

Title: Shared experiences and the social cure in the context of a stigmatised identity

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Abstract:

In an attempt to combat the social isolation and stigma associated with the incarceration of a family member, increasingly efforts are made to support families affected by imprisonment. Many of these forms of support are delivered in groups. Participation in support groups generates benefits, sometimes referred to as the social cure, by enhancing a sense of belonging, social connection and subjective identification with the group. Where an identity is stigmatised, subjective group identification may be resisted and this could potentially undermine the effectiveness of group-based support. We used semi-structured interviews with 12 partners of incarcerated men participating in group-based support, to explore their identity constructions as well as their perceptions of the value of the support group. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using a material-discursive perspective. Findings emphasise the importance of shared experiences as a basis for connection with others in this context where subjective identification with an identity is problematic. Three themes are documented in the data that emphasise shared experience. These themes – Experiences of a ‘situation’ as the basis for social isolation; Experience of a ‘situation’ as the basis for inclusion; and Victims of circumstance – all orient to the role of shared experience in participants’ talk. The theoretical discussion of these findings highlights the important role of shared experience as a basis for social connections for those affected by stigma. The implications of these findings for supporting families affected by incarceration are discussed, as is the more general potential of group-based approaches for those affected by stigma.

Keywords:

incarceration; social cure; material-discursive perspective; social identity; stigma; social isolation

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Introduction

The growth in the prison population worldwide, and the increasing acknowledgment that families often serve second sentences alongside offenders, has given rise to a growing number of initiatives intended to support families affected by imprisonment (Loper & Turek, 2006). Many of these initiatives are group-based. At the same time, a body of evidence in social psychology has demonstrated the value of group membership as a means of supporting health, a phenomenon referred to as the social cure (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes & Haslam, 2009). Many of the benefits of group membership are believed to be driven by subjective identification and, as such, can be thought of as active elements of the social cure process (Cruwys & Gunaseelan, 2016). Importantly, however, available evidence suggests that, in stigmatised situations, subjective identification with an identity or group is actively resisted (Jetten, Iyer, Branscombe & Zhang, 2013). Consequently, the value of group-based support in stigmatised contexts (such as incarceration of a family member) is less clear but is likely to involve identity negotiation. In this paper we explore, using a material-discursive approach, the positive and negative identity dynamics associated with participation in group-based support for partners of incarcerated men.

Group-based Support, Imprisonment & Stigma

Recent decades have witnessed a rapid growth in the prison population (Wildeman, 2010), estimated to be over 11 million people worldwide (International Centre for Prison Studies, 2013). The unforeseen consequence of this increase is that families are often inadvertent and forgotten victims of crime and punishment (Mathews, 1983). To date, research and policy has focused on the impact of imprisonment on children, with little attention given to the experiences of other family members such as the wives and partners of those incarcerated (Miller et al., 2013; Engstrom, 2008; Hoffmann, Byrd, & Kightlinger, 2010). Incarceration of a

family member is stigmatising (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010; Dallaire, 2007; Phillips & Gates, 2011), and tends to be viewed extremely negatively as it is often understood as ‘self-inflicted’ or a result of a ‘moral failing’. So, despite the limited research on the impact of incarceration on family members (Chui, 2016), Nesmith and Ruhland (2011) emphasise how associative and anticipated stigma can be detrimental to both family functioning and well-being. These findings are in line with Goffman’s (1963) original position that described how discrimination and prejudice harms not only the individual with the stigmatised identity, but also extends to their family and associates. For example, family members of people with mental illness reported experiences of shame and culpability as well as strained and distant relationships with others (Öestman & Kjellin, 2002). Corrigan and colleagues (2006) also found that families of those with an anti-social behaviour identity, such as drug addiction, faced an increased risk of being blamed and socially shunned. These findings are particularly relevant in the present context. Awareness of the stigma surrounding incarceration can deter family members from seeking help and support, resulting in their withdrawing from opportunities for social interactions because they feel their stigmatised identity is emphasised (Moore & Tangney, 2017).

Because of the essentially social nature of their stigma, group-based support may present challenges for family members affected by imprisonment. This is likely to be problematic because the benefits of group participation are thought to be delivered through enhanced identity resources. By subjectively identifying with a group, we gain access to resources such as support and connection to others, thereby enhancing well-being (Cruwys & Gunaseelan, 2016). Indeed, it is our sense of belonging to affiliative identities, such as family and friendship groups, that makes social support possible (Walsh, Muldoon, Gallagher & Fortune, 2015). One way in which a sense of connection and identification may become available is through a sense of shared

experiences (Bastian, Jetten, Thai, & Steffens, 2018). In exploring situations of mass emergency, such as the London tube bombings of 2005, Drury (2012; Drury, Cocking & Reicher, 2009) reported that a shared identity could arise amongst veritable strangers by drawing on their shared experience of the situation.

