

# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Abstract

Symbolic Imprisonment, Grief, and Coping Theory: African American Women With

Incarcerated Mates

by

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MS, Walden University, 2011

MS, George Washington University, 2001

BS, University of Maryland University College, 1989

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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## Abstract

African American men have been incarcerated at unprecedented rates in the United States over the past 30 years. This study explored how African American females experience adverse psychosocial responses to separation from an incarcerated mate. The purpose of this qualitative grounded theory (GT) study was to construct a theory to explain their responses to separation and loss. Given the paucity of literature on this topic, helping professionals may not understand this problem or know how to support these women. Disenfranchised grief and the dual process model of bereavement were used as a theoretical lens for this study. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 African American women over the age of 18, from the Washington D.C. metropolitan area, and who had incarcerated mates. Systematic data analysis revealed that women in the sample experienced grief similar to losing a loved one through death. They also were found to engage in prolonged states of social isolation, emulating their mate's state of incarceration. As a result of this study, a grounded theory of symbolic imprisonment, grief, and coping (SIG-C) was developed to answer this study's research questions and explain how loss occurs on psychological, social, symbolic, and physical levels. The findings from this study may promote positive social change by informing the human services research community of SIG-C and assisting helping professionals with a basis for context-specific support for affected women to contribute to their well-being during their mate's incarceration.



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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Geoffrey A. Johnson. You truly are my best friend, support system, confidant, soul mate, and one of the most caring people that I have met in this life. You have listened to my endless analysis and never-ending conversations about this dissertation. You never once told me to stop talking, but rather offered your unwavering support. I thank you for supporting me in my endeavor to making this lifelong dream come true.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

The number of incarcerated African American men in the United States has increased significantly over the past 30 years (Western & Muller, 2013). By extension, their African American female mates have experienced adverse consequences of separation and loss (Apel, Blokland, Nieubeerta, & Schellen, 2010; Massoglia, Remster, & King, 2011). Many affected African American women face the risk of loss on a symbolic, psychological, social, and physical level (Apel et al., 2010; Chui, 2009; Duwe & Clarke, 2013; Harman, Smith, & Eagan, 2010; Wildeman, Snittiker, & Turney, 2012; Wildeman & Westin, 2010). However, the literature does not provide a holistic theoretical model to account for these adverse effects possibly experienced by these women, leaving both a theoretical and knowledge gap. Symbolic loss could include material, relationship, and financial losses as well as the loss of safety, personal and social status, and security (Cox, 2012; Siennick, Mears, & Bales, 2013; Swartz-Soicher, Geller, & Garfinkel, 2011). Psychological responses to loss may include feeling anxiety, anger, depression, isolation, and other emotional responses (Chui, 2009). These responses to loss, when analyzed closely in the literature, appeared to be similar in characteristics to grief (Apel et al., 2010; Chui, 2009; Duwe & Clarke, 2013; Harman et al., 2010; Wildeman et al., 2012; Wildeman & Westin, 2010).

To the affected person, these losses may become overlapping and overwhelming, and possibly, compounded by social losses or societal stigma associated with

incarceration, as an indication that their reactions to loss are unworthy of public empathy (Apel et al., 2010; Defina & Hannon, 2010; Dennison, Stewart, & Freiberg, 2013; Doka, 2002). Physical responses to loss may include health-related illness, as well as the impact of physical separation on a dyadic relationship because of a mate's imprisonment (Lee & Wildeman, 2011). However, a review of the literature conveyed that not all African American women respond to strains associated with incarceration and loss in the same manner; some women have developed coping responses that buffer negative impacts, potentially leading to resilience (Choi & Pyun, 2014). For those who do not have the wherewithal to cope effectively, the adversities may continue to aggregate, and if unaddressed, the negative impacts may permeate on personal (Harman et al., 2010), familial (Wakefield, 2010) and community levels (Kelley, Mayingo, Wesley, & Durhan, 2013; Martensen, 2011).

In this section, I focus on the unique characteristics and challenges that the incarceration of an African American mate may pose on their African American female mate living in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. I examine the symbolic, psychological, social, and physical representations of loss that appear to be similar in characteristics to grief. I then examine coping strategies used by African American women. This background provides a context to introduce the problem statement, purpose, and research questions specific to this body of research. I then provide the conceptual framework, followed by the nature of the study. Definitions are provided to offer clarity

about the terms commonly used throughout this study. Finally, I provide the assumptions, delimitations, limitations, and the significance of my research.

### **Background**

Women who live in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area (District of Columbia [D.C.], Maryland, and Virginia) and are in a relationship with an incarcerated mate were identified as a unique group of women for this study. These women were found to be faced with additional barriers and complexities usually associated with the incarceration of a mate that compounds their burden of loss and separation (Harawa & Adimora, 2008).

In general, African American women who are in significant relationships with incarcerated African American men are disproportionately affected by high incarceration rates (Modecki & Wilson, 2009). There are potentially many variations of pairings among African American men and women; however, “few black women pair with nonblack men” (Mechoulan, 2011, p.2). Approximately 85% of African Americans marry within their own ethnic group (Passel, Wang, & Taylor, 2010). This phenomenon of African American male incarceration may affect other ethnic groups of women as well. However, in my study, I concentrated on African American women in relationships with incarcerated mates. I limited my focus to the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area because of the unique characteristics of affected African American women from this jurisdiction, as explained below.

The diversity of African American women impacted by incarceration and their broad characteristics suggested that a focused approach to studying this group and the

social problem was needed (Walley-Jean, 2009). Their varying characteristics included decreased chances of having strong, stable, intact relationships and marriage prospects (Apel et al., 2009). This may be attributed to the fact that African American women in the Washington, D.C. area were found to outnumber their African American male counterparts. Specifically, in 2008, there were 62 men to every 100 women, indicating a shortage of potential male partners (Harawa & Adimora, 2008). Chambers and Kravitz (2011) indicated that it is important for African Americans to have the opportunity to build strong families through marriage and other relationships. These familial relationships provide such benefits as stronger communities and greater informal social control (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011).

Another characteristic that made this affected group of African American women unique was that African American men in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area were found to have a 3 out of 4 chance of becoming incarcerated during their lifetime if they did not have a high school diploma and if they were unemployed (Harawa & Adimora, 2008; McDaniel, Simms, Fortuny, & Monson, 2013). This circumstance increased women's chances of being single and having an incarcerated mate (Resnick, Comfort, McCartney, & Neilands, 2011). Additionally, the Washington, D.C. area has been found to have one of the highest human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) rates among African Americans in the United States (Castel et al., 2012; Center for Disease Control, 2012; Harawa & Adimora, 2008). This circumstance may add additional risk and strain on couples' relationships.

Women who live in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area were also found to face greater strains in trying to stay connected with their incarcerated mate because of geographic separation (Kruzel, 2013). This was largely due to the closing of Washington, D.C.'s Lorton prison complex, previously located in Virginia, in adherence with the National Capital Revitalization and Self Government Improvement Act of 1997 (District of Columbia Department of Corrections, 2014). As a result of this law, all of Lorton's prisoners were transferred to federal facilities under the jurisdiction of the Federal Bureau of Prisons (Guerino, Harrison, & Sabol, 2012). Hence, approximately 6,500 or more prisoners were transferred away from home and family to mostly high security prisons across the United States and were potentially relocated to other prisons within 3 to 5 years after their initial placement, depending on available space at their current placement (Fornaci, 2010). The Federal Bureau of Prisons made attempts to keep prisoners within a 500-mile radius of their hometown; however, it could not be guaranteed (Fornaci, 2010). The overwhelming majority—or 90%—of the felons sent to prison from the Washington D.C. area were African American, and many of them and their families were poor or unemployed (Berliner, 2013; Fornaci, 2010; Justice Policy Institute, 2010).

