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Jaleesa Myers
Coping with Incarcerated-related
Stress: A Study of Coping Responses
by Women Romantically Involved
with Incarcerated Men

ABSTRACT

Research related to coping responses of women romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men has been unexamined in social work literature. This study examined how women romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men cope with economic, social and emotional stress associated with their partners' incarceration by examining their use of problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidant-focused coping styles. The study answered to what extent do women romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men utilize adaptive coping responses, especially paying close attention to experiences of African American women. Using quantitative methods, the Brief COPE—a 28-item inventory—was administered to 67 women—whose partners were incarcerated—through online support communities. Findings show women are no more likely to use adaptive coping responses than maladaptive coping responses when coping with stress related to the incarceration of their partner. Within adaptive coping responses, women were significantly less likely to seek use of instrumental social and emotional support. Additionally, within maladaptive coping responses, women were just as less likely to vent. Women employ a variety of coping responses due to living with sexism and other biases related to their gender and are adept to cope with stress. However, women's inability to seek social and emotional support—as well as vent—is related to feeling shamed and ostracized by societal influences. Clinicians should apply a strengths-based approach when working with these women to lean in towards developed coping strategies to increase social and emotional health while they are in partnership with incarcerated men.

**COPING WITH INCARCERATED-RELATED STRESS: A STUDY OF COPING
RESPONSES BY WOMEN ROMANTICALLY INVOLVED WITH INCARCERATED
MEN**

A project based on an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2016

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CHAPTER I: Introduction

The United States has the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world (Enns, 2014). Nearly 2 million offenders are incarcerated within American prisons and jails, only 11% of whom are female (Lindquist, 2000), making the majority of the inmate population to be male. According to Lindquist (2000), stress encountered by offenders while incarcerated is “likely to increase the need for supportive social relationships” (p. 432) and, yet, little research has been done on the stress of incarceration on offenders’ significant others. Significantly, little research has been done on how women cope while being romantically involved with, or married to, male offenders (Comfort, 2008).

In this study, disclosure of relevant literature on the emergence of coping rooted in ego psychology and its adaption towards contemporary coping as we know today, while paying close attention to the portrayal of women’s experience with coping as described within the literature, will be discussed. Additionally, the lack of explicit studies on women coping with stress encountered from their male partners’ incarceration is highlighted. Lastly, discussion around economic, social and emotional barriers women experience when coping with a loved one’s incarceration and its connection to women of color, primarily African American women, will be explored. According to Grinstead, Faigeles, Bancroft, and Zack (2001), it has been well documented that for every man who is incarcerated and has a female partner the woman will suffer “financial, social and psychological consequences” (p. 59). These consequences are

usually in the form of loss of income, stigmatization and stress of maintaining contact when a loved one is incarcerated.

Friedman (2001) describes coping as all thoughts and behaviors that occur in response to a stressful experience, whether the person is handling the situation well or poorly (p. 139). Additionally, Black (2015) identifies that stressors arising from maintaining daily needs for food, clothing and shelter after the loss of income from an incarcerated partner can cause personal, spiritual and economic difficulties, while impacting the emotional stability of these women (p. 1). The research question that will be answered is to what extent women utilize adaptive coping responses while romantically involved with, or married to, men who are incarcerated. Adaptive coping with stress includes problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies. Problem-focused coping is defined as coping geared toward solving the problem or changing the situation to improve the stressful situation. Emotion-focused coping is defined as management of emotion during stressful periods. This study will discuss incarcerated-related stress on women, and more specifically, find how well women romantically involved with, or married to, male offenders cope utilizing adaptive coping responses.

As an unexplored topic, a desired outcome of this research is to highlight the use of adaptive coping via problem-focused and emotion-focused coping responses of women who are romantically involved with, or married to, male offenders and examine the extent of this coping utilized by African American women. Sadly, the majority of male offenders in this country are African American, mostly for drug related offenses (Alexander, 2012, p. 99). However, African Americans are no more likely to be guilty of drug crimes than Caucasians—who are more likely to be guilty of illegal drug possession and sales than any other racial or ethnic group (Alexander, 2012, p. 99).

Miller, Browning, and Spruance (2001) suggest there are unique implications of incarceration within the African American family (p. 3-12). Most notably, stigmatization is immediately felt by family members. Over half of African American male offenders are fathers and are part of family units outside of ones they were born in. These families often suffer financially and emotionally since many of these male offenders are no longer able to provide financially for their family and significant other. However, stress encountered by African American men is compounded compared to their Caucasian counterparts. Miller, Browning, and Spruance (2001) note, “given the record number of African American men removed from the black community by incarceration, any study of the stressors on the African American family should include some discussion of the impacts of incarceration on the good provider role performed by African American men” (p. 5). While these implications are significant when discussing the impact of incarceration within the African American family, research related specifically to African American women romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men had not been documented.

Relevance to Social Work Literature

No research was identified related to the coping responses of women romantically involved with, or married to, male offenders. This study’s findings hopefully can contribute to influencing the assessments and treatment provided to women who have a loved one incarcerated, especially African American women. Avon Hart-Johnson (2014) suggests, “helping professionals may not fully understand the impact of separation [from incarcerated men] and loss on the quality of life for affected African American women or know how to support them” (p. 8).

CHAPTER II: Literature Review

Foundation of Coping: Early Roots in Ego Psychology

Coping research was founded within the scope of ego psychology. It is only within the past 60 years that coping research emerged from ego psychology to a cognitive behavioral approach of “thoughts and behaviors” (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004, p. 748). Considering ego psychology, coping was initially referenced as a defense. The concept of defense is rooted in psychoanalytic theory and acquired significance through the work of Sigmund Freud’s structural theory and later Anna Freud’s mechanisms of defense (Goldstein, 1995, p. 65). According to Sigmund Freud, defenses arise to mediate conflicts between the id (i.e. impulsive instincts to seek satisfaction) and superego (i.e. moral conscious that inflicts social standards) by signaling the ego (i.e. mediator between the id and superego) to institute action to eliminate unconscious struggle. Goldstein (1995) suggests that throughout literature ego and its related defenses have been well documented, that all people use defenses (despite some being more commonly used than others) and that some enable a person to function effectively—adaptively—and others prove to be ineffective—or maladaptive. For instance, collapse of defenses may cause ego deterioration and an imbalance between the id’s desires and superego’s moral consciousness resulting in personality or character development seen in psychotic episodes. Anna Freud would go on to further continue the discourse on defenses of the ego, which would later be evaluated on whether these defenses served as adaptive or maladaptive functions (Goldstein, 1995, p. 78).

Considering Vaillant (1977), who is notably known for adult development around confronting stress, defined coping as an “expression of adaptive styles utilized by people when confronted with conflict (p. 7). He would go on to further explore the utilization of defenses as a healthy way to deal with conflict, defining them as more healthy than they are pathological, or related to an illness or mental illness. Reflecting upon the earlier works of Freudian findings and Vaillant’s research (as well as the works of others), coping had been for the most part concluded within the framework of ego psychology and the concept of defense. During the middle 20th century, discussion of coping was no longer considered within the category of defenses, moving away from an ego psychology approach towards contemporary coping research as highlighted in the publication of Richard Lazarus’ book, *Psychological Stress and the Coping Process* (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004, p. 746).

Contrary to Sigmund Freud’s structural theory, Anna Freud’s mechanisms of defense and Vaillant’s claim that coping was a defense and was not pathological as it was merely a healthy response to conflicts and disordered events that call them forth, Lazarus’ research highlighted the complete opposite. Lazarus expanded coping to go beyond defenses and focused on pathology to address cognitive and behavioral responses rooted in how people managed distress (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004, p. 746). The relationship between coping and stress emerged from Lazarus’s work and further influenced coping as a distinct field of interest moving forward in the 21st century.

Coping became notably defined as thoughts and behaviors people use to manage the internal and external demands of situations deemed stressful (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004, p. 746). Defining coping this way, within the context of cognitive-oriented theory, is seen today in the use of cognitive behavioral theory and other evidenced-based practices. While research

emerged around coping and stress, little research has focused on women's experiences with stressful situations related to incarceration. For this study, coping will be referenced as all thoughts and behaviors that occur in response to a stressful experience, whether the person is handling the situation well or poorly (Friedman, 2001, p. 139).

Women and Stress

Existing studies discussing coping patterns of women and stress have focused primarily on "bodily ills that result from stress and how they affect women," (Morse & Furst, 1979, p. 17). Mallers, Almeida, and Neuport (2005) suggest this is largely due to women's health being influenced by biological and psychological perspectives where the focus on physical health and stress is limited on endocrine changes, such as menstruation and menopause (p. 389). They suggest interpersonal conflicts impose the greatest risk for the ill-health in women and that those who are frequently exposed to interpersonal conflict are more likely to suffer from health-related illnesses. Barnes (2014) highlights this finding as well and goes on to suggest that women's health is largely influenced not only by their reproductive health, but by overall biology, psychology and cultural influences (p.11). These influences are innate to women's health and stress.