Drury (2012) argues that the resources associated with the social cure, such as solidarity and social support, can be accessed through shared experience, even in the absence of prior subjective identification with the group. Previous research emphasises how emergent identities based on shared negative experiences can shift categorisation from an individual to a group level (Kellezi et al., 2019). Alfadhli and Drury (2018) demonstrate that identification can occur due to a sense of a shared experiences and suffering. Furthermore, by drawing on their common experiences individuals were able to instigate collective action to face their common challenges and provide social support. Research also showed that associating and identifying with others on the basis of shared experiences enhances well-being among those dealing with bereavement by suicide (Kearns, Muldoon, Msetfi, & Surgenor, 2017). Knight and Eisencraft (2015) maintain that shared negative experiences in particular can facilitate group integration. Available research suggests commonalities in partners' lived experiences arising from a family member's imprisonment (Boswell, Wood & Advice, 2011). What is not clear in the literature is whether identification can develop in this way where, as a consequence of stigma, resistance to identification and social isolation is high.

Social identities can also carry a negative physical, psychological, or social cost (McNamara, Stevenson, & Muldoon, 2013). Being a member of a stigmatised group can increase the likelihood of enduring negative experiences, discrimination and prejudice, and undermine positive health and well-being (Branscombe, Fernandez, Gomez & Cronin, 2011;

Muldoon et al, 2017). In these situations, the value of the identity as a psychological resource and its role as a social cure is undermined. One potential way in which people may deal with stigma is to draw on alternate, non-stigmatised, identities to support their sense of self and wellbeing where they face life challenges. In this way, being a member of multiple groups can give access to a range of beneficial resources (Walter, Jetten, Dingle & Johnstone, 2015). More recently, evidence has suggested that some identities act as ‘gateway identities’ that facilitate the acquisition of new group membership’s identities and experiences (Kearns, Muldoon, Msetfi, & Surgenor, 2015).

Importantly identities are not static aspects of our inner selves. Negotiating and managing stigmatised identities involves trade-offs between positive and negative identity resources (Branscombe et al., 2011). Moreover, identity categories and constructions are not merely neutral descriptions, rather, they are ways in which to organise the social world and can be seen to have strategic social and political functions (Stevenson & Muldoon, 2010). For example, Barnes (2000) illustrates how discourse constructing members of the Travelling community in southern England as transients is used to normalise a settled lifestyle and to justify practices of surveillance, control and exclusion of Travellers. It would appear that discourse is a useful window into identity enactment and construction, where what it means to be a member of a particular group is negotiated and managed. In this way, social identities can be understood to be organic and evolving constructions, created and recreated through everyday social interactions and experiences (Willig, 2013)

Discourse can also be used to contest negative group connotations. One of the ways in which groups manage stigma is by actively resisting the application of the identity label. When exploring self-definition among members of the stigmatised Mapuche identity in Chile, Merino

& Tileaga (2011) found that young Mapuches used their discourse to negotiate, self-ascribe and resist dominant formations of Mapuche identity. Prior (2012) outlines how, when attempting to access individual-based counselling supports, students strategically resisted positioning themselves within a potentially stigmatising discourse of mental health. Similarly, Walter and colleagues (2015) demonstrated that despite meeting an objective definition of homelessness, some individuals rejected the categorisation of homeless instead making downward comparisons to others in subjectively worse situations in order to avoid self-categorisation. To cope with a stigmatised identity, individuals can dis-identify in order to protect their sense of self by avoiding the stigmatised identity altogether (Branscombe et al., 2011).

Quin and Earnshaw (2013) emphasise that a stigmatised identity can be seen as a mark of failure or shame for those affected, experienced as something that devalues the self in the eyes of others and therefore is constructed as something to be hidden. Kellezi and Reicher (2012) coined the term 'social curse' to refer to the costs of these types of identity processes. By keeping one's true "self" hidden, individuals may avoid stigma and discrimination (Hornsey & Jetten, 2011). This is particularly likely in the context where the stigmatised identity is concealable or perceived to be temporary (O'Donnell, O'Carroll, & Toole, 2018). Constructing a stigmatising characteristic as temporary and episodic also enables individuals to distance themselves from the application of the identity label and protect their sense of self (Walter et al., 2015). However, concealing a stigmatised identity has a cost (Ellemers & Barreto, 2006). Those who conceal their identity still self-stigmatise and implicitly accept and legitimise the system that is devaluing them (Ellemers & Barreto, 2006). This in turn maintains asymmetries of power where the individual is vulnerable to and accepting of judgment by others (Fiske & Dépret, 1996). Such negative self-stigmatisation can also undermine any sense of belonging, connection (Walsh et al.,

2015) and access to similar others thereby restricting access to positive group-based resources (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013).

