping in Touch.** This sub-theme, *I’m Keeping in Touch*, emerged from the main theme of SPIs sticking it out for their incarcerated partners because visitations and communication served as additional motivators for staying. Though some were unable to visit their partner because of
prison policies, location, or financial reasons, they agreed that regular communication/contact helped them to feel close.

Participant #1 shared that he lived in a different state than the one his partner was incarcerated in. Despite the distance, he would visit the area often for work and made time to visit his fiancé in prison. Though he said he wishes he could visit more often, the prison at which she was incarcerated had policies in place that restricted any additional visitations. He reported the following:

What I feel will probably increase the satisfactions I have with this relationship is if I could have a way to be close to her. Every other week, I come to check up on her. But, I know it’s nearly impossible (to see her more often) because of the distance between us and because of the kind of policy that has been in place in the facility she’s being held…They don’t allow much visitation to the facility, which has really hindered so much care that I could have provided to her.

Participant #3 shared that regular communication with her incarcerated partner helped her to “hold on a little longer” to the hope of things working out between the two of them when he got out. She said:

I actually think communicating with him regularly kind of gives me hope…kind of gives me hope of wanting to hold on a little longer, because he talks and speaks to me in some kind manners…saying that he’s sorry and stuff like that.

Participant #5 shared that her job made it difficult for her to talk to her partner as often as she would like. She discussed the negative emotions that came up as a result of talking to him on the phone. Her support system often encouraged her to cut off all communication because of this, but she disagreed. She had the following to say:
We get to talk on the phone, but I’m usually a very busy person. But, I try to make out any of my free time to talk to him. Although I’ve received advice from a few people to, you know, stop communicating with him. Constant communication stirs up feelings, but I just can’t help but to keep communicating with him.

Participant #7 shared that she was able to visit her incarcerated partner often but that it was hard to discuss anything beyond surface level topics as prison staff was always present during their visits. Below is what she shared:

I go sometimes three times a week, but it’s not every time they allow you to see him. And sometimes when you go there, they (prison staff) are always there…everything is open, nothing is private…your messages, your calls. They put everything under the supervision of the officers there….So it’s not really a private place.

Participant #8 reported that if her husband was closer to her in proximity, she might visit him more often. She shared that she didn’t feel as obligated to visit because of the distance, though she knew he would appreciate it. She said:

Of course he wants visitors and I want to see him, but I don’t feel obligated when he’s that far away…We still talk on the phone everyday and I think that’s probably something that gives me more satisfaction. I can talk to him every day and I can email him. That makes it a little bit better for me…it feels like at least the closest to normal it can be.

**Theoretical Alignment**

As mentioned in Chapter three: Methodology, all data was analyzed through the lens of social constructivism. According to Boyland (2019), social constructivism postulates that
learning and social context are inseparable. This concept, established by Vygotsky, proposes that all knowledge is a function of social and mental collaborations. In other words, each individual has a mental construct of their worldview based on their cognitive processes (i.e., I think there are lots of bad people in the world; therefore, I must stay away from others) and life experiences (i.e., I got through college on my own; therefore, I don’t need anyone else to help me). Individuals then use these thoughts and experiences as a way to construct their knowledge of ways to interpret the world around them. (Boyland, 2019).

With this study in mind, I was able to interview individuals from a specific population (i.e., significant partners of the incarcerated) and try to understand their social constructs based on their experiences with having an incarcerated partner. I was then able to reframe, or re-construct, participants’ experiences into meaning making. I did this through data collection (i.e., semi-structured interviews) and analysis (i.e., reading and re-reading, initial note-taking, looking for themes, and then looking for patterns) utilizing the seven steps of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis studies. Social constructivist data gathering and analysis seeks to elicit an understanding of how people have created knowledge constructs and how those constructs contribute to their understanding of society and the ways in which they think (Boyland, 2019).

Incorporating this lens, I was able to read through the transcripts obtained during interviews to identify themes and sub-themes that emerged that were representative of participants’ social constructs. These themes are representative of the social constructs the participants have created based on their understanding of society (i.e., I feel isolated; Nobody understands) from actual experiences (i.e., my friends and family turned their backs on me; I have to explain every detail to my therapist because she doesn’t understand prison terminology).
Another important thing to note here is that the incarceration of these participants’ partners caused them to experience a shift in their pre-existing social constructs. For example, all eight of the participants shared that they were in a loving and trusting relationship before incarceration and after their partner was arrested, their trust had been broken. Another example includes a specific participant’s lived experience: Their partner had served in the military and was an outstanding member of society up until their arrest. Once their partner was arrested, it felt as if the entire community turned their back on who they once considered to be a “hero.”

**Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to cover the themes that emerged from the data following participant interviews. There were five major themes in total (Incarceration Was a Shock, My Mental Health Has Suffered, I Feel Isolated, Having Support is Important, and I’m Sticking it Out) and seven sub-themes (Before Incarceration, Things Were Good; My Trust Has Been Broken; There Are No Resources; No One Understands; Keep it to Yourself; My Spirituality Has Helped; and I’m Staying in Touch) that were developed as a result of the shared lived experiences of the significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs). These themes help to shed light on and gain more insight into the ways in which incarceration impacts the left-behind partners of incarcerated individuals. In the following chapter, a discussion will be held that shows how these key findings have clinical implications for counselors-in-training and counselors alike. It will also show future directions for research based on the limitations of this study.
Chapter Five: Discussion

Discussion of Themes and Connection to the Study

The overall purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs). The questions guiding the research were: 1) What are the lived experiences of significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs)? and 2) What are the SPIs’ perceptions of relationship satisfaction since their partner was incarcerated? As outlined in Chapter three: Methodology, I utilized the steps of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis which included reading and re-reading, taking notes, searching for emergent themes, and connecting the themes to existing research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to understand how incarceration had impacted not only their romantic relationships, but their relationship satisfaction as well.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, five main themes emerged from the data as a result of data analysis through the lens of social constructivism and the use of the seven steps representing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. These themes help to answer the two research questions guiding the study which included understanding the lived experiences of SPIs and how incarceration has impacted their satisfaction with their romantic relationship with their incarcerated partner. Below, each theme will be related back to what the pre-existing research has shown to be true related to the significant partners of the incarcerated (SPI) population.

Theme #1: Incarceration Was a Shock

According to Chui (2010), there is a three-phase process based on the ways in which SPIs respond to their partner’s incarceration. Those phases include: (1) coming to terms, (2) keeping in touch, and (3) surviving the sentence. The first phase relates to the theme Incarceration Was a Shock and aligns with Yeboaa et al.’s (2022) findings that showed that SPIs described their
partner’s arrest as a “shock” to both the offender and their families. According to pre-existing research, this response was due to their lack of awareness of their partner’s criminal activity (Chui, 2010; Yeboaa et al., 2022).

This theme came up in all eight participant interviews through the use of words such as “surprised” and “shocked” to describe their feelings that came up as a response to their partner’s arrest and/or incarceration. Many of them expressed that they had “no idea” and felt as if they had a very “trusting relationship” before this happened. As a result of this shocking revelation, many participants shared that their partner’s arrest then led to a break in their trust for their partner. Because of these revelations, two sub-themes were developed from the major one: *Before incarceration, things were good* and *My trust has been broken*. Though some shared that communication was an important component in them rebuilding trust, many shared in their fear that there were other secrets they hadn’t discovered yet or that their partner might do more things to break their trust upon release.

**Theme #2: My Mental Health Has Suffered**

Social and emotional losses were also an impact mentioned in pre-existing research (Einat et al., 2015; Tadros et al., 2022). All eight participants mentioned feelings of “sadness,” “anger,” and “disappointment” when reflecting on the ways in which incarceration had impacted their relationships. Many of them shared that because of their lack of resources and support, they had to work more and thus limit their time/ability to speak with their incarcerated partners which fueled the original feelings of sadness, anger, and disappointment.

A major topic in the research related to the left-behind families of incarcerated individuals is psychosocial losses (Arditti, 2012) that result in ambiguous, or disenfranchised grief (Arditti, 2012; Bailey, 2018) that causes SPIs to isolate from others (Bailey, 2018). All
eight participants mentioned feelings of “grief” over losing their partner to incarceration. Also, there was a common theme among participants in which they described feeling like no one could possibly understand the grief they were experiencing. Because of these overwhelming feelings of “depression,” “grief,” and “disappointment,” that “no one understood,” participants felt as if they had to isolate themselves from others after their partners were incarcerated.