Morse and Furst (1979) suggest women's stress is influenced by a women's makeup and that they are more prone to stressful experiences related to their sex (p. 44). Some of these influences are related to child-bearing responsibilities and the loss of a male loved one. They suggest women are more susceptible to physical stress when raising a child since men, historically, are not overly involved in child-rearing to the same extent as women. This is largely in part to men being perceived as breadwinners and that women are more susceptible to financial stress, especially after the loss of a loved one (either to death or divorce). This may be at no

surprise since women make 77 cents to every one dollar earned by men (Bassett, 2013) and that women are more prone to certain kinds of psychological stress related to anxiety due to “second-class” citizenship (Morse & Furst, 1979, p. 22). Interestingly, these findings suggest that there is a parallel to the type of stress encountered by women when they experience the loss of male loved one due to incarceration since many are responsible for their children, suffer financially and must cope with stress related to being a women (Comfort, 2008).

While psychological stress can affect both sexes, there are significant kinds of stress that women are more subjected to due to society’s expectations for women. Men may respond to anxiety through aggression, while women may react via passive aggressive behavior. Women may experience resentment for pursuing personal goals and achievement outside of the home, where men would be congratulated for exhibited “goal-oriented behavior” (Morse & Furst, 1979 p. 25).

Through discourse on women’s health and its relationship to stress, dialogue surrounding biological, psychological and cultural influences impacting women’s overall health in addition to reproductive health is increasing. Psychological stressors are important to note since they include “anxiety, fear, frustration, guilt, worry, anger, hate, jealousy, sadness, self-pity and inferiority feelings” (Morse & Furst, 1979, p. 19). Since women are often generally taught to not express anger, as a result, “anger and related emotions are often suppressed” (Morse & Furst, 1979, p. 26). This is important to note, since psychological stressors add to feelings of inferiority and shame. Although the impact of general stress on women has been well-documented, studies primarily focusing on women’s general coping to incarceration of a male partner has not been. While women’s general coping responses include physical, social and psychological stress, few

studies discuss the unique racial implications for African American women, whose experiences of stress are exacerbated due to their race.

Implications of Stress on African American Women

According to Thomas, Witherspoon, and Speight (2008) African American women use a variety of coping strategies to mitigate discriminatory distress due to being discriminated against by their race and gender (p. 309). This distress is the discrimination felt by African American women related to various forms of oppression experienced merely because of their race.

Although African American women experience sexism similar to Caucasian women, they are just as likely to experience various forms of racism similar to African American men (Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2008, p. 307). Coined “gendered racism,” these experiences describe how sexism and racism “narrowly intertwine” in perceptions of gender roles for African American women, who experience oppression due to their blackness and femaleness (Essed, 1991, p. 31). The experiences of oppression towards African American women related to race and gender increases their distress level. This is due to the “accumulative experience of both racism and sexism” since they have not one, but two strikes against them (Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2008, p. 307).

King (2005) conducted a study to see whether race and gender discrimination were positively correlated to poor psychological and physical health outcomes by examining cognitive appraisal (i.e. positive interpretations of a situation). Results from the study concluded African American women who overheard negative comments related to their race and gender had increased stress reactions (p. 202). Gendered racism has not received much attention in the coping experiences of African American women due to the tendency of research studies to separate race and gender influences. Research related to coping style and systems of oppression

have found that African American women use a variety of coping strategies related to racism. Feagin and Sikes (1994) mention these additional strategies include over-achievements, positive thinking, laughter and seeking social support. Mattis (2002) suggests the most consistent findings regarding the coping experiences of African American women include formal religious involvement and devotional practices to negotiate a “range of adversities” including race, class and gender oppression (p. 308).

While there is research on the coping patterns of women related to stress, this often is viewed within the lens of illnesses that impact women and does include the impact stress has on their mental health. Literature on general coping responses of women typically focuses on their gender-related stress. Within this literature, race is often omitted, which excludes unique stressors related to women of color and more specifically African American women and their utilized coping strategies due to race, class and gender. While research examining coping styles of women, particularly focusing on a variety of daily hassles related to family, parenting, finances, psychological distress—and most importantly illness—has been explored; little has been discussed surrounding the impact of incarceration on women’s psychological and emotional health and its related stressors and coping strategies.

Women Coping with Incarcerations: Implications of Stress

According to Comfort (2008), the exact number of women impacted by the incarceration of a partner remains unclear, despite the fact that this population outnumbers women currently behind bars (p. 8). She highlights one-fifth of male prisoners are married, meaning roughly 400,000 of married women (20% of two million male prisoners) are impacted by their partners’ incarceration. This does not include women romantically involved (i.e. in a committed relationship, or casually dating) with men outside of marriage, which makes this statistic even

higher. As marriage has declined over the past several decades, with the median age of marriage increasing, many women between the ages of 20 to 34 romantically involved with incarcerated males are young adults (Fields & Casper, 2001). No studies were found which clarified how age impacted women's ability to cope with their loved one's incarceration.

Comfort, Grinstead, McCartney, Bourgois, and Knight (2005) reported that approximately 50% of incarcerated men consider themselves to be in committed heterosexual relationships and plan to return to these romantic partnerships upon their release. Today, with nearly two million male offenders incarcerated within the United States in federal, state and local correctional facilities, roughly one million women experience the incarceration of their partners. This number may be even higher since a portion of men in these relationships may have more than one partner sequentially throughout the course of their sentence.

Studies on women with incarcerated partners (whether romantically or through marriage) thus far have focused on stigma and shame, especially when visiting their loved in a correctional facility. In a study of women visiting their male partners or spouses in a California correctional facility, participants felt humiliated by the way they were treated by correctional officers based on their appearance and were subjected to a strict dress code policy. Notably, this humiliation increased in African American women, who all expressed they experienced racial and gender discrimination over their appearance and felt they were under surveillance upon entering the visiting room compared to their Caucasian counterparts (Comfort et al., 2005, p. 7). Yet, the inability for women to maintain control of their bodies and appearance when romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men extends outside of the visiting room. Many of these women's partners and spouses will be released under community supervision. Thus, transforming their homes into punitive surveillance sites, where their residences, vehicles (and

inhabitants within it) can be searched by police or parole agents without need for advance warning or a warrant. The social and emotional stress encountered from these experiences are also seen in the financial stress experienced by women romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men.

Financial and social resources can hinder or promote the secondary “prisonization” of women. Comfort (2008) suggests women romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men with higher incomes and education are better able to financially deal with leisure and professional activities, friendships and housing responsibilities while their partners are incarcerated (p. 17). Additionally, women with “scarce resources” gradually see the prison absorb their daily lives, where the majority of their kinship and social networks become inmates, former inmates, or visitors (Comfort, 2008, p. 17). The criminal justice system then emerges as one of the most powerful public institutions available for low-income women. For these low-income women, the limited social service support received, mixed with the lack of intervention by these social institutions creates collateral consequences. Additionally, the cost of support towards their loved one does not make it any easier, with many women spending over \$5,000 of their annual income to cover costs to provide food packages, telephone calls, commissary money, clothing and visits throughout their loved ones incarceration (Grinstead, Faigeles, Bancroft, & Zack, 2001). This accounts for nearly 36% of their annual income. Paying close attention to women’s coping style and socioeconomic status will be important to address. Understanding the unique implications of incarceration on women romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men is important since many of them are also part of their family unit that involve children and other vulnerable and dependent individuals such as aging parents.

Research on incarcerated men and their romantic relationships has been well documented from the male perspectives by various disciplines within social sciences (e.g. psychologists and sociologists). However, social worker's research of imprisonment in general has focused primarily on family systems and dismemberment (Carlson and Cervera, 1991b). Inadvertently when women are discussed within the context of incarceration, incarcerated women are usually highlighted. More specifically, the discussion of the impact of incarceration focuses on the relationship between children and their incarcerated maternal figure (Bloom, 1995; Johnston 1995). Of note, the inclusion of incarceration and women has historically focused on incarcerated mothers. Women romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men has not garnished the same attention (Comfort, 2008, p. 10).

Research focused on the impact of incarceration on families highlights the socioeconomic considerations incarceration has on communities such as employment, housing, access to public health and breakdown of social control in neighborhoods (Comfort, 2008, p. 11). Additionally, incarceration has been linked to poverty, joblessness, single motherhood due to the country's punitive penal policies. Also, time spent visiting a loved one leaves many families facing unemployment, family disengagement and social ostracism. This is compounded when considering African American families.