Orientating toward the constructed nature of identity, the current study explores how partners of incarcerated men talk about and construct their identities. Discursive approaches are particularly suited to explore the multiple and culturally constituted meanings of identity (Malson, 1997). In exploring representations of identity, Luyt (2003) describes how human experience is best understood as an interplay between both material and discursive aspects. Material aspects include experiences of stigma and isolation. Additionally, Ussher (1997) emphasises how material aspects of identity include physical, emotional or psychological experiences. A material-discursive perspective (Ussher, 1997; Yardley, 1997) informs our approach here. Rather than comparing groups of women, our main aim is to explore the identity construction and management of partners of incarcerated men invited to participate in group-based support. We are also interested in the potential value of group-based support to these women in a context where the relevant identity may be actively resisted. We explore whether social cure processes can occur in a context where there may be minimal subjective identification and active resistance to the label 'prisoner's wife'. Equally, we are interested in how this stigmatised identity can at the same time act as a social curse. Identity constructions, we argue, are important to study as they are central to the experience of women affected by a partners' incarceration because they impact on their interactions, justify behaviours and attitudes in this context and reflect women's views on their positioning by others.

Method

Participants

The [NAME] Prison service was involved in a national initiative to pilot the delivery of supports to families of incarcerated men aimed at facilitating meaningful relationships between imprisoned men and their families on the outside. Consequently, group-based support was offered to prisoners' partners who were, as a result of the incarceration, managing young children alone. The support group was established via a partnership between the prison and a local community based organisation working to support offenders and their families. The support group met once a week at a community centre facilitated by two support workers. These two female support workers had experience of a family member being incarcerated previously and had worked to support families affected by imprisonment on a voluntary basis since that time. For a period of eight weeks, the same group of women met to offer each other support. Conversation within the group focused on difficulties the women were having surrounding personal, parenting or family issues. This study approached and interviewed all of the women ($n=12$), who participated in this group-based support. Reflecting the prison population in Ireland, participants were drawn from the most socially deprived areas of the region served by the prison served and were all White.

Recruitment and Interviewing

Reflecting the many difficulties of working with prisoners and their families, the recruitment of women to the study was challenging. The relationship between the prison, which was seen to have a punitive orientation, and the community organisation which saw itself as having a welfare orientation was, at times, very fraught. The support group was set up further to

an initiative driven by the prison and as a result the involvement of the research team, introduced by the prison, was viewed with suspicion. Much effort was put into reassuring the members of the community organisation who were suspicious and fearful of both the researchers and the research process. Similarly, the recruitment of the women to the study was challenging. Reflective of position vis-à-vis the state and its agencies, many were concerned about the impact of their participation on unrelated issues such as welfare payments or child custody arrangements. This high level of mistrust and a reluctance to engage with the research process meant that considerable work was invested in educating gatekeepers about the function and feasibility of the project.

Having negotiated access, researchers were introduced to potential participants during the first session of the support group. The first author outlined the research project and issued an invitation to participate in the study. High levels of suspicion and mistrust of outside agencies and potential authority figures were encountered. The women were particularly sensitive to any suggestion that the research process was an evaluation of them, necessitating considerable effort to convince them that it was the group-based approach that was the focus of our research. Following the positive experience reported by the first woman interviewed, fears receded and volunteers came forward. Participants were interviewed in their own homes by the first author accompanied by a research assistant who was local, white and female. Interviews were conducted by the first author who was a local, white male. Both researchers were likely perceived as middle class due to their accents and association with the University.

All interviews were semi-structured, recorded and transcribed verbatim¹. A research schedule was developed covering three core areas - the perceptions of the support group, (e.g. *“How did you get on during the group [meetings]?”*); their relationship with their partner (*Has*

your relationship with your partner changed in any way?”); where do we go from here? (e.g. *“What do you think should happen next, now that the meetings have finished?”*). In an effort to create an open environment, the interviewer maintained a conversational tone throughout. Consequently, the research schedule served only as a loose structure with discussion guided by the participants’ answers.

Interviews were transcribed using a basic transcription system¹ (King, Horrocks & Brooks, 2019). This was simplified in the extracts retaining notation relevant for the analysis. All names were changed in the transcripts and pseudonyms are used throughout this paper. Ethical approval was obtained from both the University of [NAME] and the [NAME] Prison Service Ethical Review Boards. It was emphasised that participation in the study was not a requirement of the support initiative. Equally, participation would not result in any prison-based incentives for their partners, such as preferential treatment during parole board or disciplinary hearings, additional or enhanced visits, access to temporary release schemes, or transfers to open prison sites.