African American women with an incarcerated spouse were found to be affected by co-occurring losses, both prior to and after the loved one's imprisonment, including a loss of relationship, predictability, anticipated hopes and dreams, and income (Chaney, 2011; Chui, 2011; Comfort, 2008; DeFina & Hannon, 2010; Hagan & Foster, 2012;

Harman et al., 2007). Psychological reactions to loss may be recognized as a significant and complicated form of grieving that includes feelings of stress, loneliness, and feelings of depression (Chui, 2011; Lee & Wildeman, 2011). In their study, Wildeman, Snitticker, and Turney (2012) found high levels of depression in a sample of African American women with an incarcerated spouse. This type of loss may not be a result of any single event, but rather from accumulation of loss and stressors (Perry, Pullen, & Oser, 2012). African American women were found to be subjected to social and personal costs associated with the separation and loss from an incarcerated loved one, otherwise categorized as symbolic losses (Woodall, Dixey, Green, & Newell, 2009). Additionally, offenders and their loved ones often feel a deep sense of loss that may be compounded by other complexities. For instance, there is confusion associated with navigating the new role in the relationship and adapting to conditions of a loved one's confinement (Dennison et al., 2013). These symbolic losses are complex because they can also represent the loss of something that is not normally recognized as having significance or is publically sanctioned as worthy of sympathy and support (Doka, 2002; Kauffman, 2011).

When a female and her significant other are separated by prison, the physical dimension of loss may take on different forms: the loss of physical health, loss of contact, the threat of relationship dissolution, physical separation, and additional challenges from geographical separation. According to Lee and Wildeman's (2011) study, these women may face a decline in health, including the risk of contracting infectious diseases, such as

HIV and an increased risk of hypertension and cardiovascular disease (Lee & Wildeman, 2011). Other health-related risks reported include a reduced likelihood of these women having access to or participating in preventive health practices because of their ambivalence to seek help and lack of access to services (Lee & Wildeman, 2011; Stevens-Watkins et al., 2013).

Researchers have found that women who experience separation and loss because of a loved one's incarceration experience a plethora of responses: depression, anger, fear, numbness, separation anxiety, sleep disorders, and other problems (Fahmy & Berman, 2012). Taken together, these responses appeared to be similar in characteristics to Kubler-Ross's (1967) stages of grief [albeit, they are not linear stages of grief]:

1. Denying that death/loss is imminent;
2. Becoming angered;
3. Trying to bargain;
4. Feeling depression, and
5. Acknowledging and accepting.

Although these responses appeared similar to grief at the outset of this study, there was no scholarly consensus or theoretical model to account for this similarity, leaving a research gap in the literature.

Not all African American women with an incarcerated mate are affected by loss in the same manner. Some women employ coping strategies that enable them to develop alternative ways to respond to their loss (Harman et al., 2007). Chaney, Lawrence, and

Skogrand (2012) indicated that African American women use spirituality and familial support to help them cope with many difficulties.

African American women, in general, are independent and considered to have a strong constitution; however, even women of this stature, when exposed to repeated crisis and trauma, can become overwhelmed and are better served when accessing social support systems (Stevens-Watkins, Sharma, Knighton, Oser, & Leukefeld, 2013). Identifying a means of providing unobtrusive support is especially important given that this cultural group of women tends to shy away from professional help or mental health services (Stevens-Watkins et al., 2013). Therefore, this study becomes an important means of helping to raise awareness of the needs of this population.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Studies have indicated that African American women with incarcerated significant others may experience psychological, social, and physical responses to loss, possibly similar to grief (Apel et al., 2010; Chui, 2009; Duwe & Clarke, 2013; Harman et al., 2010; Wildeman et al., 2012; Wildeman & Westin, 2010). However, at the outset of this study, I found no theoretical model to account for their possible psychosocial and physical distress, potential grief responses, and coping strategies. Therefore, the problem is that helping professionals may not fully understand the impact of separation and loss on the quality of life for affected African American women or know how to support them. The goal of my study was to provide researchers and helping professionals with an

understanding of this problem so that possible future targeted and unobtrusive support services could be provided to this affected population.

Although the literature was sparse for this context-specific problem area, a synthesis of the available literature revealed that there was a consistent finding among scholars: Women, and specifically African American women, were likely to be negatively impacted by their mate's incarceration on multiple levels (Apel et al., 2010; Chui, 2009; Cox, 2012; Duwe & Clarke, 2013; Harman et al., 2010; Siennick et al., 2013; Swartz-Soicher et al., 2011; Wildeman et al., 2012; Wildeman & Westin, 2010;).

Wildeman et al. (2012) indicated that African American women who had children by an incarcerated mate faced physical and mental health risks, such as depression, which was potentially exacerbated by financial implications. Duwe and Clark (2013) suggested that there was a research gap in understanding the importance of women maintaining ties with the offender. Furthermore, Reznick, Comfort, McCartney, and Neilands (2011) stated that women's emotional and physical health risks increase when they are involved with an incarcerated mate. However, these risks may be situational. Other research showed that some women experience a reprieve from a mate's absence, especially if they were victims of domestic violence (Lee & Wideman, 2013). Lee, Porter, and Comfort (2014) suggested that the social stigma of having an incarcerated family member prevents the affected individual from seeking professional support; therefore, the affected woman may suffer in silence. Again, it can be argued that not all women experience this ambivalence.

Turney and Wildeman (2013) articulated that there was a need to understand the countervailing impacts that incarceration has on women and on family stability. Chui (2010) indicated that African American women suffer psychological, social, emotional, and financial hardships when their mate is incarcerated; therefore, more research attention should be directed toward this problem. This study extended Chui's (2010) research and addressed the gap of not fully explaining the psychosocial impacts of incarceration on family, and more specifically, on African American women. My research helped to close this research gap by adding to the body of literature by exploring the context-specific dimensions of psychosocial, loss, grief responses, and coping strategies expressed by this population of women.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to discover and to build a substantive theory that explains African American women's cognitive and emotional processes associated with separation and loss and to understand their coping strategies. This formulation of midlevel theory provides the basis for future researchers to develop subsequent formal or grand theory. To understand this problem of separation and loss, I interviewed a sample of 20 African American women living in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan (D.C., MD, and VA) area. Each of these women was in a relationship with an incarcerated mate.

The new context-specific theoretical model that I constructed may contribute to a new line of thinking about this issue. This discovery may advance the dialogue regarding

the effects of incarceration on a disproportionately impacted group of women and lead to information sharing among supporters and helping professionals for this understudied population. It is possible that helping professionals and others may apply the insights from this study to a support model that contributes to the improved health and well-being of these women.

The concepts central to my study were psychological, physical, and social loss; symbolic loss, and possible grief, and coping strategies, which are integrated into the research questions, below.

### **Research Questions**

In this study, I referred to grand tour research questions as a consolidation of the research questions, problem, and the central concepts for this study. The primary grand tour research questions (RQ) are provided, below:

RQ01: What are the processes and theory that explains how African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate, and what, if any, are their coping strategies?

RQ02: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their current or past experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as psychological, physical, social, and symbolic loss and potential, resultant grief?

These questions were further deconstructed, using each concept as a subquestion, in Chapter 3.

## Conceptual Framework

The framework of this study was influenced by concepts that were derived from the literature and narrowed down to two theories to provide a structured focus on loss and separation. These theories accounted for the iterative responses to grief rather than the linear or sequential phases identified by Kubler-Ross (1967). The major building blocks for developing this grounded theory were hinged upon a consolidation of (a) disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2002) and (b) the dual process model for grief (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Scholars have used a synthesis of theory to inform new ways of looking at existing problems (Graf, Rea, & Barkley, 2013). I used a similar approach to inform this research.

The concepts of interest specific to disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2002) are provided: (a) socially unsanctioned loss, (b) hidden grief, (c) circumstances associated with the grief as stigmatized, or negatively judged by others, and (d) grief that does not conform to normal grieving rules and rituals (e.g., such as holding a memorial service or public support of a prisoner of war through display of yellow ribbons). The second set of concepts used for this study was the dual process model of grief (Schut, 2010). This model helped to explain how individuals may experience oscillating periods of adjusting to loss, interchanged with periods of suffering (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). There are two primary processes that dominate the dual process model: loss orientation and restoration orientation. During loss orientation, the individual experiences the grief process where common signs may include crying or feeling depressed; during the restoration orientation

process, they may be working through grief, redefining roles, and taking a respite from the grief (Schut, 2010). When I considered the commonalities of interest in both theories and condensed them into manageable high level categories, the tentative and initial focus was reduced to a tentative conceptual model, with logical connections and assumptions: Based on a mate's incarceration, if the African American woman's self-defined relationship was intact prior to her mate's incarceration, she may respond with and feel oscillating periods of (a) psychological loss; (b) physical loss and separation; (c) social responses to loss; (d) symbolic loss and resultant grief, and (e) unorthodox grief responses (Doka, 2002). She may (f) apply coping strategies (Schut, 2010).