Coates (2015) notes having a loved one incarcerated, "takes a lot out," of the African American family (p. 55). While research findings suggest visiting during a family member's incarceration promotes reunification, decreases recidivism; maintaining contact with an offender is stressful, costly and stigmatizing (Grinstead, Faigeles, Bancroft, & Zack, 2001, p. 60). Additionally, over half of incarcerated male offenders are fathers and must deal with stress related to sexual frustration, loneliness, and coping with the idea that their romantic partner or

spouse is coping with stressfully provoking events alone. Many incarcerated men worry about the impact incarceration has on their relationships with spouses, where through loss of contact and closeness, the possibility of divorce is prominent that many families never reunite after their release.

Through the incarceration of a male partner or spouse, women are more likely to become head-of-households. However, the connection between women, their male partners' incarceration and head-of-household status remains unclear. As Hubbard (2015) describes in great length:

“The conversation around mass incarceration and African-American men typically fails to factor in how profoundly middle-class black women are impacted. Most know the more dire statistics that 1 out of 6 black men will be incarcerated in their lifetime, but when black women are included in the conversation, it's usually reduced to how incarceration affects a family financially. This is a daunting reality. Yet little has been discussed of the deeper implications of incarceration for many black women” (p. 2).

While these are characteristics of family problems related to incarceration, the economic social and emotional stress experiences are transferable to experiences of women romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men. There is shame, stigma and hardship related to incarceration. This is largely in part due to the perceived resistance to social norms by contemporary urban culture by “many” that favors the criminal justice system's ability to stigmatize and induce shame with incarceration (Braman, 2004, p. 166). According to Braman (2004), the thinking behind the criminal justice system's ability to induce shame and express public condemnation is to reduce future offense. However, policy makers behind these laws have barely observed whether the intended effects have been implemented or will be. Alexander

(2012) shares a different perspective, which highlights that imprisonment to support incarceration, through the War on Drugs, has been waged against nonviolent, low-level offenders in poor communities of color (p. 209). The harsh statutes do not correlate with the intended effects that are consequently unintended or undesirable. Rather than deterring offenders from future crimes, the stigma related to incarceration has been the silencing and isolation of incarcerated male offender's loved ones (p. 167).

Limitations

There are limitations to existing literature on this topic, which support the rationale for conducting this study. Existing studies discussing coping patterns of women and stress have focused primarily on medical illnesses and are not inclusive to their mental health. Lastly, literature focused on women and incarceration is often from the point-of-view of the woman as the offender, or, the woman as a family member to an incarcerated male.

While over a million women may be affected by the incarceration of their romantic partners, the prevalence of women in romantic partnerships with these men has not been examined in literature. Comfort et al. (2005) acknowledge there is literature on the relationship between incarceration and stress; however, it often is from the perspective of the family unit, without differentiating the unique stressors that directly affect women romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men. These experiences are a direct result of the economic, social and emotional consequences of the carceral system. As women cope with incarcerated-stress and its related stigma and shame, more discussion on how this impacts women's psychological and mental health is warranted. Providing insight to the different ways people respond to incarcerated-related stress will be explored in this study and is the purpose of conducting this research.

CHAPTER III: Methodology

The following chapter describes the purpose of this quantitative study and the methodology used to conduct the research. The quantitative study was administered through an anonymous online survey to further explore how women romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men cope. The specific research instrument used in the study, the Brief COPE, is an abbreviated form of the COPE Inventory and was used to alleviate the expected high response burden.

The Brief COPE has not been used to assess coping patterns of women romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men and the adaptive (i.e. problem-focused and emotion-focused) and maladaptive (i.e. avoidant-focused coping) coping responses employed. The purpose of the study was to discover the extent women utilized adaptive coping responses while romantically involved with, or married to, men who were incarcerated. It was hypothesized that women would utilize maladaptive coping responses due to economic, social and emotional stress associated with incarceration and the inability to express their emotions (e.g. anxiety, frustration and guilt etc.) since they are taught early to suppress them since they are female. It was also hypothesized that African American women would utilize more adaptive coping responses due to experiences of racism and transferable coping strategies to adapt to this stressful encounter. It was further hypothesized that women's age, education status and socioeconomic status would influence women's adaptive coping responses.

Research Design

A quantitative survey using the Brief COPE was used for this study. The COPE Inventory is a 60-item coping inventory scale used to assess responses when confronted with difficult or stressful life events. This scale has been used to assess the coping response to various stressful situations by a defined population. Given the consideration of time to complete this research study, the Brief COPE was used for expected high response burden. As an abbreviated form of the COPE Inventory, the Brief COPE is a 28-item inventory, and for the purpose of this study, was used as an instrument to assess women's coping response to the stress associated with their partners' incarceration.

Topics explored within the scale included problem-focused coping (i.e. active coping, planning, seeking of instrumental social support and acceptance); emotion-focused coping (i.e. self-distraction, seeking of emotional social support, positive reframing, turning to religion and humor) and avoidant-focused coping (i.e. focus on and venting of emotions, behavioral disengagement, substance-use, denial and self-blame). The Brief COPE was formatted into a Likert Scale, where participants were asked to scale their own preference, from 1 to 4, responding to each number based on the following: I usually don't do this at all, I usually do this a little bit, I usually do this a lot and I usually do this all the time, respectively. Participants were asked to respond based on their own experiences and were required to treat each question separately when answering.

The Brief COPE was a scale adapted to fit the unique population of participants. This inventory had not been used to understand coping responses of women romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men and language was modified to fit the needs of the population. More specifically, flexibility to categorize problem-focused, emotional-focused and

avoidant-focused coping into adaptive and maladaptive responses was taken into consideration in deciding to use this particular instrument. Please refer to Table 1 for more information.

Table 1: Brief COPE Scales and Items

Adaptive Coping		Maladaptive Coping
<p>Problem-focused Coping</p> <p>Active Coping <i>I've been concentrating my efforts on doing something about the situation I'm in.</i> <i>I've been taking action to try to make the situation better.</i></p> <p>Instrumental Support <i>I've been getting help and advice from other people.</i> <i>I've been trying to get advice or help from other people about what to do.</i></p> <p>Planning <i>I've been trying to come up with a strategy about what to do.</i> <i>I've been thinking hard about what steps to take.</i></p> <p>Acceptance <i>I've been accepting the reality of the fact that it has happened.</i> <i>I've been learning to live with it.</i></p>	<p>Emotion-focused Coping</p> <p>Self-distraction <i>I've been turning to work or other activities to take my mind off things.</i> <i>I've been doing something to think about it less, such as going to movies, watching TV, reading, daydreaming, sleeping, or shopping.</i></p> <p>Emotional Support <i>I've been getting emotional support from others.</i> <i>I've been getting comfort and understanding from someone.</i></p> <p>Positive Reframing <i>I've been trying to see it in a different light, to make it seem more positive.</i> <i>I've been looking for something good in what is happening.</i></p> <p>Humor <i>I've been making jokes about it.</i> <i>I've been making fun of the situation.</i></p> <p>Religion <i>I've been trying to find comfort in my religion or spiritual beliefs.</i> <i>I've been praying or meditating.</i></p>	<p>Avoidant-focused Coping</p> <p>Denial <i>I've been saying to myself "this isn't real."</i> <i>I've been refusing to believe that it has happened.</i></p> <p>Substance-use <i>I've been using alcohol or other drugs to make myself feel better.</i> <i>I've been using alcohol or other drugs to help me get through it.</i></p> <p>Behavioral Disengagement <i>I've been giving up trying to deal with it.</i> <i>I've been giving up the attempt to cope.</i></p> <p>Venting <i>I've been saying things to let my unpleasant feelings escape.</i> <i>I've been expressing my negative feelings.</i></p> <p>Self-blame <i>I've been criticizing myself.</i> <i>I've been blaming myself for things that happened.</i></p>

Limitations

Limitations to using the Brief COPE included defining the time-frame in which participants would be expected to share if they used a specific coping response when identifying their coping patterns. For the purpose of the study, the time-frame was six months. Identifying how to group adaptive and maladaptive coping responses using the problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidant-focused coping responses found within the Brief COPE was required to code survey results. Additionally, there was no way to determine frequency of stressors. Lastly, modifying the language of the Brief COPE was taken into consideration. This was especially important to make the survey readable and comprehensible.