When discussing the topic of mental health with the participants, it is important to consider what the research says about SPIs and the toll their mental health takes after the incarceration of their partner. According to the research, SPIs are faced with a great deal of mental health complications (Einat et al., 2015; Bailey, 2018; Wildeman et al., 2019; Tadros et al., 2022; Yeboaa et al., 2022). These complications include feelings of helplessness, shame, and low self-esteem (Bailey, 2018; Yeboaa et al., 2022). Arditti (2012) found that SPIs are also at a higher risk of developing stress disorders especially if they witnessed their partner’s arrest (Yeboaa et al., 2022).

Participant #1 used the following words to describe his mental health state following his fiancé’s incarceration: “I actually feel a bit of grief thinking about the situation.” Participant #3 said the following: “I would say it was really hard for me to deal with depression…I used to be an outgoing person…I used to really have fun and now, I don’t think I can have fun again because I’m actually so broken.” Participant #5 shared that she felt “very depressed.” Participant #6 shared details of her lived experiences such as feeling “very sad sometimes” and closing herself up inside her home so she could “cry and cry.” She also mentioned having feelings of “depression.” Participant #7 shared that she felt “lonely, sad, and angry.”

In addition to these examples, Participant #6 shared that she often experiences “flashbacks” to the day her partner was arrested in front of her which could be indicative of a
stress disorder as Yeboaa et al. (2018) referred to (mentioned earlier on in this section). Though only one of the eight participants shared that they were receiving clinical mental health treatment from a therapist, no diagnoses were shared or discussed in this study to protect the privacy of the participants. This is merely a reflection of what pre-existing data shows and how that has shown up in this study’s data as well.

**Theme #3: I Feel Isolated**

Pre-existing research has shown that the left-behind family members of incarcerated individuals suffer from a wide variety of effects, such as stigmatization, a loss of relationships, etc (Chui, 2010; Arditti, 2016; Taylor, 2016; Bailey, 2018; Brown & Gibbons, 2018; Song et al., 2018; Condry & Minson, 2021; Lee & Wildeman, 2021; Tadros et al., 2022; Yeboaa et al., 2022). In my interviews with participants for this study, I found this to be the case. All eight participants spoke to the stigmatization of having an incarcerated partner through their experiences of “keeping to (themselves),” “staying quiet,” or simply not sharing details of their partner’s case. Almost all of the participants (seven of the eight) mentioned feeling as if their friends and/or families turned their back on them once their partners were incarcerated. The reasons behind this were different across the board. For Participant #8, it was because of the severity of her partner’s crime. For others, such as Participants #5 and #6, it was because their family members had warned them earlier on about their partner’s intentions and/or behaviors.

Bailey (2018) found that many left-behind partners struggle with feelings of criminalization as if others hold them just as accountable for their partner’s crime as their partner. I found this to be true through my discussions with participants. Participant #7 spoke to this experience directly when she said she feels that others think: “He has criminal records, so you must be bad too.” According to Vickers & Rutter (2018) and Yeboaa et al. (2022), the
romantic partners of incarcerated individuals are referred to as “passive victims” due to their association with the individual alone (Burkholder et al., 2020). Participant #8 referred to spouses of incarcerated individuals as the “invisible population” because she felt as if once her partner was incarcerated, nobody cared about what happened to her. She noticed that what limited resources were available were mostly for children of the incarcerated, not their significant/romantic partners.

Theme #4: Support Systems are Important

Based on the information gathered from interviews in this study, all but one participant (Participant #5) found support within their family. The majority of these individuals shared that they felt comfortable talking to their mother or a sibling about the details of the case but felt more reserved with information when talking to extended family members. A few participants mentioned how their friends had stepped in to support them through their partner’s incarceration while others shared that they turned to their faith for support. All eight participants shared that they felt a lack of support from their community or church since their partner was arrested.

In addition to the support (or lack thereof by friends, family, and the community), Eller et al. (2023) found that the more support individuals felt they were receiving from their partners, the more satisfied they were in their relationships. Many participants spoke to this phenomenon by sharing details of how their partners were “apologetic” about their crimes, “patient” with participants as they dealt with the anger and frustration of their partner’s incarceration, “grateful” to their commitment, and “kind” in their communication with the SPIs. Timmons et al. (2023) found that couples who experienced lower levels of relationship satisfaction fed off of their partners’ negative emotional states and were more likely to fight than more relationally satisfied couples. For example, Participant #5 shared that communicating with her incarcerated partner
would usually “stir up feelings” and referred to her lack of trust for her partner as something that “might lead to bad stuff.”