It was posited that women who did not have a self-defined, intact relationship would have strong coping abilities to adjust to and buffer the feelings of loss. I posited that these expressions of loss would also overlap, and some women would feel each of these expressions. I also posited that there could be a two-way relationship between the responses to loss and coping.

I then developed a tentative working assumption in the framework of this study: African American women who experience the loss of their loved one may oscillate between feelings of grief and coping, but the disenfranchisement associated with being in a relationship with an incarcerated mate may prevent them from seeking social support that may enable them to move closer to healing or recovery. When using grounded theory, the hypothesis is usually generated from the data (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Charmaz, 2006). Therefore, this conceptual framework provided a means of examining

the data through the lens of the disenfranchised grief and dual process model for data analysis, and subsequent hypothesis generation.

I chose these concepts because of the linkages with my study's research problem and how the conceptual framework aligns with my research questions, where the concepts were embedded in the research questions. These concepts also aligned to the interview questions in the interview guide (Appendix A). Each interview question was designed to encompass the nuances of each of the aforementioned concepts. Additional details on the conceptual framework are provided in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

I implemented a grounded theory design for this research study. The grounded theory method enabled me to establish a loose explanatory framework, using the identified tentative concepts (Charmaz, 2008). This approach was best suited because of the paucity of literature and lack of theory for this research topic (Charmaz, 2006). I used Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory method and integrated elements of Glazer and Strauss (1967), where noted, to increase rigor and structure. Quantitative methodology was not feasible for this study as I did not have targeted variables or theory to verify or test (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

The grounded theory method is concerned with discovery of theory, derived from data analysis, and employing tools such as analytical memos, and, potentially, other artifacts, such as policy documents, journals, letters, and photographs (Birks & Mills, 2011). I used analytic memos to record my thoughts about the data, concepts, linkages,

and other important information about the data collection and analysis. These memos were incorporated in the data analysis process.

I performed data collection using qualitative semi-structured, open-ended interview questions. I interviewed 20 African American women who self-identified as having a relationship with a current or previously incarcerated mate. To qualify for the study, the mate must have been currently serving or previously served greater than a 1-year prison sentence. This criterion was based on the rationale that the average incarcerated male serves between 2 to 10 years in prison (U. S. Department of Justice, 2013). I incorporated other artifacts, as additional data points (elicited materials) and for triangulation. These sources were context-specific and included: autobiographies; letters, if approved and released by the source owner(s); web-site testimonials; personalized greeting card content, or newspaper articles, as content-specific to separation and loss between the women and their incarcerated mate. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) indicated that a sample of 20 participants was a large enough qualitative sample to identify emerging common patterns, themes, and concepts. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) stated that randomized sampling is not practical with grounded theory studies. Therefore, I chose to use snowball and convenience sampling to recruit individuals, who were the subject matter experts for this topic.

I used first- and second- cycles of coding, including the use of in vivo coding, which entails respondents' verbatim words, used as codes (Charmaz, 2008). The data collection and analysis processes were iterative, in that I repeated periods of

transcription, analysis, interpretation, code creation, property identification, theoretical category development, and model building, until the point of saturation was reached (Birks & Miles, 2011; Charmaz, 2006). This process is explained thoroughly in Chapter 4.

As I created new categories, to increase the rigor, I evaluated the categories against each other using constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967); in turn, new high-level abstract categories were formed, which led to the creation of theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2006). I then tested and compared these categories to new data collected, until there was a clear pattern, relationships, and understanding of the processes conveyed in the data (Birk & Miles, 2011). That is how theory was constructed (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) described theory as observed patterns and processes that show relationships, change, and outcomes, as identified from the data analysis. Finally, I validated theory through triangulation of additional data sources and compared the findings against discrepant cases (Maxwell, 2013).

### **Definitions**

The terms listed below are used throughout this study. Some terms are used interchangeably, depending on the context in which they are offered.

*African American women:* In this study, the term African American women refers to individuals who self-identify with this ethnic group. One early mention of this term dates back to the book titled “*Invention of the Negro*” (Conrad, 1966). Terms

considered synonymous with this term are Black, of African lineage, or of African descent (Street et al., 2012).

*Assumptive world:* This term describes an individual's strongly held convictions and beliefs about how he or she has the ability to plan, to control, and to predict normalcy of life events. Further, this planning includes assumptions held about the future, based on predictability and stability of past experiences (Natale & Sora, 2010). This term originated from the work of Parkes (1975), who studied widows and widowers suffering from bereavement.

*Classic grounded theory:* The processes that typify classic grounded theory is the discovery of substantive theory from an iterative data collection and analysis process that leads to the development of substantive midrange theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). What differentiates this genre of grounded theory from others is the researcher's role, as that of an observer who analyzes the data from an objective standpoint (Birks & Mills, 2011).

*Collateral consequences:* The spillover effects, or the adverse impacts of mass incarceration on children, mothers, families, communities, and others (especially African Americans). For example, this term is referred to as the secondhand punishment of otherwise innocent individuals through stigma, disenfranchisement, and guilt by association (Hagan & Foster, 2012).

*Constructivist grounded theory:* This method refers to the grounded theory approach originated by Kathy Charmaz, who theorized that the researcher could not become separate and apart from the research in which he or she is engaged (Charmaz,

2006). It is through the lens and insights of the researcher that the data are translated and become theory (Birks & Mills, 2011).

*Grief and grieving:* The emotional and/or psychological reactions to losing something or someone significant, as felt through separation. Grief may manifest as intense emotions that are expressed in the form of sadness, profound sorrow, and varying degrees of psychological or physical responses (Cowles, 1996; Fitzgerald, 1994). The term, grief, as used in my study, is interchangeable with mourning and non-death bereavement (Kubler-Ross, 1967).

*Incarcerated:* This term is used throughout this document as a description of a person's confinement in a state or federal prison. Synonymous terms also used are: imprisoned, detained, and detention (Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], 2010).

*Inmate:* A person detained in a state or federal prison for greater than 1 year, under the custody of the Department of Corrections (BJS, 2014).

*Non-death loss:* In this study, this term, non-death loss, refers to significant loss experienced by individuals, such as a loss of job, resources, relationships, limbs, and so forth (Walsh, 2012). This term is also synonymous with nonfinite loss.

*Mass incarceration:* The term mass incarceration was first coined by Garland (2001), who suggested that mass incarceration deserved a distinct term as a phenomenon worthy of scientific attention and study that defined the masses of individuals incarcerated in the United States. This term refers to the phenomenon that describes the population of inmates in the United States, as well as the exponential growth of

individuals who are incarcerated (Wesern & Muller, 2013). More recently, scholars have used this term interchangeably with hyper-incarceration, carceral state, and mass imprisonment, a term that is usually used to describe the disproportionately high incarceration rates of African American men (Wildeman, 2014).

*Mourning:* In my study, this term refers to the state of grieving the loss or separation from another person, object, or thing. Although Freud (1961) used this term to explain the melancholy and psychosexual relationship of grief, in my study, this term focuses primarily on the stage in which a person is saddened or emotionally distressed from separation (e.g., Bowlby, 1982).

*Significant other/loved one/mate/partner:* In this study, these terms are used synonymously. These references define couples in significant, dyadic, and committed relationships (e.g., Kins, Soenens, & Beyers, 2013).

*Symbolic loss:* Symbolic loss is a term that means losing something significant that holds meaning, value, and purpose in one's life: a loss of a relationship, job, friend, material resources, or social status (Doka, 2010).

### **Assumptions**

The primary assumption that I made during this study was that each participant would provide detailed and honest answers to the interview questions. Second, I based my study upon the assumption that the use of grief theories as the conceptual framework was appropriate and fitting. Third, I assumed that a grounded theory method was appropriate for the exploration of my research questions, as well as for advancing

knowledge of this topic through the development of substantive theory. I also assumed that my sample may be hard-to-reach because the stigma associated with incarceration may have caused participants to shy away from participation. Therefore, multiple strategies of recruitment were used, as defined in the theoretical sampling approach in Chapter 3 (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Finally, I postulated that by narrowing down the unit of analysis to African American women with current and previously incarcerated mates and by using theoretical sampling, the appropriate level of rich data would be derived for qualitative data analysis and interpretation to generate theory (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this study was narrowly focused on a convenience sample of available and willing participants who met the aforementioned inclusion criteria. The study also depended upon participant recall and reflection of their experiences with their mate's incarceration. My targeted focus then changed to a purposeful sample and subsequent theoretical sampling to allow for an in-depth and detailed analysis of the nuanced processes related to loss and separation when a loved one is incarcerated.