Analysis

Analysis was conducted using a material-discursive perspective (Ussher, 1997), specifically a thematic discourse analysis (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). This approach combines the attention to the detail of the participants’ talk with an interest in how broader social forces influence what is said (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2016). Recordings were listened to with and without transcripts by the first author in order to gain an understanding of the overall dataset. Guided by a social identity approach and taking an inclusive approach, all references to identity construction were selected, extracted and saved in a separate document (Willig, 2013). As such, the analysis can be considered to be a systematic, thematic analysis followed by a discourse

analysis (Naughton, O'Donnell & Muldoon, 2019). So for example, “*It’s just been hectic, and every Thursday I used to go in and we’d just get our worries off*”, was selected as it moves from a singular to a plural description emphasising the participant’s sense of being in a wider collective. This resulted in forty-six excerpts being identified and reviewed. These 46 excerpts were then coded with labels remaining close to the data. Throughout this process, we attended to the discursive features, patterns and effects. We were interested not only in what was said, but also how it was said and to what effect (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2016). Commonalities between labels were identified and amalgamated to form higher order themes by the first and last authors. Throughout this process the two authors discussed potential themes resulting in the final three themes documented here. Excerpts that exemplified each theme were subjected to further discursive analysis so that the management and negotiation of identity in the women’s talk were explored.

Findings

Three distinct themes relating to the experiences of women whose partners are incarcerated were identified. Our analysis identified how participants used perceptions of their experiences as a criterion for constructing inclusion in the support group context and exclusion in other social contexts. The peculiarity associated with the experience of being a prisoner’s partner was used to normalise and justify their own and other’s behaviour, but equally, the unusual situation was used to externalise perceived stigma. The three themes are entitled: 1. Experiences of a ‘*situation*’ as the basis for social isolation; 2. Experiences of a ‘*situation*’ as the basis for inclusion; and 3. Victims of circumstance.

Theme one: Experiences of a “*situation*” as the basis for social isolation

Participants emphasised that they had an expectation of judgment and that this expectation is what hindered them speaking about their situation. For participants, experiences of a ‘situation’ was sufficient to elicit negative evaluations from those who did not share your experiences. This expectation was also presented as a justification for not seeking help from their existing social circle when needed. Their talk indicated that this was in part, based on a reluctance to speak with those who had not experienced the situation. For example in extract one, Sheila offers an explanation justifying her lack of help seeking behaviour as normative for ‘people like her’.

Extract One. Sheila

- | | | |
|---|-------------|---|
| 1 | Interviewer | Would you recommend the course to someone else? |
| 2 | Sheila | Oh definitely, yeah, I really would. |
| 3 | | Just to be around other people in the same situation as you |
| 4 | | [...] |
| 5 | | People like myself (don’t?) go and look for other company |
| 6 | | or go for help, just to even talk |
| 7 | | I don’t think, like I never, ever went to look for it |

Sheila described the group-based nature of ‘the course’ rather than any aspect of the content; “*Just to be around other people in the same situation*”. Sheila then continues by describing the importance of being with those with similar experiences. Using the phrase “*People like myself*”, Sheila differentiates and distances herself from others without this experience with the phrase, “*other company*”. In doing so, Sheila offers a subject position (Davies & Harré, 1990) whereby she constructs and positions herself with a specific identity. Consequently, she is more likely to be influenced and constrained by what she views as stereotypical behaviour (Joyce, Stevenson & Muldoon 2013). An interesting aspect of this description is that she does so without specifying any category that might form the basis of a social identity. Instead, she offers the shared experiences as the basis upon which inclusion and exclusion can occur. In lines 5-6 Sheila describes the perceived stereotypical attributes and behaviours for those who have experienced

similar situations. Sheila focuses specifically on the lack of help seeking behaviours, not looking for “*company*”, “*help*”, or opportunities to “*talk*”. Sheila also invokes extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) as she describes her reluctance to access even minimal help in line two, “*just to even talk*”. In this way, Sheila is articulating a perceived norm that it is not appropriate for prisoners’ partners to seek help. Finally, in Line 3, Sheila emphasises how her behaviours are consistent with the norms and behaviours of this group, this time accentuating the certainty with which she feels she would not have sought help in the past; “*I never, ever went to look for [support]*”. In short, Sheila accepts, normalises and legitimises her own behaviour, exclusion and silence.

Similarly in extract two, Norah also differentiates between those who have been in a situation where their partner has been imprisoned and those who have not by virtue of their circumstances. She also attributes her fear of judgement from others who do not share her experience as the reason why she is reluctant to speak.