Theme #5: I’m Sticking it Out

As mentioned in the Literature Review for this study, Chui (2010) found that SPIs often experienced a three-phase process after the incarceration of their loved ones. These steps include: (1) coming to terms, (2) keeping in touch, and (3) surviving the sentence. As mentioned earlier on in this chapter, the first phase “coming to terms” describes the ways in which romantic partners experience and deal with the shock of their partner’s incarceration and other consequences that come as a result of it (i.e., broken trust, accepting that things aren’t the way they were before, etc.).

The second phase, “keeping in touch” lines up with the theme of I’m Sticking it Out as it refers to the SPIs’ lived experiences and willingness to participate in visitations, communication methods, or both. The final phase, “surviving the sentence,” also aligns with this theme as it shows how participants’ lived experiences of dealing with the mental health effects of their partner’s incarceration, the isolation that comes along with it, their support systems (or lack thereof) affects their ability to stay hopeful during their partners’ sentences.

Finally, the research highlights the specific experiences of left-behind romantic partners who are also co-parenting. Only three of the eight participants in this study shared that they had one or more children with their incarcerated partner. Chui (2010) found that many mothers deemed prison visits as “unsuitable for children” so they avoided bringing them to visitations in general. This fact seemed to stand true in this study based on the ages of the children in question. A study conducted by Einat et al. (2015) found that 57% of male inmates never had visits from their children and only 25% had weekly communication. The three participants who were
co-parenting (Participants #3, #7, and #8) shared their experiences in their semi-structured interviews. Participants #3 and #7 both reported having young children and shared that they didn’t like to bring their children along. Participant #3 said she only brought her young child occasionally at the request of her incarcerated partner. Participant #7 shared that she didn’t talk about her partner’s incarceration at all with her children because they were “too young to understand.” Participant #8 described being very open with her two teenagers and including them in both communication and visitations.

**Additional Areas of Interest**

The research also shows that financial strain is a major component of surviving beyond a significant partner’s incarceration (CITE). Two of the eight participants (#7 and #8) shared specific examples of the impact of financial stress such as the sudden switch to the role of “breadwinner” for their families. Participant #7 discussed how she had to work more often and longer hours and take care of household duties once she was home so this ultimately affected her social life. She shared that becoming the breadwinner of her family meant less time to do enjoyable things. These two participants also happened to have (a) child(ren). Participant #8 spoke to the fact that if she wasn’t so “financially stable” on her own, she likely wouldn’t be able to afford the daily phone calls and alternative forms of communication (i.e., video calls, emails, etc.).

Participant #8 was the only White participant and had been in her relationship the longest. Interestingly enough, the ways in which incarceration impacted her relationship satisfaction closely resembled the experiences of the other seven participants. Though the length of the relationship differed, the lived experiences (themes of this study) of feeling shocked at their partner’s arrest, feeling as if their mental health had suffered, experiencing isolation, losing
support systems while finding support in other ways, and sticking it out through the use of communication and visitation were all echoed by this participant.

**Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

A major strength of this study was the researcher’s experiences with clinical mental health counseling (i.e., active listening skills, genuine empathy, etc.) and interactions with the incarcerated population (i.e., both from personal and professional standpoints). To maintain integrity and ensure that these identities didn’t interfere with the collection of data from interviews and the participants’ lived experiences were being reflected in the data, techniques listed in Chapter three were utilized. Technology also served as a strength in this study as participants were recruited via social media which allowed for a wider population pool. Participants and the researcher were able to meet through the use of a confidential video platform to complete interviews which led to more comfortability for participants. Another strength to be noted would be the trustworthiness and rigor dedicated to this study. Following lengthy, detailed interviews (e.g., no less than 45-75 minutes long), participants were provided with their transcripts and invited to participate in member-checking. Though no participants responded to this request, it was an additional step taken by the researcher to ensure rigor. A final strength would be the number of interviews. As mentioned previously, Smith et al. (2009) recommends that six to eight participants be interviewed and, in this study, there were eight. These things combine all contributed to data triangulation which improves the rigor of this study.