A delimitation of my study was the exclusion of other ethnic groups of women outside of the identified group of African American women. My decision was based on the high prevalence of African American men incarcerated in the United States and the disproportionate adverse consequences on African American women. My choice was made so that insights could be gained in answering my research questions first, before

expanding to other populations. My findings provide the framework for a future quantitative and/or a mixed methods study by identifying important variables for future hypothesis development (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). These findings are listed in Chapter 5.

### **Limitations**

I identified three limitations specific to this study: a new interview guide, dependency on research subjects to reveal sensitive information, and a small sample. First, I designed the interview guide specifically for this study, which could be considered a limitation. I managed this limitation by drawing upon the guidance of Rubin and Rubin (2005, 2012), whereby an integration of the responsive interviewing model augmented the interviewing process. This model is founded upon three important elements (Rubin & Rubin, 2012): focus on the human aspects of the interview, building a rapport and conversation; gain an in-depth understanding rather than seeking average generalities, and use flexible interviewing based on need to know more information. Additionally, I sought feedback on the interview guide design from subject matter experts and my committee supervisor.

Second, grounded theory depends upon participants who provide deep and rich information, whereby processes may be identified, patterns and themes discerned, and more importantly, the process is hinged upon a participant's honesty. To manage this limitation, I encouraged each study participant to tell her story, as answers to interview questions, in a manner that was candid and without reservation. Rubin and Rubin (2005)

recommended using questions that are not intrusive to build rapport (along with using empathy), followed by asking questions that point away from the respondent to achieve the full description without the participant having to lie. An example includes asking a question, as follows: “Some individuals experience stress when doing something for the first time. Could you tell me why visiting a prison for the first time might be uncomfortable?”

Third, I anticipated that the sample would be small in number and drawn from a hard-to-reach population, partially due to the stigma associated with having an incarcerated mate. Because the sample was small and purposeful, there was a risk of sample bias. I managed this bias by choosing a wide geographic area to sample (DC, MD, and VA) and wide age range for participants. This increased variation of the sample. Consequently, this study’s sample group age range was between 24 and 75 years of age.

### **Significance of This Research**

The aim of this study was to contribute to social change by providing the research community and helping professionals with insights about the adversities, coping strategies, and the needs of African American women impacted by their mates’ incarceration so that future tailored support services may be designed to contribute to the well-being and improved quality of life for the affected women.

This grounded theory study offers an understanding of how African American women perceive their responses to separation and loss from a psychosocial perspective, beyond what is currently known by clinicians, from both a pathological and non-

pathological perspective. Worden (2009) indicated that the research community and clinicians should become more informed and sensitized to the diversity of ways in which individuals react to loss. Findings from my study may contribute to a broader understanding of how individuals react to non-death loss and learn to cope. It is reasonable to assume that when a woman lacks emotional and physical well-being, it may be challenging to live a healthy, happy, and productive life, caring for her children and/or supporting her incarcerated mate. The seminal work of Nelson and Prilleltensky (2005) informed that transformative social change occurs when researchers, scholars, community organizations, and other leaders work together to create change by scholarly research that brings attention to social issues, opposes stigma and discrimination, and highlights power differentials. My hope is that this study helps to provide insight and a greater understanding of this social problem.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I introduced the study by indicating the high levels of incarceration within the African American community. Next, I discussed how African American women living in the Washington, D. C. area were uniquely impacted in that the nearby Lorton, Virginia prison closed and all of its former prisoners were transferred to facilities across the United States to serve their sentences, posing additional hardships on affected women. I discussed that many of the women affected by incarceration were found to be poor and single parents and potentially subject to economic adversity, both prior to their mate's incarceration and afterwards. I introduced the problem statement,

which was concerned with the lack of full knowledge within the research community and by helping professionals of how African American women may have psychological, physical, and social responses to loss and symbolic loss and, potentially, grief, resulting from the negative impact of a mate's imprisonment. These women may use coping strategies, both effectively and ineffectively. I provided the research questions and offered clarity of the purpose and central concepts as the framework for this study; I also explained my rationale for choosing the qualitative paradigm and grounded theory method. I included a list of definitions of common terms that could be misconstrued for other meanings. My assumptions relative to this study, as well as the limitations and delimitations, were included. Finally, I provided the significance of this research on effecting social change.

In Chapter 2, the literature review and search strategy are covered. In this chapter, I reiterate the conceptual framework. Grief theories and their relationship to this study are presented. Coping strategies are also covered. I provide an examination of literature specific to the African American women's plight and consequences of having a mate incarcerated and how it affects her psychosocial status and her family. I include a review of research methodologies, and the chapter concludes with a summary.

In Chapter 3, I provide an introduction to the methodology section. I introduce the reiterate research questions and deconstruct these questions into subquestions that were used to thoroughly vet each concept embedded in the grand tour research questions. I provide the conceptual framework, expound upon the qualitative tradition, present the

rationale for this qualitative study, and explain my role as a researcher. The remainder of the chapter includes ethical considerations, the study design, sample, instrumentation, data collection, data management, and my approach to trustworthiness. Chapter 4 contains an overview of the chapter, the research setting, participant demographics, the data collection process, data analysis, and discrepant cases. Results are presented as aligned with each interview subquestion. Finally, evidence of trustworthiness, transferability, and dependability are included.

Chapter 5 provides interpretations of the findings by research questions, limitations, recommendations, implications, positive social change, and researcher reflections.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Given the identified psychological, social, physical, and other adversities that incarceration may have on an offender's mate, there was a need to understand more thoroughly how African American women process separation and loss from their incarcerated loved one. The problem identified is that given the lack of a theoretical model that explains these psychosocial impacts and coping, helping professionals may not know fully how to support African American women experiencing the separation and loss from their mates. The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to discover and build substantive theory that explains the processes and the perspectives held by African American women living in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan (DC, MD, and VA) area, and who, potentially, encounter symbolic, psychological, social, and physical responses that may be consistent with grief, resulting from separation and loss from an incarcerated mate. Second, the aim was to discover what, if any, coping processes are used.

In this chapter, I provide the literature related to the aforementioned overarching psychosocial impacts and coping themes and concepts synthesized from the literature. The scope of this review was a synthesis of findings from the literature on how African American women in relationships with incarcerated men may be affected by symbolic, psychological, social, and physical, related losses, and the coping strategies they may use.

As such, my literature review is organized according to the erudition of these emergent themes extrapolated from the literature.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I used several sources to conduct the online literature review. These sources included Walden University Library, Google Scholar, and the World Wide Web. I queried the following databases: Criminal Justice Periodicals, Education, ERIC, Expanded Academic ASAP, HEALTH Sciences: A full text collection, MEDLINE, Periodicals Science Direct, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, ProQuest Criminal Justice, ProQuest Central, PubMed, Sage Premier, and SocINDEX. I expanded this search further to include abstracts, dissertations and theses (ProQuest Dissertations and dissertations and theses at Walden), and conference papers to gain an in-depth understanding of the most current scholarly position on the topic.

I used the following keywords in a search string, both singularly and in a combined format, to yield results: *African American women, ambiguous loss, anticipatory grief, bereavement, Black families, complicated grief, disenfranchised grief, dual process model of bereavement, family system, families and recidivism, fragile families, family relations, finite loss, grief, grief theories, grounded theory, incarcerated family members, incarceration, inmates, loss, offenders, offender families, offender wives, male offenders, nonfinite loss, non-death loss, postmodern, prison, prisoner families, prison visitation, prisoner wives, separation, women and prisoners, and women and offenders.*

I used recent contributions to the field, with an exception of seminal journal articles and unique articles (older articles pertinent to this study, where no other recent contributions to the field were found); the literature was dated no later than December 31, 2009. I subsequently catalogued the literature, using Zotero software, and organized it according to a systematic electronic filing process comprising a topology of major, minor, and subcategories. I used an iterative search until no new literature was returned from the keyword searches. Hence, I felt that a point of saturation was reached after the searches repeatedly returned duplicate of that which I already had contained in my catalogued library.