Extract two. Norah

- | | | |
|---|-------|---|
| 1 | Norah | Like towards another person now like |
| 2 | | if I am talking to like just say someone around |
| 3 | | that was never in that situation |
| 4 | | you would be kind of scared to say some things |
| 5 | | in case they say, in case they kind of judge you. |

In lines 2-3, Norah invokes a hypothetical interaction with an anonymous other. Using the phrase “*Someone around that was never in that situation*”, Norah establishes two things. Firstly, using the phrase “*someone around*” Norah established that the interlocutor is readily accessible and close to hand. In this way, Norah emphasises the likelihood of this conversation. Secondly Norah emphasises the differences between herself and the unnamed other, because of the lack of shared experiences between someone “*that was never in that situation*” compared with someone

who was. Norah is using her own situation of having an incarcerated partner, as a key point of difference between her and hypothetical others. This lack of experience is subsequently used in lines 4-5 to explain how social contact with others was characterised by fear as well as a self-imposed censorship; “*you would be scared to say somethings*”. Norah elaborates how the self-censorship is a shield from the potential judgement of undefined others: “*in case they kind of judge you*”. In lines 3-4, we also see that Norah moves from “I” to “you”, thereby offering a reaction that she assumes is uncontentious. In creating an imagined scenario, Norah recruits the listener or interviewer to become a co-creator of the content and its meaning (Baumer et al., 2011). Consequently, the credibility of the message as well as the connection between the speaker and listener is enhanced (Sakki & Pettersson, 2015) and Norah’s common-sense presentation of her guardedness and expectation of being judged is presented as normal and justifiable.

Finally, in extract three, similar to previous extracts, the experience of an incarcerated partner appears to hinder help seeking behaviour in this case even from traditional affiliative supports such as family and friends:

Extract three. Mary

- | | | |
|---|-------------|---|
| 1 | Interviewer | Would you have talked to anybody, like your friends and family? |
| 2 | Mary | No. I don’t know. I’m trying to think. |
| 3 | | None of my friend’s partners are locked up. [...] No I didn’t. |
| 4 | | I just hope that [my Partner] does get straight |

Mary answers the question about available supports with a straightforward ‘no’ before qualifying her answer with some indecision: “*No. I don’t know. I’m trying to think*”. This hesitancy is resolved by stating that no one else shares her experience; “*None of my friends’ partners are locked up*”. The fact that none of her friends’ partners are locked up is offered as a relevant and

sufficient justification for not drawing on these networks. In doing so, Mary legitimises her social isolation and social dis-connection and accepts, her hopefully, temporary social exclusion. Mary's emphasis on the potential temporary nature of this dilemma is marked by a lack of agency. Control over her reconnection with her social circle and supports is very much aspirational and seen as defined by the actions of her partner (See line 4); "*I just hope that (my partner) goes straight*".

Theme Two: Experiences of a "*situation*" as the basis for inclusion

Theme two captures how participants constructed a sense of 'group' with other women in their support group. Importantly, the fact that the participants' partners were incarcerated was not the basis of this inclusion, rather, participants emphasised the importance of the shared experiences that followed from their partners' incarceration. In extract four, Mary describes how shared experiences form the basis for group integration. She also outlines the perceived benefits she has accrued from identification with this group.

Extract four. Mary

1	Mary	Because we were all in the same situation, like,
2		[Name] understood me, I understood her,
3		it was like we were going through the same thing, [...]
4		so we all kind of bonded together
5		because it wasn't like she is over there, she is after living a
6		great life with her fella,
7		like we were all in the same situation

In this extract, Mary moves between singular and plural pronouns changing the emphasis to reflect either group identification or exclusion. For example, in line 2-3, Mary goes from using singular pronouns ("*I*", "*me*" and "*her*") toward using the plural "*we*" indicating a move from individual to a more collective identity. Specifically for Mary, the degree to which she felt understood by other group members was explained by the degree to which she felt they were in a

similar situation; *“Because we were all in the same situation, like, (Name) understood me, I understood her”*. While for Sheila and Norah, a lack of a shared experience was a barrier to social connection in the wider world, for Mary, a shared experience was the basis for a reciprocal and shared social connection to others in the support group; *“we were going through the same thing, [...] so we kind of bonded together”*. Mary reiterates in lines 5-7 her belief that the benefits accrued are a consequence of their shared situation. In describing those excluded from the support group, Mary returns to using singular pronouns; *“She”* and *“her”* while at the same time emphasising criteria for inclusion; *“like we were all in the same situation”*.

In extract five below, Jane talks about the sense of inclusion arising from perceived shared experiences with those in the support group. Jane also speaks about the positive outcomes she experienced arising from this sense of belonging.