The number of participants could be considered as a limitation of the study. There were only eight participants after rejecting two based on their MWI (met while incarcerated) status. Though this may be viewed as a potential limitation, interpretative phenomenological analysis
(IPA) methodology encourages in-depth semi-structured interviews with fewer participants than traditional qualitative studies. In fact, Smith et al. (2009) recommends between six and eight participants. This allows for more purposeful and careful selections and richer representations of the lived experiences of participants (Smith, et al., 2009).

On that same note, the participant qualifications contributed to limitations in this study. For one, only the age and race of the participant were recorded. It would be interesting to also have the age and race of their incarcerated partner to further tie it back to the existing statistical data about prison populations. The requirements didn’t allow for participation from individuals solely co-parenting with an incarcerated individual or those who met while their partner was incarcerated. Another limitation was that all participants were in a reported heterosexual relationship; no participants identified otherwise in their interviews, so the results may not reflect the experiences of someone identifying as being a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. One final limitation was that the demographic questionnaire did not include any questions about sexual orientation or location, both of which could provide more insight into participants’ lived experiences.

A final limitation to note is based on the use of the social media platform Reddit. Because I incorporated the use of this platform to recruit participants, it could have potentially skewed the age range of participants. As discussed in Chapter Four, most of this study’s participants were younger, and this could be due to the use of social media for recruitment. Beyond that, the forums in which I posted my flyer were intended to provide support to individuals in a relationship with someone who was incarcerated. This could have potentially skewed one of the study’s themes, “Having Support is Important” (e.g., the topic of support coming up in every
interview), since many of the participants were likely on that forum to seek out some form of support.

**Implications for Future Research and Clinical Practice**

The findings of this study contribute to the gap of knowledge focused specifically on the romantic partners of incarcerated individuals. The themes that emerged from this study speak to the ways in which counselors and counselor educators could be better prepared for their work with this population. It is clear that having a support system is of utmost importance for the significant partners of the incarcerated as well as feeling understood and heard, whether by a therapist or others in the community.

Seven of the eight participants described feeling “very sad,” “depressed,” “angry,” and “lonely.” For those who didn’t feel as if they had a strong support system (e.g., friends and/or family members with which they could discuss details of their incarcerated partner), they agreed that a therapist or group therapy would be beneficial to their healing. There was also a common theme of participants feeling as if “no one understood” what they were going through. One participant mentioned that though she had a therapist, she felt as if she had to stop and explain all of the lingo and logistics of incarceration when discussing her or her husband’s lived experiences. To her, this was an additional frustration because she wanted to be able to talk to someone who knew what she was talking about as well as validate her experiences. For counselors and counselor educators, this is a call to action to explore the potential of more training/education related to working therapeutically with not just the incarcerated population, but their romantic partners as well.
Continued Research

As mentioned in the Limitations of the study, participants/significant partners such as those co-parenting or those who met post-incarceration were not included in this study. A study focused primarily on the relationship satisfaction of individuals who met while one or both partners were incarcerated (MWI) would lead to even more knowledge and awareness when working with incarcerated populations in a clinical setting. Something to also consider in future studies is the sexual orientation and location of participants. In my demographic questionnaire, participants were not asked these questions, but both could really be useful when trying to understand their lived experiences better (i.e., do the challenges of being a member of the LGBTQIA+ community compound those associated with being in a romantic relationship with an incarcerated person; does visitation/communication look different at prisons located in different regions of the country).

Support Groups

The majority of participants (i.e., 7/8) shared that they would prefer an in-person form of support for partners of the incarcerated versus online discussion forums. Many discussed feeling “hesitant to share” details of their experiences online because of the anonymity of the other people that could be “there for the wrong reasons.” Participants stated that having a physical place to go where they could sit with others who had similar experiences would feel validating and would reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Community Resources

Data collected from interviews showed that none of the participants were aware of any resources available to them from the community. All eight participants agreed that this would be beneficial, especially those who had to assume the role of “breadwinner” after their partner was
incarcerated. Those who were actively involved in their church or “worship place” shared that they didn’t feel as if their church provided resources to them either. Something to be considered when advocating for the significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs) could be seeking out local resources (i.e., providing a list of resources specifically for SPIs) and encouraging the courts/jails/prisons to provide partners with better resources for managing life and the challenges that come with having a significant partner incarcerated.