I stored the source articles by major themes in a hierarchical parent and child subfolder collection. I named folders to reflect content of the central concepts that were prevalent and substantive in the literature. From the hierarchal structure, I then further delineated the literature and stored it by dissertation chapters.

This chapter is organized by major themes identified in the literature. First, I provide a conceptual framework, which comprises a focus on disenfranchised grief and the dual process model of grief/bereavement. I next provide sections that each detail symbolic loss and grief and psychological, social, and physical loss, and conclude with coping with loss. Providing further context to my study, the literature on African American women and a mate's incarceration is covered. Finally, I provide a review of the research methodologies. I finish the chapter by summarizing the literature. What follows is my literature review that reflects these findings.

### **Conceptual Framework**

My grounded theory study was designed to extend the literature through my findings, while taking into account the known cognitive and emotional processes associated with loss and separation, using the conceptual framework of disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2002) and the dual process model of grief (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). This focus helped to bring about insights specific to how African American women with an incarcerated partner may respond to conditions of separation and non-death loss. This framework also helped me to establish theoretical sensitivity in recognizing markers of grief, while conducting data analysis (to be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4).

As indicated earlier, disenfranchised grief is a concept that describes how individuals grieve from significant losses while enduring a lack of validation of their grief because it is not socially sanctioned as worthy of support (Doka, 2002). This theory includes a consideration of grief and loss from a non-death perspective, whereby symbolic losses are examined. Symbolic losses are generally considered physical and psychosocial losses, and typically have included such situations as job loss, divorce, loss of a limb, loss of a significant relationship, and other losses (Goldsworthy, 2005). Using the concept of disenfranchised grief, my study explored how the stigmatization associated with African American women having an incarcerated mate affects their experiences with psychosocial loss.

Doka's (2002) seminal work informed the current study, supporting my conceptual frameworks in that he argued that there are forms of grief that defy normal,

socially accepted rituals associated with grieving (e.g., funerals or memorials). When grief is disenfranchised, the griever may feel that his or her feelings are unnatural and an inappropriate response to the loss (Doka, 2002). Initially, theorists applied the concept of disenfranchised grief only to thanatology (death) studies. However, over the past twodecades, researchers have expanded the application of this theory to extend to situations that include symbolic losses, such as: divorce, the loss of a limb, foster care, and so forth (Doka, 2002). Doka substantiated my study's aim of acknowledging and exploring non-death-related grief and unorthodox forms of grieving.

Doka (2002) offered that individuals may feel that their non-death grief is invalidated. However, per my review, there have been limited studies that acknowledged the application of disenfranchised grief as it pertains to the African American population, and no studies were found that relate to the African American woman's experience with an incarcerated mate and disenfranchised grief. My study extends the knowledge in this topic area by providing insights into how this group of African American women may be affected by grief experiences that may not be acknowledged.

Specifically, the concepts of disenfranchised grief that informed this study were (a) socially unsanctioned loss, (b) hidden grief, (c) circumstances associated with the grief as stigmatized or negatively judged by others, and (d) grief that does not conform to normal grieving rites and rituals (e.g., such as holding a memorial service or public support of a prisoner of war through the display of yellow ribbons).

The second set of concepts was drawn from the dual process model of grief (Schut, 2010). The dual process model of grief helped to explain how individuals experience oscillating periods of adjusting to or coping with loss, interchanged with periods of suffering from loss (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

As indicated in Chapter 1, there are two primary processes that dominate the dual process model: loss orientation and restoration orientation. During loss orientation, the individual experiences the grief process, where common signs may include crying, feeling depressed, or doing the grief work (Schut, 2010). During the restoration process, the individual may try to adapt to the primary loss and to any secondary losses, such as financial burdens associated with the loss, as a process of regaining focus on recovery and adjusting through coping and planning a means of reconciling the loss. During this process, the individual may take on new roles, such as finding another job to meet financial burdens (Schut, 2010).

Grief resulting from loss is not always time-based and straightforward; it may be dynamic. Stroebe and Schut, (1999) challenged that grief oscillates between stages of intense feelings of loss to periods of restoration. During the loss phase, the person may engage in the *grief work* and experience denial and periodic avoidance of moving towards restoration. In the restoration phase, the person makes adjustment and begins to focus on new things, new identities, and new experiences. These authors suggested that an individual dynamically oscillates between the two stages. These processes of loss-orientation (LO) and restoration orientation (RO) are collectively referred to as the dual

process model (DPM). Schut (2010) indicated that during the LO process, individuals may engage in grief work, release from the bonds that bind to the absent person, and feel denial and/or restorative changes. When the individual oscillates to the RO processes, he or she adapts to life changes, takes part in new things to replace the loss, experiences detractions from the grief, and develops new roles and behaviors associated with the transformed identity (Schut, 2010). These processes may be experienced at different frequencies, and the affected person may toggle between stages of LO and RO.

The DPM model informed this study by providing insights on how individuals may experience adaptation and coping with significant loss in their lives (Schut, 2010). This model also served as a significant part of the study's conceptual framework as I sought to understand coping strategies in dealing with loss. While the Stroebe and Schut's (1999) model informed my conceptual framework, there remained unanswered questions, such as whether the grieving cycle normalizes and becomes less intrusive on the affected person's life over time. I wanted to learn if the African American woman adjusts to her mate's absence, and if her grief normalizes, over time, as well.

When combined, the conceptual framework of disenfranchised grief and the dual process model provided a means of stipulating a basis for theoretical sensitivity during data collection and analysis, with specific focus on symbolic losses, socially unacceptable grief, hidden grief, loss orientation, and restoration orientation of loss experiences. I consolidated the properties of the two theories above and summarized them into tentative analytic of concepts: (a) symbolic loss and resultant grief, (b) psychological responses to

loss, (c) responses to physical loss, (d) social responses to loss, (e) unorthodox grief responses, and (f) coping strategies. These concepts allowed for a primary focus on loss, grief, and coping strategies as the major categories used during data analysis.

For clarity, in the context of this chapter and my research study, grief was defined as the cognitive reaction/response to being separated from a loved one, or an emotional reaction to loss (Granek, 2010). Eisenhart (1989) espoused that when constructing paradigms, it is imperative that the researcher assume that no existing theory explains the phenomena in totality. As such, the section below begins with an exploration of the literature, specific to symbolic loss and grief, while exposing the strengths, weaknesses, and gaps that led to a need to conduct this grounded theory study.

### **Impacts of Incarceration on African American Women**

The sections that follow provide a review of the literature specific to symbolic loss and grief, psychological loss, social loss, physical loss, coping strategies, and African American women's experiences with a mate's incarceration.

#### **Symbolic Loss and Grief**

African American women who previously were exposed to adversities and were in a relationship with incarcerated men were found to be especially vulnerable to feelings of separation and resultant feelings of loss and grief (Apel et al., 2010; Chui, 2009; Duwe & Clarke, 2013; Harman et al., 2010; Wildeman et al., 2012; Wildeman & Westin, 2010). In general, everyone during his or her life course experiences loss of some kind, and in varying significance, related to death, an object, a relationship, or otherwise (Toller,

2009). Some losses are considered symbolic losses, as I will convey in this section. Doka (2010) offered that symbolic losses are considered the absence of things considered significant in one's life, such as those that are personal and social. These symbolic losses may feel similar to the ultimate loss, which is death (Doka, 2010). Offenders and their loved ones often feel a deep and profound sense of loss that may be compounded by complexities and multiple losses associated with incarceration (Dennison et al., 2013). Multiple losses may comprise any number of symbolic losses, including a loss of companionship, financial resources, societal acceptance, safety, and security (Doka, 2002; Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper, & Mincy, 2009).

The grief associated with the absence of a loved one due to incarceration may be experienced as disenfranchisement and invalidation because of the social stigmas attached to the criminal behavior of the offender (Doka, 2010; Schwartz-Soicher, Geller, & Garfinkel, 2011). Through this example, it was assumed that women in relationships with incarcerated partners might be subjected to disenfranchisement of their feelings as a by-product of their relationship with offenders.