Extract five. Jane

- 1 Jane You don't feel like you are the odd one out then.
- 2 I feel like you get along with everyone else kind of more
- 3 because we are all in the same situation anyway [...]
- 4 so I find it very good. Yeah,
- 5 it is comforting, you feel like less stress when you leave the place.”

Again we see Jane's use of pronouns in lines 1-4, marking transition from individual to group identity going from *“I”* to *“we”*. In line 2, Jane describes her sense of belonging, specifically how she felt connected with other participants; *“I feel like you get along with everyone”*, and attributes this connection to their shared experiences; *“because we are all in the same situation.”*

Drawing on their shared circumstances, Jane uses a three-part list to illustrate the perceived benefits she attributes to the shared situations being *“good”*, *“comforting”* and feeling *“less stress”*.

In extract six Susan supports previous comments and emphasises how shared experiences facilitated participants' openness and social connection.

Extract six. Susan

- 1 Susan I think it actually brought a lot of us closer together like,
- 2 knowing that people are in the same situations
- 3 [...]
- 4 we are able to get things off our chests
- 5 [...]
- 6 we could speak about things.
- 7 and we are not the only ones that are like going through the same things

Echoing previous extracts, Susan uses the collective pronouns “us” and “we” in lines 1, 4, 6 & 7, reflecting her feelings of inclusion in the group. In contrast to Extract 2, where Susan reported social interaction characterised by fear and self-censorship, Susan emphasises in lines 4 & 6 an ability to share and speak openly and in an unguarded fashion; “*we are able to get things off our chest [...]* *we could speak about things*”. Additionally, by using phrases such as “*we are able*” and “*we can*”, Susan reflects a shared sense of agency. Susan claims this openness and agency arises from their shared experiences, and not only provides participants with a safe space to speak but also facilitates a sense of belonging and social connection between group members. This is illustrated in lines 1-2; “*I think it actually brought a lot of us closer together like, knowing that people are in the same situations*”, and again in line 7; “*we are not the only ones*”. Lastly, Susan alludes to a sense of common fate amongst group members who not only have experienced similar situations in the past but also are experiencing similar experiences on an ongoing basis as they are currently “*going through the same things*”.

Finally, in extract seven, Sheila describes how participation with the group provided her with opportunities to engage in new experiences and activities free from judgment.

Extract seven. Sheila

- 1 Sheila it was a great group [...] just [to] get out of the house even [...]
 2 and then you're in town, so you could always walk up for coffee
 3 with them or, the other day now the other girls were gone up
 4 town, just stroll up town and having a chat after, you know,
 5 just something with other people that's not judging you

Sheila begins by presenting the group as a catalyst for more frequent social interaction. Initially this is described in terms of logistics and opportunity. For Sheila, participating in the group provided her with a reason for leaving the house and more opportunity to engage in seemingly innocuous activities such as going for a “*stroll*” (see line 4), or “*walking up for a coffee.*” By prefacing with adverbs: “*even*” (see line 1) or “*just*” (see lines 1, 4 & 5) Sheila presents each of these activities as everyday activities that can now be enjoyed. By not specifying the exact details of the event, Sheila creates an image of an easily and frequently availed of social opportunity. Having established the opportunity and legitimacy of the behaviour, Sheila highlights that an integral facilitator of each activity is the lack of judgment (see line 5) “*just something with other people that's not judging you.*” This implies that for Sheila, banal daily interactions can be fraught with feelings of being positioned and judged by others. While this in turn undermines her social engagement, they are countered by participation with the group.

Theme three: Victims of circumstance

This theme captures how participants spoke about their experiences as external to their self-definitions; an external feature of their lives rather than an internalised element of their own identity. As such, participants resisted self-categorisation as ‘prisoners’ partners. In doing so, participants can distance themselves from the negative connotations, stigma and guilt of being in a relationship with an incarcerated man.

As noted earlier, participants refer to a ‘*situation*’ when speaking about how they have experienced life since their partner was imprisoned, as is the case in extract eight below:

Extract eight. Sheila

- 1 Sheila Then when you are in a situation [others] don’t, I suppose stop
2 and think of what I’m going through.