**Conclusions**

The experience of having an incarcerated romantic partner is an incredibly challenging and isolating experience (Arditti, 2016; Bailey, 2018; Brown & Gibbons, 2018; Chui, 2010; Condry & Minson, 2021; Lee & Wildeman, 2021; Song et al., 2018; Tadros et al., 2022; Taylor, 2016; Yeboaa et al., 2022). The mental health toll it takes on the left-behind partners has the ability to lead to isolation and social withdrawal, especially for those who feel as if they have no access to resources and/or a support system. The research has shown that individuals who fall into the population of significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs) experience feelings of depression, anxiety, stress, guilt, shame, and grief (Arditti, 2012; Bailey, 2018; Einat et al., 2015; Tadros et al., 2022; Wildeman et al., 2019; Yeboaa et al., 2022).

To compound these factors, those who have children, those who experience a lack of support from family and friends, and those who witnessed their partner’s arrest are at an even higher risk of developing mental health disorders such as Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) or other major stress disorders (Chui, 2010; Arditti, 2012; Einat et al., 2015; Yeboaa et al., 2022). Because of their experiences of ambiguous loss, disenfranchised grief, isolation, and other challenges such as financial strain, participants agreed that having community resources and/or mental health therapy would benefit them greatly.
Currently, there is no requirement for counselor education programs to include training for work with family members of the incarcerated (Burkholder et al., 2020) and many participants in this study shared a desire to find someone (e.g., an individual or group) to go to who understood the specific challenges and barriers that came as a result of a loved one’s incarceration. Mental health counselors have specialized training to help the significant partners of the incarcerated (SPIs) to feel heard, understood, cared about, and advocated for. With that being said, counselor educators, counselors-in-training, and current counselors have a call to action to be better prepared for working with this population.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

For additional demographic information, participants were provided with a questionnaire via Qualtrics with the following questions:

**Demographic Information Questionnaire**

Thank you for your interest in this study. Please answer the following questions for descriptive and exploratory purposes.

1. How old are you?
   
   ______ years old

2. What is your gender?

   ____________________

3. With which racial category do you identify?
   
   a. American Indian or Alaska Native

   b. Asian

   a. Black or African American

   b. Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

   c. White

   d. Other _________

   e. Prefer not to share

4. Please describe your relationship status.

   a. Single

   b. In a significant relationship

   c. Engaged
d. Married

e. Divorced

f. Widowed

g. Other _______

5. How long have you been in a relationship with your incarcerated partner?

   a. ________

6. How long has your partner been incarcerated?

   a. ________
Appendix B: Informed Consent

All participants were provided with specific and understandable information pertaining to the research. My advertising flyer clearly stated my study’s purpose, duration, and participant expectations. I conducted communication via email following the completion of the Demographic Questionnaire as a way to screen for inclusion/exclusion criteria before moving forward. If participants met the inclusion criteria for the study, they were provided with an electronic copy of the informed consent form and it was reviewed in detail prior to the interview. This document is included below:
## Consent for Research Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Relationship Satisfaction for Significant Partners of the Incarcerated: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>
| Researcher(s) | Carrie Lund, The University of Memphis  
|                | Dr. Frances Ellmo, The University of Memphis |
| Researchers Contact Information | Carrie Lund, MS, P-LPC  
|                                | cecowart@memphis.edu |
|                                | Dr. Frances Ellmo, PhD  
|                                | feilmo@memphis.edu |

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The box below highlights key information for you to consider when deciding if you want to participate. More detailed information is provided below the box. Please ask the researcher(s) any questions about the study before you make your decision. If you volunteer, you will be one of about 15 people to do so.
Key Information for You to Consider

**Voluntary Consent:** You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this research is to understand the lived experiences of significant partners of the incarcerated. The hope is to better understand incarceration’s impact on relationship satisfaction for those in romantic relationships with incarcerated individuals.

**Duration:** It is expected that your participation will last at a minimum 45 minutes-1 hour for a Zoom interview.

**Procedures and Activities:** You will be asked to first schedule a Zoom meeting via a phone call. Then, you will be asked to attend said meeting that should last about 45 minutes-1 hour.