Theorists have generalized how individuals internalize and externalize grief associated with loss, yet there is a lack of scholarly consensus in the literature. In her seminal work, *On Death and Dying*, Kubler-Ross (1969) described the phases of coming to terms with death as the ultimate loss. Individuals anticipating death or grieving for others were said to pass through five stages: (a) denying that death/loss is imminent, (b) becoming angered, (c) trying to bargain, (d) feeling depression, and (e) acknowledging

and accepting. Theorists continue to apply this model to death studies as well as to symbolic forms of loss (Buglass, 2010).

My study drew upon Kubler-Ross's (1969) acknowledgement that individuals may experience potentially long and protracted stages of grief. However, my study differed from her proposition regarding closure. I found that reaching closure may be more complicated than the generalized sequential and potentially iterative grieving process, especially with symbolic losses. While Kubler-Ross suggested that in order to heal, one must reach the acceptance stage and move past the grieving process to reach closure (Roos, 2012), not all scholars agree that all grievers are in a position to reach closure or want closure (Boss 1999; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). In contrast to Kubler-Ross (1969), Bowlby (1982) suggested that grief occurs in three stages: protest, despair, and detachment. He also contended that closure is an end goal or idealized state of the griever.

Insights were gleaned from both Kubler-Ross (1969) and Bowlby's (1982) plausible explanations regarding the emotional and psychological reactions to loss; yet, several questions related to my study remained unaddressed. Unlike Kubler-Ross (1969) and Bowlby's (1982) model, grief may not always be neat, orderly, and linear. Furthermore, processes associated with loss may be experienced differently by different ethnic groups (Curley, 2013). Therefore, at the outset of this study, gaps in the literature were unanswered with regard to the Kubler-Ross and Bowlby's concepts. An example of a gap included not understanding how Kubler-Ross' inclusion of anger as a grief stage

would apply African American women who are angry and grieving. In her work, Walley-Jean (2009) described the myth associated with the angry Black woman. She argued that the stereotype of the African American woman's angry disposition misrepresents women of color. In this study, I sought to understand if this stereotype that dominates public opinion affected how African American women expressed anger resulting from grief. Further, I sought to understand if these women felt that their anger was linked to the aforementioned stereotype, or was it accepted as a part of the African American woman's grieving process.

In this study, I sought to understand the aforementioned questions as well as the unique processes of symbolic loss and grief as experienced by African American females with an incarcerated partner, not properly addressed by other research studies. The rigor of grounded theory allowed these processes to be uncovered and identified through the data analysis process (Charmaz, 2006).

As mentioned, offenders and their families may become overwhelmed by the variations of feelings that stem from the separation of a loved one. These feelings may become compounded by complexities associated with incarceration (Dennison et al., 2013). Grief can be an inherent reaction to loss and separation of a significant relationship (i.e., partner/spouse; Bowlby, 1982). The loss associated with the incarceration of a partner or husband may be experienced as disenfranchisement and invalidation because of social stigmas that can manifest in negative ways and that affect the entire family, especially the children (Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011).

Jones and Beck (2007) provided keen insights about the intense emotions and crisis experienced by inmate families. Their study cites that families were found to suffer when the inmate suffered, feared when the inmate feared, and agonized when the inmate agonized. Their study supported my study by showing how tightly integrated families may become in the inmate's affairs and invested in their emotional well-being.

Jones's and Beck's (2007) study contributed significantly to this study, as the majority of the individuals providing primary support to the death-row inmates were found to be women. With limited studies pertaining specifically to African American women's interactions with their incarcerated spouses or partners, this insight was instrumental. Jones and Beck (2007) indicated that the women in their study began to experience nonfinite loss shortly after the shock of the offender's arrest. In my study, my aim was to discover if the onset of African American women's reactions to loss occurs during an arrest and throughout the continuum of the inmate partner's incarceration.

Along a similar line of inquiry, insights were drawn from Long (2011), who also explored the disenfranchised experiences of families charged with the death penalty. His study was one of the few that provided insights specific to grief, incarceration, and the experience associated with familial disruptions because of a family member's imprisonment. In his qualitative narrative case study, Long (2011) suggested that there is a nexus between ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief encountered by the families of death-row inmates. Long's study informed that a death-row family must endure the grief process as multiple death row appeals are rendered to the court and eventually exhausted

(Long, 2011). Consequently, these families were found to be exposed to a long duration of trauma at an intensity that imposed chronic stress.

According to Long (2011), during the inmate's incarceration, the family becomes disenfranchised from social support because of the stigma associated with capital punishment and is suspended in a state of grief, which is ambiguous and prolonged. While Long's (2011) study did not specifically focus on African American women, my study provided an understanding of how integrated the family may become in sharing the inmate's experience with agony, traumatization, and isolation, without normal avenues of closure.

The family system's equilibrium may become out of kilter. Long posited that while the inmate is awaiting death by execution, the family becomes psychologically invested in the experience, living vicariously through the inmate's trauma and fear (Long, 2011). These findings made salient contributions to my study, as Long (2011) explained the concept of the family's transference as another form of suffering. As such, the family lives through the inmate's social loss experience.

Researchers have shown that females in relationships with incarcerated men have felt as though they, too, were criminalized (Black, 2010). Further validating this notion, the Victorian Association of the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO), Australia, expressed that many of its clients felt grief, loss, shame, and guilt by association when their family member was in prison (VACRO, 2009). Family members

felt as if they were grieving the death of a loved one. However, these families had no rituals to help bring about closure, as with traditional death ceremonies (VACRO, 2009).

While Long (2011) advanced the research of disenfranchised grief— suggesting that the nexus of ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief is applicable to the families of death- row populations— at the outset of this study, I was uncertain if African American women with inmate partners experience grief similar to the described processes encountered with death- row families. Additionally, it was unclear whether disenfranchised grief occurs within populations when incarceration is highly concentrated, commonplace, and an expected condition, as it is in some African American communities (Wildeman, 2009). Chapter 5, research Subquestion 2, provides the findings relative to this question.

Jones and Beck's (2007) study was the second of its kind that provided insights into the grief experiences associated with incarceration; albeit, the perspective was also from death- row families' perspectives, as well. This study had merit in enhancing my understanding of how there can be nexus between grieving and incarceration. However, questions remained regarding the differences in the levels and intensity of grief experienced by death- row families versus family exposure to sentencing, unrelated to capital punishment. My study was specifically focused on African American women and their interpretations of loss by non-death- row inmates.

Offering yet another perspective on loss and grief, Boss (1999) posited the griever does not always move to a state of closure, as Kubler-Ross (1969) and Bowlby (1982)

suggested. She argued that certain individuals may experience loss and grief that is persistent, without closure, ambiguous, and uncertain. This dynamic and ever unfolding process may grow in intensity, and may become unrelenting. Combined, this state is referred to as ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999).

According to Boss (1999), there are two forms of ambiguous loss: a loss that occurs when the person is psychologically absent (e.g. dementia, addictions, and chronic mental illness), but physically present. The second concept was applicable to the current study's focus: specifically, when the absent person is perceived as being physically absent (e.g. divorce, prisoner of war, and incarceration) but perceived as being psychologically present and integrated into the affected person's daily life. For example, Boss used an example of a person who has a missing child but continues to make family decisions that considers the missing child as if he or she were there. A similar scenario could be likened to a woman with an incarcerated loved one who does not leave home because she may miss her partner's phone call (Abramowicz, 2012).

These scenarios demonstrate a life put on hold because the absent person is still psychologically integrated into the affected person's psychological family. The concept of the psychological family, when used in the literature, refers to the boundaries of family defined by its members (Thompson & McArthur, 2009). When the family becomes disoriented as to who is in or out of the family due to a crisis that forces separation, boundary ambiguity and ambiguous loss may occur. It is possible that African American women with an incarcerated spouse experience elements relating to this phenomenon of

ambiguous loss and boundary ambiguity. However, my study did not specifically examine ambiguous loss and boundary ambiguity, but, rather, remained focused on disenfranchised grief and the dual process model of grief.

In general, the predominant use of grief theory was applied to death-related losses (Boss, 1999). However, as this literature has presented, there are similarities between a griever's responses to death and an individual's reactions to separation by incarceration (Wildeman, Schnittker & Tuney, 2012).