What is striking about the reference to ‘*a situation*’ is its appearance across the other extracts (See also Extract 1, line 3; Extract 2, line 3; Extract 3, line 1; Extract 4, line 3; Extract 5, line 2). Though experience of this situation is identified as a sufficient and necessary element in accessing group membership and associated support (See extract 2, line 3), participants appear unwilling to elaborate on what the ‘*situation*’ is, but at the same time expect a universal understanding as to its content. Not naming the specifics of ‘*the situation*’, achieves two things. First, by using a broad universal descriptor, participants emphasise the totality of their experiences rather than a specific element. Second, by not naming the ‘*situation*’ they appear to be engaging in a discursive silencing strategy (Wigginton & LaFrance, 2016) whereby a potentially spoiled aspect of their identity can be avoided. Reflecting this, participants often refer to ‘*that*’ or ‘*the*’ situation, emphasising the external, separate and independent feature rather than an internalised aspect of themselves (See also Extract 1, line 3; Extract 2, line 3; Extract 4, line 1; Extract 5, line 3; Extract 6, line 2). In this way, participants both resist the label and recognise their inability to manage such a powerfully negative identity preferring to reference the ‘*situation*’.

An exceptional case is Mary’s direct reference to having a partner in prison (extract 9). In Extract nine, Mary elaborates on how despite this resistance to self-categorisation, preferring

to reference the '*situation*', she recognises that the group structure and associated support was facilitated by the prison.

Extract nine. Mary

- | | | |
|---|-------------|---|
| 1 | Interviewer | Are you glad you did [sign up for the supports]? |
| 2 | Mary | Yes. |
| 3 | | [...] |
| 4 | Mary | Like [Name] and [Name], we are on Facebook, and we would |
| 5 | | chat away on Facebook and stuff. |
| 6 | Interviewer | [...] are [you] going to keep up the contacts later? |
| 7 | Mary | That is yeah, at least you know now that there are other people |
| 8 | | out there that are in the exact same situation as you, |
| 9 | | so probably like the best part of the jail up there |

Mary explicitly refers to '*the situation*' (see lines 8-9) as the route through which connections are made with other similar others. Yet, referring to the negative experiences involved in '*the situation*' as a potential positive can be problematic. In prefacing the comment with the word '*probably*' Mary is limiting the extent to which the statement can be undermined (Willig, 2013, Potter 1997): "*so probably like the best part of the jail up there*". In doing so, Mary is acknowledging the positive of drawing on the situation as a resource but at the same time managing a potential dilemma where having '*the best part of the jail*' might make her sound like imprisonment is desirable (Billig et al., 1988). Her acknowledgement of the value of the group for women who would prefer not to need this support is a very good representation of the reality of the situation for these women.

Discussion

Using a material-discursive approach, this paper explored the identity constructions of partners of incarcerated men who had engaged with group-based supports as well as the value of these supports for the women negotiating this highly stigmatised identity. Our analysis identified

a strong sense of social isolation and exclusion, which the women presented as justifiable. There was no sense in which the women railed at their exclusion and disconnection from others. Rather, it was presented as a part of the experience of being a partner and co-parent of an imprisoned man. This experience of social stigma and isolation was an experience the women felt they shared with others participating in a support group. This sense of shared experience amongst the women in the support group allowed them to form connections with others. It also allowed them to resist or suppress the highly stigmatised attributes and labels applied to prisoners' families. They defined their situation or circumstances as the issue rather than defining any element of themselves or their identity as problematic.

Our findings add to previous research that has suggested subjective identification with a group enables a social cure via a sense of belonging, meaning and social connection (Cruwys & Gunaseelan, 2016). Though this process is undermined when a group identity is perceived to be tainted with a stigma (Branscombe et al., 2011), our findings suggest that shared experience is an important vehicle for the development of social connections and identity resources in these more problematic contexts. Membership of a stigmatised group involves trade-offs. Some dimensions of the identity are detrimental to individuals affected (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012). On the other hand, group-based support for those affected can actually counter this stigma even in the absence of subjective identification with the group. A sense of shared experience with others is central to the success of these group supports.

Results also indicate how participants constructed a sense of group identity with other women by orienting towards their shared experiences. For the participants, it was not enough that others had their partners incarcerated, instead the sense of connection evolved out of the perception of common adversity arising from those experiences. This reflects previous research,

which emphasises how shared experiences can facilitate interpersonal and group bonding (Koudenburg et al., 2015). In particular, negative experiences can emphasise the distinction between those facing a common threat and those who do not (Knight & Eisenkraft, 2015). Sharing such adverse experiences can enable group support and connection (Bastian et al., 2018). This has been exemplified in research on crowds and natural disasters (Drury et al., 2009; 2015), as well as in research in immigrant detention centres (Kellezi et al., 2019) and refugee camps (Alfadhli & Drury, 2018). Collectively, this research highlights how identification can arise out of a sense of shared experiences and common fate. These shared experiences enable collective action in the face of adversity as well as the provision of social support (Kellezi et al., 2019; Alfadhli & Drury, 2018). The current study expands on this by demonstrating how shared experiences of adversity in the context of a stigmatised identity can also be the basis through which a shared sense of identity can develop.