**Risk:** There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts involved with your participation.

**Alternatives:** Participation is voluntary, and the only alternative is to not participate.

Who is conducting this research?
Carrie Lund, of the University of Memphis, Department of Counselor Education and Supervision is in charge of the study. Her faculty advisor is Dr. Frances Ellmo. There may be other research team members assisting during the study. Neither member of the research team has a significant financial or conflict of interest related to the research.

What happens if I agree to participate in this Research?
If you agree you will be asked to describe your experiences as a romantic partner of an incarcerated person. Furthermore, you will be asked questions about your relationship satisfaction and how that may or may not have changed as a result of your partner being incarcerated.

You will participate in a recorded HIPAA-compliant Zoom interview during which you will be asked questions such as “Tell me about your relationship before incarceration.” For purposes of deeper understanding, this interview will be audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. This transcription will be shared with participants to ensure all information is accurate. If there are any questions or if the researcher would like further clarification, it is requested that you participate in a second interview so that your experiences are accurately represented. Throughout each of these interviews, you may skip any question that makes you uncomfortable and you are free to stop at any point.
time. Overall, there is a potential of participating in three interviews in total: the first interview during which research questions are asked and discussed, the second interview during which participants are asked to look over their transcript to ensure accuracy, and a third interview that is only necessary should there be any clarification needed.

**What happens to the information collected for this research?**

Information collected for this research will be used to understand the lived experiences of participants at a deeper level. All names will remain anonymous and pseudonyms/nicknames will be assigned for data collection. Your name will never be used in any published reports, conference presentations, etc. We may publish/present the results of this research, however, your name and any other identifying information will remain confidential. The data collected may also be used for future research.

**How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?**

We promise to protect your privacy and security of your personal information as best we can. Although, you need to know about some limits to this promise. Measures we will take include conducting Zoom interviews in a private setting and utilizing a HIPAA-compliant Zoom platform. All data will be stored on a password-protected computer in an encrypted folder using pseudonyms for participant information. The primary investigator, Carrie Lund, and her research team (listed below) will have access to the data. All data will be deleted within a year of collection OR once research is concluded.

Individuals and organization that monitor this research may be permitted access to inspect the research records. This monitoring may include access to your private information and any interview transcripts. These individuals and organization include the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and other committee members: Dr. Frances Ellmo, Dr. Patrick Murphy, and Dr. Melanie Burgess (The University of Memphis: Counselor Supervision and Education) and Dr. Leigh Holman (The Chicago Schools of Professional Psychology, at Dallas).

Research team members are required to report the following: if a team member suspects any form of abuse or neglect, or suicidal thoughts. TN Laws may require this suspicion be reported. In such case, the research team may be obligated to breach confidentiality and may be required to disclose personal information.

**What if I want to stop participating in this research?**

It is up to you to decide whether you want to volunteer for this study. It is also ok to decide to end your
participation at any time. There is no penalty if you decide to withdraw your participation. Your decision about participating will not affect your relationship with the researcher(s) or the University of Memphis.

Will it cost me money to take part in this research?

There are no costs associated with participation in this research study.

Will I receive any compensation or reward for participating in this research?

You will be compensated with a $25 Amazon gift card for taking part in this research.

Who can answer my question about this research?

Before you decide to volunteer for this study, please ask any questions that might come to mind. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Carrie Lund, at cecowark@memphis.edu or her faculty advisor, Dr. Frances Ellmo, at fellmo@memphis.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-2705 or email irb@memphis.edu. We will give you a signed copy of this consent to take with you.
STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have had the opportunity to consider the information in this document. I have asked any questions needed for me to decide about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions through the study.

By signing below, I volunteer to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been given a copy of this consent document. I understand that if my ability to consent for myself changes, my legal representative or I may be asked to consent again prior to my continued participation.

As described above, you will be audio recorded while performing the activities described above. Audio recordings will be used for transcription purposes only. Initial the space below if you consent to the use of audio recordings as described.

_____ I agree to the use of audio recording.

Name of Adult Participant  Signature of Adult Participant  Date

Researcher Signature (To be completed at the time of Informed Consent)

I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understand the information described in this consent and freely consent to participate.

Name of Research Team Member  Signature of Research Team Member  Date