This section provided insights on how the African American woman and her family could be subjected potentially to multiple losses, represented as non-death losses. These losses may be prolonged and complicated, and may feel not publicly legitimized, leaving the family in a state of disenfranchised or unacknowledged grief. Insights were gleaned from both Kubler-Ross and Bowlby's (1982) plausible explanations regarding the emotional and psychological reactions to loss. The Jones and Beck (2007) study provided keen insights into the intense emotions and crisis possibly experienced by inmate families.

### **Symbolic Loss and Trauma**

At the outset of this study, it was unclear whether separation by incarceration causes bereavement comparative to death-like grieving. However, there was evidence that forced separation causes crisis and trauma in families (Morris, 1965). In my study, I drew upon insights from Pauline Morris' work, specific to families and incarceration. She suggested that forced separation between family members because of incarceration may

cause disruption, crisis, and trauma to the non-incarcerated family members (Morris, 1965). Her study was one of the first of its kind to provide empirical research on an offender family's reaction to crisis and hardships attributed to loss and separation. While Morris' (1965) seminal work on prisoner families was conducted in the United Kingdom, it informed the current study in that she concluded that all forms of breakup in the family system could cause varying degrees of trauma.

There are multiple types of trauma (Martin, Cromer, DePrince, & Freyd, 2013). For example, a person may experience an emotional episode or response to an accident, sexual assault, short- or long- term abuse, extreme fear, and other categories of traumatic events. Research indicated that individuals who experience several traumatic events over a lifetime are more at risk to bouts of anxiety and depression, among other disorders (Martin, et. al., 2013). My research study explored how the accumulation of stressors may compound expressions of loss and grief.

The net accumulation and the effect of loss, separation, trauma, stress, and other negative manifestations on African American women due to their mate's imprisonment has been largely ignored in the literature. This may be attributed to the high degree of focus that researchers have placed on the psychological health of children with inmate fathers or mothers (Arditti, 2012), or the mental and overall health of the male inmate (Secret, 2012). This situated the current study in the literature as a means contributing to a broader understanding of variations of traumatic events relating to loss, including episodes related to arrest and incarceration of this population of women's loved ones.

The literature was clearer when explaining the effect of incarceration on children. The incarceration of a parent can trigger in children adverse emotional responses and trauma. For example, studies showed that children tend to internalize and externalize feelings of ambiguity, stress, trauma, and anger as a result of a parent or significant caregiver being removed from the home and subsequently incarcerated (Bocknek, Sanderson, & Britner, 2009). Congruently, Modecki and Wilson (2009) found maternal and paternal incarceration placed children at an increased risk of depression, emotional trauma, withdrawal, and academic difficulties, due to maternal and parental incarceration. Adding to this complexity, the child may have witnessed the arrest of the parent, thus reinforcing visual aspects of trauma.

As suggested by the literature, African American mothers who care for the children of an incarcerated mate may have to contend with their children's negative responses to paternal imprisonment (Swartz-Soicher, Geller, & Garfinkel, 2011). However, if they, too, have an accumulation of stress and trauma related to the loss, it was unclear what coping mechanisms these women use. My study's aim was to understand these women's experiences.

### **Economic Losses**

Another form of symbolic loss identified in the literature was the financial strain that women and their families encounter when a loved one is incarcerated. Symbolic loss, such as loss of income, lack of instrumental support, or the economic distress due to an inability to secure employment can be stressful to the African American female head of

household. How does incarceration of the former head of household affect the African American woman and her family who are left behind? Smith and Hattery (2010) suggested that when African American men are removed from the household, it has a cascading impact beyond the immediate family, whereby the strain may also affect the communities in which the diaspora of men occurred (Gust, 2012). Hence, the potential earnings that these men could have contributed to family and their neighborhood have been replaced by miniscule wages earned in the penal system (Smith & Hattery, 2010). African American females often become heads of household and provide instrumental support to any children in the relationship, and her mate (Turney, Snittker, & Wildeman, 2012a).

Gust (2012) informed that incarceration may intensify pre-existing economic stresses. Consequently, the woman may experience a role transition and may be expected to provide the family's tangible and intangible instrumental support (Turney, Schnittker, & Wildeman, 2012). Research also suggested that incarcerated African American men and their families are likely to be economically disadvantaged or living at or below the poverty level prior to becoming imprisoned (Turney et al., 2012). The financial strains may extend beyond the responsibility of the household finances; there are costs associated with maintaining contact (e.g. letters, travel, phone) with the imprisoned individual (Martinsen, 2012).

Turney, Schnittker, and Wildeman (2012) examined paternal incarceration and women's role of providing instrumental support as well as the influence on a woman's

well-being. They found that women with attachments to imprisoned men may not have extensive support networks to help mitigate the expenses of providing for the household while the man is incarcerated (Turney, Schnittker, & Wildeman, 2012). If there is a lack of support networks, how does this affect the African American woman and her family when financial hardships are present?

Grinstead, Faigeles, Bancroft, and Zack (2001) provided a general profile of how African American women encountered financial, social, and emotional challenges when the mate was sent to prison. These researchers conducted a study in a large male prison setting in California. They gathered data using a survey of the female visitors ( $N = 153$ ) who visited inmates at the prison. This sample was revealing. Of the women completing the survey, 17% received annualized household earnings of less than \$10,000 per year. The majority of the women earned below \$30,000 per year. Over 75% of the men were serving time for first-time convictions. Thirty-nine percent of the women visited at least once a week. To maintain contact with their loved one, it cost on average of \$292 per month. This included travel, collect phone calls, and providing money for sending a quarterly inmate package of clothing or other necessities.

Grinstead, Faigeles, Bancroft, and Zack (2001) found that women earning low wages were spending a high amount of their income on maintaining a relationship with their inmate spouse or partner. Grinstead et al. (2001) further indicated that the geographical locations of the prisons pose hardships on women living in urban areas due to transportation costs and related expenses that add to the expenses of visitation. For

example, if the drive or ride to the prison is several hours, the visitor(s) may need to purchase food, or purchase food from vending machines in the visiting area, or do without if not available.

The aforementioned study provided context on how African American women in relationships with incarcerated mates found ways to cope with a lack of financial wherewithal while trying to maintain bonds with their mates.

### **Psychological Loss**

Bowlby (1980) indicated that severe reactions to grief could become pathological, or present as a clinical psychological diagnosis. Bowlby's (1980) research described emotions associated with the grieving process to include feelings of numbness, disbelief, denial, disorganization, despair, and a longing for the absent person.

Consistent with Bowlby's findings, Wildeman, Schnittker, and Tuney's (2012) study conveyed a significant correlation between the man's recent incarceration and the woman's depressive symptoms. Adverse symptoms were often compounded by stress, shame, and disbelief (Wildeman et al., 2012). This parallel of grief-related responses reported in the works of scholars (Bowlby 1980 & Wildeman et al., 2012) produced a quandary in the literature that had to be reconciled. While Wildeman et al., (2012) provided a quantitative analysis of the relationship between men's recent incarceration and women's depressive symptoms; it was unclear whether multiple factors contributed to women's depression. Wildeman et al., (2012) measured life satisfaction and major depression as variables of focus in their study. First, single mothers from urban areas

were overrepresented. Both factors are associated with disadvantages, such as financial disparities, and other stressors (Chaney, 2009). Second, the study did not analyze the degree to which the circumstances associated with arrest or the conditions of the inmate's imprisonment affected the mothers' depressive symptoms (Wildeman, et al., 2012).

Although death-related grief and non-death related grief may rise to the level of a clinical response, the literature did not convey how and why these experiences are reported to diverge when it relates to meaning-making processes. Toller (2009) argued that, in contrast to death-related grief, non-death losses are typically *not* coped with by "meaning-making practices," such as sharing memories and stories about better times, celebrating the happier times, and so forth (Toller, 2009, p. 258). On the other hand, Freud (1961) argued that grief could trigger a pathological reaction and generate severe responses to loss, symptomatic of depressive disorder. He posited that grief is a process whereby the mourner sought isolation to grieve; however, the individual would eventually seek to sever the ties with the deceased as a demonstration of the person releasing from the bereavement phase, replacing current memories with fonder times of the past to recover and bring about new meaning. These conflicting views offered an opportunity in the current study to gain clarity by seeking to understand how and if this study's population of women create new meaning in their lives when experiencing loss because of an imprisoned mate.