Our participants made the distinction between themselves and those who did not have similar experiences. In doing so, participants reported that they often isolated and segregated themselves from others and were disinclined to seek help. Klein and colleagues (2007) argue that social identity performance can be understood to be either the expression or the suppression of behaviours. Our data would appear to suggest that co-parenting women affected by imprisonment of their partners actively suppress social engagement with others anticipating sanction or disapproval from others. In doing so participants accepted, legitimised and reified their own and their children's punishment for crimes they did not commit. This speaks to the extent to which the social stigma, including self-stigma, applied to those affected by imprisonment remains acceptable and unchecked. It also speaks to the very real challenges of

working to support these very vulnerable families who are routinely positioned as undeserving by themselves and others.

Wigginton and LaFrance (2016) describe how individuals engage in discursive silencing strategies to hide aspects of identity. In this way, individuals can avoid revealing spoiled elements of their identity. Similarly, in the context of prejudicial views of a racial out-group, Durrheim and colleagues (2016) emphasise that individuals actively manage their social identity by speaking indirectly about potentially problematic aspects. The current study elaborates on this approach using a stigmatised identity, illustrating how a problematic and potentially stigmatising aspect of identity can be managed. Finlay and Lyons (2005) warn that researchers should be wary of drawing conclusions of rejection of a label in their work on intellectual disability. However, the basis of their assertions was that participants reacted to the ill-fitting and ambiguous nature of the label. In the current study, participants did not contest the suitability of the label; rather they avoided making any explicit reference to the label at all. By referring to their current experiences as a 'situation' rather than an integral part of how they see themselves, participants in their discourse, kept this stigmatising identity at arm's length. Consequently, the stigmatised identity is resisted. Participants constructed 'the situation' as an external element rather than as an internalised part of their identity.

These findings also have implications for public and social policy. If stigma generates a reluctance to identify with the group, then support group initiatives built on characteristics of that stigma are likely to have viability issues. Previous research highlights how multiple social groups can enhance the benefits of the social cure by providing alternative avenues for support. Here, there is an important role for compatible (Iyer et al., 2009) and gateway identities (Kearns, et al., 2018). Identification with one social group can lead to the acquisition of another,

facilitating increased perception of social support and reducing perceived stigma (Kearns et al., 2018). Similarly, the current findings indicate that while participants were unwilling to assume a stigmatised identity, they were willing to engage with the support group on the basis of shared experiences of a difficult situation. In the current example, we can see how even a very negative and stigmatised identity can be used as a gateway identity to offer connections based on shared experience. By orientating towards gateway identities, support groups can activate the benefits of the social cure and facilitate further support. This means that support can be offered to stigmatised groups without alienating or excluding them. Practitioners must be mindful that the initiative was implemented in an area where an existing NGO was already established and capable of hosting group meetings. Consequently, there may be issues of access for partners living in other more geographically isolated contexts. Additionally, participants were in a relationship that both parties were actively trying to maintain through participation in the family support group. It is important however for practitioners to think about the most appropriate and appealing ways to target stigmatised and hard-to-reach populations for group-based interventions given that resistance to stigmatised identities means that the identities themselves are unlikely to have the necessary traction.

When reflecting on the results of this study it is important to consider a number of limitations. Access to the participants was only achieved after considerable effort on the part of the researchers, negotiating with a number of reluctant, and at times sceptical, gatekeepers. This, along with the sensitive nature of the questions and the vulnerable position of the women involved may have contributed to the women adopting a guarded stance (Schomerus et al., 2012). While every effort was made to establish trust and rapport, this dynamic is likely to have affected the interviews. This group represents a very vulnerable, hard-to-reach and small

population (Arditti, 2015), and so caution needs to be exercised in generalising findings. Despite these limitations, this study provides a vital insight into the experiences and behaviour of a traditionally hard to reach population (Arditti, 2015). The study contributes both theoretically and practically in supporting some of the most vulnerable and often overlooked members of society, and highlights the importance of shared experience as a means of connecting those isolated by stigma. It also points to a psychological protection associated with stigma suppression and resistance whilst at the same time offering insight into a stigmatised identity, which remains a pernicious social problem. Whilst it may be psychologically protective, resisting stigmatised identification is unlikely to empower vulnerable and marginalised people to challenge the legitimacy of their social exclusion.

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Footnote

¹A simple level transcription was employed (King, Horricks & Brooks, 2019). The author used round brackets with a question mark, (?), to indicate speculative transcription. This was where a word was unclear, but the author had a high degree of confidence as to what was said. The author used square brackets, [], to indicate where the author included clarifying remarks, or removed unrelated text.”