Research Methods

Participants were recruited from online support communities for families of persons who were incarcerated. Snowballing efforts via outreach to local organizations, agencies and writers who wrote about the prison system and the impact of incarceration occurred organically as online support communities willingly shared the survey to their local affiliates. A recruitment flier to organizations/agencies (Appendix B) was approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee and highlighted the research question, purpose and provided a survey link to the actual survey. As organizations, agencies and writers agreed to share the survey with their respective followers, a recruitment email followed (Appendix C). This email explained the research, purpose, confidentiality agreement and inclusion criteria of the study. Once participants agreed to participate in the study by clicking the survey link embedded in the recruitment email, survey participants were taken to a separate online page where they were screened by completing the inclusion criteria (Appendix D). After meeting the inclusion criteria, participants were required to read and

give their informed consent to participate in the study (Appendix E). Participants were asked to save this informed consent for their records. Followed by the informed consent, participants were taken to the survey (Appendix F), where they were asked 28-questions based on their previous coping experiences within the past six months. Participants were made aware that the survey could take 20–30 minutes to complete. The online survey was created using Qualtrics, an electronic survey creator that allows easier transfer of data using excel. Ms. Marjorie Postal, research instructor and analyst, from Smith College School for Social Work was the data analyst for this study.

Confidentiality and Risks

A separate email account was created to answer questions related to the survey. The purpose of the email address was to address any survey-related concerns for participants, while maintaining confidentiality. This email address (See Appendix B) was the sole email address utilized by recruiting organizations/agencies and study participants to communicate with the researcher. Additionally, participants' survey responses were protected since data was entered in Qualtrics. Participating in this study may have caused participants to feel uncomfortable or distressed. Information about where to seek supportive resources was made available to study participants (See Appendix E). Participants were informed that if necessary they could end their participation at any time by closing the survey's browser. If participants chose to end the survey before its completion, their data was excluded from the study.

Sample

Eligibility criteria for the study participants included women clicking, "yes," to all five questions asked in the inclusion criteria. Additionally, participants needed to have identified that the incarceration of their male partner or spouse had affected their lives in one, or more, of the

following areas—economic, social, emotional—in the past six months in order to meet the inclusion criteria.

Specific demographic data was collected regarding each participant and their incarcerated partner or spouse including: race, gender, age, education, socioeconomic status, child status, pregnancy status, conviction status, conviction type (non-violent or violent), sentence length, facility type (i.e. local, state or federal) and facility location.

Coping was defined as all thoughts and behaviors that occur in response to a stressful experience, whether the person is handling the situation well or poorly (Friedman, 2001). By broadly focusing on all thoughts and behaviors, regardless of whether the person has stress under control or not, gives premise to an array of responses—both adaptive and maladaptive—to identify additional areas of support. Romantic partnership was defined as a person involved in a heterosexual relationship with a male incarcerated with a conviction. Lastly, stress was defined as tension resulting from adverse, or very demanding circumstances.

Participants were not compensated for their participation in the study. Study participants were made aware of the potential benefits of their participation in this study (Appendix E).

CHAPTER IV: Findings

This study examined how well women adaptively coped when romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men when dealing with economic, social and emotional stress. The Brief COPE was used to assess participants' responses when confronted with difficult or stressful life events by examining the use of problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidant-focused coping styles.

The findings that follow will include participants' demographics, which include: race, age, education, household income, child status and relationship length. Secondly, findings on the current incarcerated history of the participants' romantic partners and spouses will be discussed. This will include information on whether it is their first conviction, the type of conviction, sentence length, facility type and location, respectively. Last, results of the Brief COPE scale will be presented. Participants rated their coping preference to problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping and avoidant-focused coping questions.

Size and Demographics of Study Sample

A total of 151 participants responded to the survey. However, only 82 respondents met all of the inclusion criteria (see Appendix D). Additionally, due to response burden, nine potential participants did not complete the survey's section of demographic information and incarcerated history of their partner. A total of 73 participants shared their demographic information and their partners' incarcerated history. Response burden increased as participants continued into the survey, where an additional six participants did not complete the Brief COPE. A total of 67

participants completed the Brief COPE survey. Overall, the sample size of 67 participants represented a diverse group of women participants from various identities and experiences (Table 2).

Participants included within the study identified as 14% African American, 1% Asian American, 75% Caucasian, 4% Hispanic and 6% Multi-racial. Interestingly, African American women did not constitute a large respondent subgroup, despite being the second largest respondent subgroup after Caucasian women. Women between the ages of 25 to 34 represented 37% of the sample, the largest group. The second largest group identified as 35 to 44 years of age at 36%. Additionally, women between the ages of 45 to 54 made-up 17% of the study sample and represented the third largest group. Young adult women between the ages of 18 to 24 represented 7% of the study sample. The smallest group of women identified between the ages of 55 to 64 and represented 3% of the group.

Education levels were provided by participants and were categorized by some school completion, but not degree attainment 4%, General Education Development (GED) 1%, high school graduate 14%, some college 29%, college completion 37%, some graduation school 5% and graduate school completion 10%. Participants represented a well-rounded range of educational experiences, with the majority being college graduates.

The economic status of participants was divided among five categories. Eighty-five percent of participants identified household incomes lower than \$50,000, where 44% and 41% of participants made less than \$24,999 and \$25,000 to \$49,999, respectively. Only 15% of participants made over \$50,000, where 10% of women made \$50,000 to \$74,999. Four percent made \$75,000 to \$99,999 and 1% made over \$100,000. Additionally, 58% of participants identified as mothers and the majority of women (99%) confirmed they were not

pregnant during the commencement of the study. Additionally, the number of children of participants ranged between one and seven (see Table 2). Lastly, women in long-term relationships (over 2 years) with their male incarcerated partner accounted for 81% of the study, while 11% of study participants were romantically involved or married one to two years. Only 8% of study participants were romantically involved with their male incarcerated partner for one year or less.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

n=73			
Race	African American or Black	14%	10
	Asian American or Asian	1%	1
	Caucasian or White	75%	55
	Hispanic	4%	3
	Multi-racial	6%	4
Age	18 to 24	7%	5
	25 to 34	37%	27
	35 to 44	36%	26
	45 to 54	17%	13
	55 to 64	3%	2
Education	Completed some school, but attained no diploma	4%	3
	Received a GED	1%	1
	Graduated from high school	14%	10
	Completed some college	29%	21
	Graduated from college	37%	27
	Completed some graduate school	5%	4
	Completed graduate school	10%	7
Household Income	Under \$24,999	44%	32
	\$25,000—\$49,999	41%	30
	\$50,000—\$74,999	10%	7
	\$75,000—\$99,999	4%	3
	\$100,000 and up	1%	1
Children	Yes	58%	42
	No	42%	31
Relationship Length	Less than one year	8%	6
	No more than 2 years	11%	8
	Over 2 years	81%	59

Incarcerated History of Participants' Partners

The first section of the survey, presented in Table 2, highlighted participants' demographic information related to race, age, education, household income, child status and relationship length. In Table 3, the current incarcerated history of participants' partners, whether romantically involved or through marriage, is presented. The following questions were again represented in quantitative format and answered if this was a first-time conviction, type of conviction, sentence length, facility type and location. Participant responses were again varied and represented a wide range of experiences.

Table 3: Incarcerated History of Participants' Romantic Partners and Spouses

n=73			
First-time Conviction	Yes	38%	28
	No	62%	45
Conviction Type	Non-violent offense	62%	45
	Violent offense	36%	26
	Not sure	2%	2
Sentence Length	Less than one	5%	4
	No more than 2	11%	8
	2—3	18%	13
	4—7	16%	11
	8—15	23%	16
	15+	27%	19
Facility Type	Local-operated facility	13%	9
	State-operated facility	66%	46
	Federal-operated facility	13%	9
	Don't know	8%	6
Facility Location	Northeast	17%	12
	South	44%	31
	Midwest	14%	10
	West	16%	11
	Don't know	9%	6

A total of 62% of participants reported this was not their romantic partners' or spouses' first conviction, compared to 38% who indicated it was their first. Participants were asked to

share the type of conviction their partner received. This was separated into non-violent offense (i.e. a crime that does not involve the use of any force or injury to another) and violent offense (i.e. a crime that involves the use of force or injury to the body of another person). Sixty-two percent of participants reported their romantic partner or spouse was convicted of a non-violent crime, while 36% indicated violent offense. Another 2% was “not sure” of their romantic partners’ or spouses’ conviction. This was largely due to their partner awaiting trial. Participants romantically involved with, or married to, men who were incarcerated reported a variety of sentence lengths. Twenty-seven percent of women reported their partner was serving more than 15 years in prison, followed by 23% who reported 8 to 15 years. Only 16% reported 4 to 7 years, while 18% reported 2 to 3 years. Eleven percent of participants indicated sentences length of less than two years. The lowest sentence length reported was less than one year at 5%.

Participants reported the type of facility their romantic partner or spouse was located in. This category was separated into three categories, which included: local (i.e. jails operated by local law enforcement), state (i.e. prison facilities operated by state) and federal (i.e. prison facilities operated by the federal government) facilities. Participants reported 13% was within a local-operated facility, followed by 66% in state-operated facility and 13% in federally-operated facilities. Only 8% reported they “did not know” what jurisdiction their romantic partner or spouse was located within. Lastly, participants were asked to report the state their partner or spouse was serving his time. Twenty-six states were included and were categorized into regions within the United States that included the Northeast, South, Midwest and West. The Midwest made up 14% of the location, the West at 16% and the Northeast accounted for 17%. The South had that majority at 44%. A number of participants reported they “did not know” the location, this accounted for 9%. In the next section to follow, participants completed the Brief COPE

survey by selecting responses that suited their coping response based on stress encountered from their romantic partner or spouse incarcerated.

The Brief COPE Inventory

The Brief COPE is a survey with 14-scales with two-items (or questions) each, separated into three coping categories: problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping and avoidant-focused coping (Carver, 1997). There were a total of 28 questions and each question was placed in one of the three coping categories using insight from research articles on the COPE Inventory. Table 1 illustrates associated questions within each category. Additionally, problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping were grouped under adaptive coping (i.e. constructive coping) and avoidant-focused coping under maladaptive coping (i.e. destructive coping).

A total of 67 participants (n=67) completed the Brief COPE. Responses were spread evenly throughout each item, within each scale, and included a wide range of coping strategies within problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidant-focused coping. Problem-focused coping was aimed at problem-solving or doing something to alter the source of the stress. Second, emotion-focused coping was aimed at reducing or managing the emotional distress that is associated with—or cued by—the situation. Third, avoidant-focused coping was aimed at impeding adaptive—active—coping.

Problem-focused Coping

Participants utilized various problem-focused coping strategies, which included: active coping, seeking of instrumental social support, planning and acceptance. Active coping consisted of initiating a coping attempt to ameliorate a stressful experience. Majority of participants reported “I usually do this a lot” and “I usually do this all the time,” when asked if they have been concentrating their efforts to do something about their situation, or taking action to make

their situation better related to their partners' incarceration, respectively. In this case, 60% (n=40) of participants usually concentrated their efforts to do something about their situation a lot of the time and all the time. The same was found for 73% (n=49) of participants who take action to try to make their situation better a lot of the time and all of the time. For more information, refer to Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Problem-focused Coping Scales and Items

n=67			
<i>Active</i>			
I've been concentrating my efforts on doing something about the situation I'm in.	I usually don't do this at all	10%	7
	I usually do this a little bit	30%	20
	I usually do this a lot	45%	30
	I usually do this all the time	15%	10
I've been taking action to try to make the situation better.	I usually don't do this at all	0%	0
	I usually do this a little bit	27%	18
	I usually do this a lot	42%	28
	I usually do this all the time	31%	21
<i>Instrumental Support</i>			
I've been getting help and advice from other people.	I usually don't do this at all	33%	22
	I usually do this a little bit	28%	19
	I usually do this a lot	21%	14
	I usually do this all the time	18%	12
I've been trying to get advice or help from other people about what to do.	I usually don't do this at all	36%	24
	I usually do this a little bit	25%	17
	I usually do this a lot	31%	21
	I usually do this all the time	8%	5
<i>Planning</i>			
I've been trying to come up with a strategy about what to do.	I usually don't do this at all	9%	6
	I usually do this a little bit	16%	11
	I usually do this a lot	54%	36
	I usually do this all the time	21%	14
I've been thinking hard about what steps to take.	I usually don't do this at all	3%	2
	I usually do this a little bit	24%	16
	I usually do this a lot	43%	29
	I usually do this all the time	30%	20

Acceptance

I've been accepting the reality of the fact that it has happened.	I usually don't do this at all	6%	4
	I usually do this a little bit	12%	8
	I usually do this a lot	39%	26
	I usually do this all the time	43%	29
I've been learning to live with it.	I usually don't do this at all	3%	2
	I usually do this a little bit	10%	7
	I usually do this a lot	39%	26
	I usually do this all the time	48%	32

Seeking instrumental social support is seeking advice, assistance or information. This was separated into two scales: I've been getting help and advice from other people and I've been trying to get advice or help from other people about what to do. Majority of participants, 61% (n=41), stated, "I usually do not" or "I usually a little bit" get the help and advice from other people on what to do about their situation related to the incarceration of their romantic partner or spouse. The same trend is seen when 61% (n=41) of participants responded "I usually do not" or "I usually a little bit" try to get advice or help from other people.

Planning focuses on thinking about how to cope, thinking of the best steps to take and how to handle the problem, with a stressor related to participants' romantic involvement or marriage to their male incarcerated partner. Majority of participants are thoughtful in planning how to cope with incarcerated-stress. Seventy-five (n=50) of participants have tried to come up with a strategy about what to do "usually a lot of time" and "usually all the time." Additionally, 73% (n=49) of participants have thought hard about what steps to take "usually a lot of time" and "usually all the time."

The acceptance scale is classified as understanding the reality of a stressful situation in an attempt to deal with it. Majority of participants 82% (n=55) have accepted the reality that their partners' incarceration has happened "usually a lot" and "usually all the time." Participants also

have learned how to live with their partners' incarceration, where 87% (n=58) have learned to live with their partners' incarceration "usually a lot" and "usually all the time." Overall, participants responded favorably to problem-focused coping and are adept to finding supportive ways to alter their stress levels by using active coping, planning and acceptance strategies. Participants, however, do not seek social support from others, which scored the lowest out of the four scales presented within problem-focused coping.

Emotion-focused Coping

Participants utilized various emotion-focused coping strategies, which include: self-distraction, seeking of social support for emotional reasons, positive reframing, humor and religion. Interestingly, participants only responded to one item within Religion scale: I've been trying to find comfort in my religion or spiritual beliefs. For more information, refer to Table 1.2. Self-distraction, also referred to as mental disengagement, is a way of coping using distraction to take one's mind off a problem. Participants utilized self-distraction as a coping response, where the majority, 80% (n=54), have been turning to work or other activities to take their mind off things related to their partners' incarceration by sharing, "I usually do this all the time" and "I usually do this a lot" when combined. This is also reflective in participants' ability to do something to think less about their partners' or spouses' incarceration by watching TV, reading, daydreaming, sleeping or shopping. Nearly 64% (n=43) of participants responded "I usually do this a lot" and "I usually do this all the time" when combined.

Table 1.2: Emotion-focused Coping Scales and Items

n=67			
<i>Self-distraction</i>			
I've been turning to work or other activities to take my mind off things.	I usually don't do this at all	5%	3
	I usually do this a little bit	15%	10
	I usually do this a lot	40%	27
	I usually do this all the time	40%	27
I've been doing something to think about it less, such as going to movies, watching TV, reading, daydreaming, sleeping, or shopping.	I usually don't do this at all	8%	5
	I usually do this a little bit	28%	19
	I usually do this a lot	25%	17
	I usually do this all the time	39%	26
<i>Emotional Support</i>			
I've been getting emotional support from others.	I usually don't do this at all	33%	22
	I usually do this a little bit	28%	19
	I usually do this a lot	24%	16
	I usually do this all the time	15%	10
I've been getting comfort and understanding from someone.	I usually don't do this at all	40%	27
	I usually do this a little bit	28%	19
	I usually do this a lot	23%	15
	I usually do this all the time	9%	6
<i>Positive Reframing</i>			
I've been trying to see it in a different light, to make it seem more positive.	I usually don't do this at all	9%	6
	I usually do this a little bit	15%	10
	I usually do this a lot	48%	32
	I usually do this all the time	28%	19
I've been looking for something good in what is happening.	I usually don't do this at all	12%	8
	I usually do this a little bit	18%	12
	I usually do this a lot	39%	26
	I usually do this all the time	31%	21
<i>Humor</i>			
I've been making jokes about it.	I usually don't do this at all	49%	33
	I usually do this a little bit	24%	16
	I usually do this a lot	18%	12
	I usually do this all the time	9%	6
I've been making fun of the situation.	I usually don't do this at all	72%	48
	I usually do this a little bit	14%	9
	I usually do this a lot	9%	6
	I usually do this all the time	5%	3

*n=66

Religion

I've been trying to find comfort in my religion or spiritual beliefs.	I usually don't do this at all	30%	20
	I usually do this a little bit	16%	11
	I usually do this a lot	21%	14
	I usually do this all the time	33%	22

Seeking social support for emotional reason is getting moral support, sympathy, or understanding. Over one-third of participants reported “I usually don’t do this at all” when asked if they have been getting emotional support from others and if they have been trying to get comfort and understanding from someone regarding their partners’ incarceration.

Reframing, or positive reinterpretation, is managing distress emotions. Majority of participants 48% (n=32) reported, “I usually do this a lot” when asked if they have been trying to see their partners’ or spouses’ incarceration in a new light. Additionally, this trend was reflective for the majority of participants, 39% (n=26), who have been looking for something good in what is happening related to their partners’ or spouses’ incarceration by responding, “I usually do this a lot.”

Humor was defined as using jokes, or instead, making fun of the situation to cope with stress. Over one-third of study participants, 49% (n=33), did not joke about their partners’ or spouses’ incarceration. This was also illustrated in nearly three-fourths of participants, 72% (n=48), who did not make fun of their partners’ or spouses’ incarceration. Religion was defined as the tendency to turn to religion or spiritual beliefs to find comfort. Participants’ responses were various, where the majority were evenly split between, “I usually don’t do this at all” at 30% (n=20) and “I usually do this all the time” at 33% (n=22).

Avoidant-focused Coping

Participants utilized various avoidant-focused coping strategies, which include: denial, substance-use, behavioral disengagement, venting of emotions and self-blame. For more

information, refer to Table 1.3. Denial, a response that denies the reality of the event and its related stressors was underutilized by participants 60% (n=40) and 88% (n=59) when asked if they have said “this isn’t real” and refusing to believe their partners’ incarceration has occurred. Majority reported, “I usually don’t do this at all,” and “I usually do this a little bit,” respectively.

Table 1.3: Avoidant-focused Coping Scales and Items

n=67			
<i>Denial</i>			
I've been saying to myself "this isn't real."	I usually don't do this at all	42%	28
	I usually do this a little bit	18%	12
	I usually do this a lot	19%	13
	I usually do this all the time	21%	14
I've been refusing to believe that it has happened.	I usually don't do this at all	70%	47
	I usually do this a little bit	18%	12
	I usually do this a lot	4%	3
	I usually do this all the time	8%	5
<i>Substance-use</i>			
I've been using alcohol or other drugs to make myself feel better.	I usually don't do this at all	72%	48
	I usually do this a little bit	16%	11
	I usually do this a lot	9%	6
	I usually do this all the time	3%	2
I've been using alcohol or other drugs to help me get through it.	I usually don't do this at all	82%	55
	I usually do this a little bit	8%	5
	I usually do this a lot	8%	5
	I usually do this all the time	3%	2
<i>Behavioral Disengagement</i>			
I've been giving up trying to deal with it.	I usually don't do this at all	60%	40
	I usually do this a little bit	33%	22
	I usually do this a lot	8%	5
	I usually do this all the time	0%	0
I've been giving up the attempt to cope.	I usually don't do this at all	66%	44
	I usually do this a little bit	25%	17
	I usually do this a lot	6%	4
	I usually do this all the time	3%	2
<i>Venting</i>			
I've been saying things to let my unpleasant feelings escape.	I usually don't do this at all	43%	29
	I usually do this a little bit	25%	17
	I usually do this a lot	27%	18
	I usually do this all the time	5%	3
I've been expressing my negative	I usually don't do this at all	19%	13

feelings.	I usually do this a little bit	34%	23
	I usually do this a lot	31%	21
	I usually do this all the time	15%	10
<i>Self-blame</i>			
I've been criticizing myself.	I usually don't do this at all	34%	23
	I usually do this a little bit	27%	18
	I usually do this a lot	22%	15
	I usually do this all the time	16%	11
I've been blaming myself for things that happened.	I usually don't do this at all	66%	44
	I usually do this a little bit	10%	7
	I usually do this a lot	10%	7
	I usually do this all the time	13%	9

Engaging in substance-use involves the intake of alcohol to help alleviate stress.

Participants are unlikely to engage in substance-use, where the majority 72% (n=48) and 82% (n=55) reported they usually “don’t do this at all” when asked if they used alcohol or other drugs to make themselves feel better and alcohol and other drugs to help them get through their partners’ or spouses’ incarceration, respectively.

Behavioral disengagement focuses on reducing efforts to deal with stress. It is closely identified with helplessness. Participants are not adept to cope through helplessness, where the majority 90% (n=60) and 93% (n=62) have not given up trying to deal or attempt to cope with their partners’ or spouses’ incarceration, respectively.

Venting is described as the tendency to ventilate distressing experiences. Majority of participants 43% (n=29) expressed, “I usually don’t do this at all,” when asked if they have said things to let their unpleasant feelings escape regarding their partners’ or spouses’ incarceration. However, when asked if they have expressed negative feelings about their partners’ or spouses’ incarceration, participants responses were closely similar for “I usually don’t do this at all,” and “I usually do this all the time,” where responses resembled 19% (n=13) and 15% (n=10), respectively.

Self-blame is the ability to hold yourself accountable and making negative statements about your actions that are deemed irresponsible. Majority of participants 66% (n=44) do not blame themselves for their partners' or spouses' incarceration, citing: "I usually don't do this at all." However, participants are likely to present varied coping responses when asked if they have been criticizing themselves.

Participants were less likely to use maladaptive coping responses when coping with their partners' or spouses' incarceration. More specifically, coping through the use of denial, substance-use, behavioral disengagement was significantly low. Surprisingly, coping through venting is usually not done by participants and coincides with previous findings related to not seeking social and emotional instrumental support within problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies, respectively. These findings suggested participants were unlikely to share their experiences with others regarding coping with their partners' or spouses' incarceration, regardless if it includes seeking support or expressing frustrations.

Implications of Findings

Overall, participants' responses were varied and represented a wide range of coping strategies related to their partners' or spouses' incarceration within problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidant-focused coping styles. There was no correlation between problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidant-focused coping styles within race, age, education and income. This suggested there is no relationship between these three variables and whether they will influence adaptive and maladaptive coping, respectively.

Racially, participants did not encompass a variety of racial identities and the size of the subpopulations was small in comparison to Caucasian women. Therefore, a detailed analysis of race could not be conducted due to the size of these racially and ethnically diverse

subpopulations. Thematically, participants adaptively coped with their partners' incarceration, where the majority of study respondents expressed, "I usually do this all the time" and "I usually do this a lot" when relating their coping styles to problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. This suggested there is a positive relationship between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping and as problem-focused coping increases/decreases, so will emotion-focused coping (and vice versa).

Lastly, participants were less likely to cope with their partners' or spouses' incarceration through maladaptive coping strategies, suggesting a negative correlation (i.e. as adaptive coping responses increases, maladaptive coping responses decreases). However, when looking at specific coping scales related to instrumental social and emotional support, participants were less likely to seek support in receiving advice, assistance and information; as well as getting moral support, sympathy and understanding from others. These findings positively correlated with participants' responses to venting. Participants were more likely to vent their feelings surrounding their partners' incarceration as seeking instrumental support socially and emotionally increased.

A discussion of the key findings will follow in the upcoming section, which will include discussion of the positive relationship between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping styles, understanding the low utilization of seeking instrumental support socially and emotionally and its relationship to venting, respectively. Last, recommendations will be provided for clinicians who work with women romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men and considerations to help engage this population in mental health treatment.

CHAPTER V: Discussion

The purpose of the study was to assess the extent of adaptive coping responses of women romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men. The study sought to address this research question by answering how well do women adaptively cope when romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men when dealing with economic, social and emotional stress by examining the use of problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidant-focused coping styles—an area of research that has for the most part remained unexamined in social work literature. Within the study, answering the extent of adaptive coping responses of African American women was also explored since many of these women are more prone to economic, social and emotional stress related to their race and gender (Essed, 1991, p. 31). Within the chapter, discussion of findings presented in the previous section will be explored, specifically focusing on the coping responses of participants and racial demographics of participants found within the study. Additionally, the chapter will present the study's limitations and suggestions for future clinical social work practice.

Coping Responses

Participants' responses were varied and represented a wide range of adaptive and maladaptive coping responses to incarcerated-stress within problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidant-focused coping styles. There was no correlation associated with any of the coping styles presented within the study on women's age, education and income. Thomas, Witherspoon, and Speight (2008) suggested women—regardless of race—experience sexism and that they

must learn how to mitigate discriminatory distress based on their sex (p. 307). Additionally, Morse and Furst (1979) also suggested women's stress is influenced by experiences related to their sex (p.44), and that they are more prone to respond to stress through passive aggressive behavior (p. 25). This may suggest women have already developed coping strategies to deal with stress, potentially in other areas of their lives unrelated to their partners' incarceration. This proposes women are easily adept to transfer already established coping skills to any stressful experience, regardless of the source of stress. This may be related to women coping with sexism and building resiliency as a result of biases related to their gender. Further exploration within this area will be important to determine in future research on this topic.

Although participants were likely to use problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidant-focused coping styles, there was a positive correlation between participants utilizing instrumental social and emotional support, within problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, respectively. As participants were less likely to use instrumental social support, they were also less likely to use instrumental emotional support. The positive correlation suggested women are less likely to seek out social and emotional support when coping with the stress of having a loved one incarcerated. If women are more likely to seek out social support, they will also be likely to seek out emotional support.

Use of instrumental social and emotional support specifically impacted participants' responses to maladaptive coping within the venting scale. As women were less likely to use instrumental social and emotional support, they were equally less likely to engage in venting in order to express their thoughts and feelings surrounding their partners' incarceration. This may be related to stigma surrounding incarceration and feeling ostracized from society to discuss

incarceration (Comfort, 2008), regardless if it was for social, emotional support or a venting release.

Coping Responses for African American Women

Interestingly, African American women made up only 14% of study participants. The low participation from African American women within the study may be related to this specific population seeking support outside of the online communities study participants were recruited from, since many African American women seek coping support within religious and spiritual areas Mattis (2002).

Limitations

Research of coping responses for women romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men has not been examined in social work literature. Additionally, the study instrument used within the survey, Brief COPE, has never been used to assess the range of coping responses of this vulnerable population. An edited version of the COPE Inventory was used, there were 28-items, or questions, within the survey, making response burden low. Additionally, the sample size was limited. As mentioned above, study participants were not from racially diverse backgrounds, where the majority of participants were Caucasian (75%), followed by African American (14%), Multi-racial (6%), Hispanic (4%) and Asian (1%). Due to the sample size being homogenous and the limited diversity amongst participants, findings on African American women and their related coping strategies were not found to be statistically significant within the study. For future research, it would be important to increase the overall number of African American women respondents by working with support communities that work exclusively with this population.

Implications for Clinical Social Work Practice

One of the implications of the study's findings is that women are less likely to seek social support from people in getting advice or help on what to do to cope with their partners' incarceration. Additionally, they are equally less likely to get emotional support from others to help get understanding and comfort. Due to sexism (Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight 2008), women are adept at coping with stress related to their gender and are able to transfer already developed adaptive coping strategies to support their mental and emotional health to lower maladaptive coping. One of the implications of the study's findings is that women could benefit from mental health services in order to explore their resistance to seek social and emotional support to diminish feelings of shame related to societal negative influences related to incarceration.

Clinicians could benefit from gaining more understanding about the impact of mass incarceration on families and partners, especially since many clients come from marginalized populations and are statistically more likely be incarcerated as a result of this disenfranchisement (Coates, 2015). It is also important that clinicians are aware of the implications of incarceration on the family unit, specifically on women. Conducting clinical assessments with women should provide the opportunity to discuss the legal status of not only women seeking mental health services, but the history of family members, particularly men who they are romantically involved with or married to. Due to feelings of shame and feeling ostracized, they are less likely to readily share this information.

Conclusion

The United States has the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world (Enns, 2014). Additionally, the majority of the inmate population is male (Lindquist, 2000). As the

stress encountered by offenders will increase the need for supportive relationships, little research has been done on the stress of incarceration on offenders' significant others, specifically how women cope while being romantically involved with, or married to, male offenders (Comfort, 2008). This is largely due to women feeling shamed and ostracized by society when discussing incarceration (Morse & Furst, 1979; Braman, 2004).

As discussed within the study, women coping with incarcerated-stress demonstrate a variety of ways to cope. While seeking social and emotional support is limited and often not sought, this is largely due to societal influences surrounding stigma discussed throughout the study. As clinicians work with women who are romantically involved with, or married to, incarcerated men, applying a strengths-based approach is helpful. Saleebey (1996) suggests this approach to treatment requires using what people know and what they could do to compile resources for themselves, within the individual, family and community, to problem-solve (p. 297). As women utilize a variety of strategies to cope with their loved one's incarceration (i.e. problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidant-focused), incorporating a strengths-based approach can help guide support of utilizing adaptive coping rather than maladaptive coping within this population. In general, more research is needed to address women's coping related to incarceration, especially as it relates to its impact on their health. The majority of the two million individuals imprisoned are men of color and more research is needed—both quantitative and qualitative—to better understand the coping patterns being utilized by women of color, particularly African American women who are their romantic partners or spouses.

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APPENDIX A: Human Subjects Review Approval Letter



School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

February 18, 2016

Jaleesa Myers

Dear Jaleesa.

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Victoria Winbush, Research Advisor

APPENDIX B: Recruitment Email to Organizations/Agencies

To: Coping Responses <copingresponses@gmail.com>

Cc: Dr. Victoria Winbush <vwinbush@gmail.com>

Bcc: <emails of organizations/agencies>

Subject: Seeking Participants for Research Study on Women, Incarceration and Stress/Coping

[body of email]

Hello,

I hope this email finds you well.

I would like to describe my study to women from your organization in hopes that they might be willing to volunteer to be respondents for the study. The purpose of the study is to assess the coping responses of women romantically involved with men who are incarcerated. Completion of this study will fulfill a requirement toward my earning a graduate degree in clinical social work from Smith College School for Social Work (SCSSW) because I have chosen to do my thesis on this topic. Research related to the needs of this population group has been for the most part unexamined. I am interested in addressing this gap in social work literature by the development of this study. I am seeking your support to gain access to members of this population group who may be interested in sharing their thoughts and experiences.

Research is being overseen by my research advisor, Dr. Victoria Winbush (cc'd), who has been selected by SCSSW to oversee my research.

Below is a snapshot of the research I will be conducting:

Purpose: to determine how women romantically involved in partnerships with incarcerated men with stress associated with their partners' incarceration.

Research Question: to what extent do women who are romantically involved with or married to men who are incarcerated utilize adaptive coping responses?

Research Design: a quantitative study using the Brief COPE, a 28-item inventory, examining the use of problem, emotional and avoidance coping styles.

Recruitment: to recruit participants through their connection to online communities, such as NYIF, and other outside agencies that provide support to individuals, groups and families who have a loved one incarcerated.

A copy of my proposal can be found attached. Additionally, the survey can be found here. The survey link also contains the inclusion criteria, demographic questionnaire and a confidentiality agreement.

If you will agree to make the study available to the members of your online community, please provide an email response of approval to copingresponses@gmail.com.

Best,
Jaleesa

This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the Smith College School for Social Work (SCSSW) Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC).

APPENDIX C: Recruitment Email to Participants

To: Coping Responses <copingresponses@gmail.com>

Bcc: Dr. Victoria Winbush <vwinbush@gmail.com>; <emails of participants>

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Survey to Help Understand Your Experience

[body of email]

Hello,

A loved one's incarceration can be stressful and support is often limited to close family and friends. As stressful as it is to cope with a partners' incarceration; dealing with financial, social and emotional stability is even more difficult.

This study aims to help social workers be able to meet the needs of women who are dealing with the stress associated with a partners' incarceration. By completing this survey, you will be part of research that will help guide how social workers support women whose male partners are incarcerated.

Are You:

- Romantically involved/married to a man incarcerated?
- Experiencing financial, social and/or economic stress related to his incarceration?
- 18 years of age or older?

If you answered 'yes' to ALL [click here!](#)

All responses shared on the online survey are confidential.
Survey takes 20—30 minutes to complete.

If you have any questions, please send them to copingresponses@gmail.com. Also, please share this survey with those in your social network who may also be interested in participating.

Thank you for your interest and consideration.

Your Student Researcher

This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the Smith College School for Social Work (SCSSW) Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC).

APPENDIX D: Inclusion Criteria

*Inclusion Criteria *clicking 'no' in any of the below questions will result in an automatic ending of the survey*

1. Are you **18 years of age** or older?

yes

no

2. Are you able to **read and comprehend English fluently**?

yes

no

3. Are you a heterosexual woman **currently romantically involved or married to** a heterosexual male incarcerated in the U.S.?

yes

no

4. Were you **romantically involved** with or **married** to this same male partner **at least 1 month** prior to his incarceration?

yes

no

5. Have you been **impacted socially, emotionally** and/or **financially** by his incarceration **at least once** in the past six months?

yes

no

APPENDIX E: Informed Consent

2015—2016

SMITH COLLEGE

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Smith College School for Social Work • Northampton, MA

Title of Study: Coping with Incarcerated-related Stress: A Study of Coping Responses by Women Romantically Involved with Incarcerated Men

Investigator: Jaleesa Myers, Smith College School for Social Work, (678) 509-5952

Introduction

You were recruited as a participant based on your romantic involvement or marriage with an incarcerated male. Please read this form and ask any questions before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study is to learn the type of coping responses used by women who are romantically involved with men who are incarcerated. This study is being conducted as a research requirement for my master's in social work degree. This research may be published or presented at professional conferences. The potential benefit of this study to the profession of social work will help to discuss unique implications of incarceration for women to help guide future services.

Description of the Study Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to complete an online survey that will take about 20 – 30 minutes.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study

The study has no risks. Additional information regarding supportive services is provided at the end of this consent form.

Benefits of Being in the Study

A benefit for your participation is to gain insight in how you are coping with your partner's incarceration. The potential benefit of this study to the profession of social work is that it will help to discuss the unique implications of incarceration for women to help guide future services.

Confidentiality

Your participating in this study is completely confidential. I will not be collecting or retaining any information about your identity. I will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

Collection & Retention of Information

All research materials will be kept in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period.

Payments/Gift

You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

Your participation is voluntary. You can stop participating in this study at any time during the survey by clicking on the 'ESC' button at the top left of your keyboard. If you don't complete the survey, your information won't be included in the research. Once you finish the survey you won't be able to withdraw because I will have no way to identify which answers are yours.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me at copingresponses@gmail.com. If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Support Services

- The New York Inmate Families Support Advocacy Forum
- National Alliance on Mental Illness
- The Osbourne Association

Consent

Your e-signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. For any concerns related to the confidentiality of your responses or to the survey, please feel free to contact: copingreponses@gmail.com. For convenience, please print the consent form for your records.

Electronic Signature

An e-signature has the same legal binding as a hand-written signature. It is provided on this application by indicating if *I agree* or *I disagree* with the accuracy of the information provided within the application. By clicking *I agree* or *I disagree* you are electronically signing this application in a manner that is legally equivalent to a signature by hand.

I agree

I disagree

APPENDIX F: Survey

Demographics

6. What is your race?

African American or Black

Asian American or Asian

Caucasian or White

Multi-racial

Native American

Other: Specify _____

7. What is your age?

18 to 24

25 to 34

35 to 44

45 to 54

55 to 64

65 or older

8. What is the highest level of education completed?

completed some school, but attained no diploma

received a GED

graduated from high school

completed some college

graduated from college

completed some graduate school

completed graduate school

9. What is your approximate average household income?

under \$24,999

\$25,000—\$49,999

\$50,000—\$74,999

\$75,000—\$99,999

\$100,000 and up

10. Do you have children under the age of 18?

yes, if so how many? ____

no

11. Are you currently pregnant?

yes

no

not sure

12. What type of conviction is your male incarcerated partner serving?

non-violent offense

violent offense

not sure

13. What crime(s) was your male incarcerated partner convicted of?

[text box for participant to write response]

14. Is this your partner's first incarceration?

yes

no, if not how many other times has he been incarcerated? ____

15. What is the length of time you have you been in relationship with your incarcerated male partner?

- Less than one year
- No more than 2 years
- over 2 years

16. How many years is your male incarcerated partner currently serving?

- Less than one
- No more than 2
- 2—3
- 4—7
- 8—15
- 15+

17. What is the location of your male incarcerated partner?

- local operated facility, which state _____
- state operated facility, which state _____
- federal operated facility, which state _____
- don't know

Instructions

You are about to begin another part of the survey that will last 15—20 minutes, depending how quickly you answer each question. You will be able to save and finish the survey at a later time by clicking ‘save’ at the bottom of the page before clicking exiting the page. The following questions will reflect a broad range of coping responses when people are confronted with difficult or stressful events in their lives. There are many ways to deal with stress. This survey will ask you how you feel when you experience stressful events related to your partner’s incarceration and what you usually do when under a lot of stress.

Using the response choices listed below, respond to each of the following items by selecting an answer for each. Please try to respond to each item separately in your mind from each other item. There are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers, so choose the most accurate answer for you.

Answer Key

- 1 = I usually don't do this at all
- 2 = I usually do this a little bit
- 3 = I usually do this a lot
- 4 = I usually do this all the time

1. I've been turning to work or other activities to take my mind off things.

[1] I usually don't do this at all [2] I usually do this a little bit [3] I usually do this a lot [4] I usually do this all the time

2. I've been concentrating my efforts on doing something about the situation I'm in.

[1] I usually don't do this at all [2] I usually do this a little bit [3] I usually do this a lot [4] I usually do this all the time

3. I've been saying to myself "this isn't real."

[1] I usually don't do this at all [2] I usually do this a little bit [3] I usually do this a lot [4] I usually do this all the time

4. I've been using alcohol or other drugs to make myself feel better.

[1] I usually don't do this at all [2] I usually do this a little bit [3] I usually do this a lot [4] I usually do this all the time

5. I've been getting emotional support from others.

[1] I usually don't do this at all [2] I usually do this a little bit [3] I usually do this a lot [4] I usually do this all the time

6. I've been giving up trying to deal with it.

[1] I usually don't do this at all [2] I usually do this a little bit [3] I usually do this a lot [4] I usually do this all the time

7. I've been taking action to try to make the situation better.

[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]
I usually don't do this at all	I usually do this a little bit	I usually do this a lot	I usually do this all the time

8. I've been refusing to believe that it has happened.

[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]
I usually don't do this at all	I usually do this a little bit	I usually do this a lot	I usually do this all the time

9. I've been saying things to let my unpleasant feelings escape.

[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]
I usually don't do this at all	I usually do this a little bit	I usually do this a lot	I usually do this all the time

10. I've been getting help and advice from other people.

[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]
I usually don't do this at all	I usually do this a little bit	I usually do this a lot	I usually do this all the time

11. I've been using alcohol or other drugs to help me get through it.

[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]
I usually don't do this at all	I usually do this a little bit	I usually do this a lot	I usually do this all the time

12. I've been trying to see it in a different light, to make it seem more positive.

[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]
I usually don't do this at all	I usually do this a little bit	I usually do this a lot	I usually do this all the time

13. I've been criticizing myself.

[1] I usually don't do this at all	[2] I usually do this a little bit	[3] I usually do this a lot	[4] I usually do this all the time
---	---	----------------------------------	---

14. I've been trying to come up with a strategy about what to do.

[1] I usually don't do this at all	[2] I usually do this a little bit	[3] I usually do this a lot	[4] I usually do this all the time
---	---	----------------------------------	---

15. I've been getting comfort and understanding from someone.

[1] I usually don't do this at all	[2] I usually do this a little bit	[3] I usually do this a lot	[4] I usually do this all the time
---	---	----------------------------------	---

16. I've been giving up the attempt to cope.

[1] I usually don't do this at all	[2] I usually do this a little bit	[3] I usually do this a lot	[4] I usually do this all the time
---	---	----------------------------------	---

17. I've been looking for something good in what is happening.

[1] I usually don't do this at all	[2] I usually do this a little bit	[3] I usually do this a lot	[4] I usually do this all the time
---	---	----------------------------------	---

18. I've been making jokes about it.

[1] I usually don't do this at all	[2] I usually do this a little bit	[3] I usually do this a lot	[4] I usually do this all the time
---	---	----------------------------------	---

19. I've been doing something to think about it less, such as going to movies, watching TV, reading, daydreaming, sleeping, or shopping.

[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]
I usually don't do this at all	I usually do this a little bit	I usually do this a lot	I usually do this all the time

20. I've been accepting the reality of the fact that it has happened.

[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]
I usually don't do this at all	I usually do this a little bit	I usually do this a lot	I usually do this all the time

21. I've been expressing my negative feelings.

[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]
I usually don't do this at all	I usually do this a little bit	I usually do this a lot	I usually do this all the time

22. I've been trying to find comfort in my religion or spiritual beliefs.

[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]
I usually don't do this at all	I usually do this a little bit	I usually do this a lot	I usually do this all the time

23. I've been trying to get advice or help from other people about what to do.

[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]
I usually don't do this at all	I usually do this a little bit	I usually do this a lot	I usually do this all the time

24. I've been learning to live with it.

[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]
I usually don't do this at all	I usually do this a little bit	I usually do this a lot	I usually do this all the time

25. I've been thinking hard about what steps to take.

[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]
I usually don't do this at all	I usually do this a little bit	I usually do this a lot	I usually do this all the time

26. I've been blaming myself for things that happened.

[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]
I usually don't do this at all	I usually do this a little bit	I usually do this a lot	I usually do this all the time

27. I've been trying to find comfort in my religion or spiritual beliefs.

[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]
I usually don't do this at all	I usually do this a little bit	I usually do this a lot	I usually do this all the time

28. I've been making fun of the situation.

[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]
I usually don't do this at all	I usually do this a little bit	I usually do this a lot	I usually do this all the time

Thank you for taking this survey.