Analyzing grief through a pathological lens provided an alternative way for this researcher to understand the severity of individuals' grief experiences. Complicated grief

would be considered a clinical diagnosis if severe symptoms meet qualifying criteria, such as major depressive disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This diagnosis is otherwise known as Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The literature indicated that between 7 and 10% of grieving individuals experience complicated grief as a maladaptive response to normal grieving (Lobb et al., 2010; Ghesquiere, 2014). Complicated grief is a mental health condition that may impair cognitive function, whereby the symptoms are persistent for six months or longer [resulting from death of a loved one] (Ghesquiere, 2014). Individuals diagnosed with this disorder may experience intense yearning, consistent and continuous thoughts of the absent (deceased) person, feelings of intense loneliness, problems accepting the loss, seeking isolation, and bouts of anger (Ghesquiere, 2014).

Surprisingly, symptoms of complicated grief also appeared to be congruent with findings in the literature related to HIV studies. Harman, Smith and Eagan's (2007) study comprised more than 90% of African American women, with HIV risk associated with having a relationship with incarcerated partners. The clinical symptoms were described, similar to Ghesquiere's (2014) description of complicated grief.

Additionally, Harman et al. (2007) found that inmate wives and girlfriends sometimes feel anger because their significant other is incarcerated. This population also faced a greater risk of depression, especially if they have past experiences of trauma (Harman et al., 2017). One of the primary risk factors and contributors to complicated

grief reported was due to the absence of reaching closure (Lobb et al., 2010).

Harman's et al. (2007) overview of complicated grief helped to explain the pathology or etiology of symptoms associated with extreme loss or bereavement. Their study focused primarily on women's risk of HIV with inmates and not on grief as a response to loss. My study offers perspectives about how African American women process loss and grief when separated from an incarcerated loved one.

Women and families of inmates experience a tremendous sense of loss, which is potentially intensified by the collateral effects of incarceration (Secret, 2012). Some women grieve the loss of relationships, which they believe were stable and intact prior to the imprisonment of their partner (Wildeman & Western, 2010). Others may grieve for a partner who physically abused them, yet they yearn for the relationship (Stewart, Lynn, Gabora, Kropp, & Lee, 2014). For some women, the feelings of loss may become overwhelming, and emotionally distressing (Chui, 2009). Hence, affected women may experience a wide range of emotions that include anxiety, grief, anger, and powerlessness (Chui, 2009). Adding to the complexity, many women may have been previously subjected to conditions that compromised their emotional health prior to their partner's incarceration. In my study, I was curious about how mothers contend with their stress as well as the uncertainty observed in their children. I wanted to know if the condition observed in their children added to their stress levels. Additionally, I sought to understand how the aforementioned variations in pre- and post- relationships with

incarcerated men affected the way in which African American women process loss and separation from their incarcerated partner.

To partially explore these questions, I drew upon the work of Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney (2012), who conducted one of the first quantitative studies to analyze the psychological wellness and physical health of the mothers of children whose father is incarcerated. The study used the Fragile Families and Child Well-being longitudinal research dataset. It is referred to as fragile families dataset because it contains data from high risk populations of single parents. The dataset comprised a significant number of unmarried mothers and imprisoned fathers of their children. This dataset comprised 5,000 children born of mothers who originated from urban areas throughout the United States. Twenty hospitals were selected from qualifying urban cities whose populations were over 200,000. From the qualified cities, mothers were interviewed from 20 hospitals. This research focused on two factors: major depression, and life dissatisfaction. This dataset also allowed the researchers to examine variables such as impulsivity, domestic violence, pre-incarceration relationships, and drug use.

The aforementioned study provided rich insights into the state of fragile families. Women in relationships with imprisoned men were found to be 54% more likely to suffer from depression compared to their counterpart ( $p < .001$ ). These statistically significant findings were also found in the group of mothers who were in relationships with a recently incarcerated man, with less significance ( $p < .01$ ). However, when reviewing the data rendered from the full sample's models (1 – 6), a high number of the mothers

had parents who had suffered depression. This may have caused the women to have a predisposition for the same disease. The researchers concluded that mothers in relationships with incarcerated men have a greater epidemiology of major depressive symptoms, declined mental health, and perpetual dissatisfaction than those who do not (Wildeman, Schnittker, & Turney, 2012).

Although their study provided substantial insights specific to women in relationships with incarcerated male spouses and partners, there were gaps identified that challenge the relevance of their study's ability to answer, in totality, my research questions. First, the sample contained a sample of females with known pre-existing conditions or a family history of depression. It was uncertain whether or not these women had a diathesis for depression and if the condition existed prior to the partner's incarceration. Second, the study only examined women who shared biological children with incarcerated men. Therefore, women who were non-biological mothers were not included in the sample, which may have affected the outcome. Third, their study did not examine women with newly formed relationships established with men recently or previously incarcerated. Fourth, their study did not contain any information specific to how the proximal separation and prison system constraints add burden on the couple's relationship. Finally, their study did not focus on the phenomena of loss and separation with grief as a potential response. The present study addressed these open questions through qualitative inquiry and grounded theory.

## **Social Loss**

I turn my focus from symbolic and psychological losses and grief theories to the social implications of mass imprisonment of men of color on their female partners, which entails a multiplicity of losses and, potentially, stigma. Comfort (2007) posited that, in order to truly convey the degree in which a demographic of the population can be decimated, one must begin with an overview of what mass incarceration entails. Therefore, what follows is a descriptor of mass incarceration and its impact on African American women through the context of family.

Mass incarceration is a phenomenon concerned with the extremely high rates of imprisonment, which disproportionately affects African American men in the United States (Martensen, 2012). Studies have shown that when one family member is incarcerated, this phenomenon has potential negative implications for the entire African American family (e.g. Apel, Blokland, Nieuwbeerta, & Schellen, 2010; Barnes and Stringer, 2014; Cox, 2012; Turney, 2014).

David Garland first coined the term, mass incarceration. In this publication, Garland (2001) suggested that mass incarceration deserved a distinct term as a phenomenon worthy of scientific attention and study. The current study drew insights from this phenomenon because it describes the gravity and significance of the profound adverse consequences on a nation, and specifically, on people of color. As Garland (2001) described further, this phenomenon—imprisoning mass numbers of African

American men– became so concentrated that it had the ability to decimate familial structures of current and future generations of this racial group (Garland, 2001).

The United States continues to lead the entire world in its punitive stance towards incarceration, as evidenced by its extremely high incarceration rates (Wakefield, 2010). It was reasonable to assume that the disproportionate incarceration rates of African American men in America would also have an impact on the African American female, along with the rest of her family (Rodríguez et al., 2012).

The surge in incarceration of African American men began during the late 1970s and continued to escalate. One study concluded that two factors are primary contributors to mass incarceration: low academic achievement, and economic downturns (Wildeman & Western, 2011). These two conditions, coupled with the punitive stance that America held on crime and the war on drugs, provided a surge in imprisonment and a social loss in the African American community. As such, during the 1990s, one in four African American children was found to have an incarcerated parent, whereas seven out of one hundred were found for Caucasian children (Wildeman & Western, 2011). Ten percent of parents of African American children were incarcerated at the beginning of the year 2000 (Wildeman & Western, 2011). African Americans were found to be seven times more likely to face incarceration in their lives, compared to their Caucasian counterparts (Western & Muller, 2013). Their research informed my current study in that women in relationships with incarcerated African American men were likely to be subjected to a host of adverse consequences associated with their mate's imprisonment. Salient to my

study, this burden on women may be exacerbated in that many women who remain behind while their mate goes to prison assume the role of head of household (Cox, 2011). These women were found to do so under the stress and stigma of their mate's incarceration.

### **Stigma and Shame**

There is a social loss associated with incarceration. This loss may include loss of status or feeling excluded through stigmatization, where affected individuals often hide or conceal events in their lives related to shame and humiliation (SPSSI, 2012). Kauffman (2011) indicated that shame is a common feature of loss (p. viii). Alexander (2012) posited that shamed individuals fail to seek out places that serve as traditional modes of support, such as churches and ministries, when they have incarcerated loved ones. These internalized feelings and the need to withdraw causes some individuals to harbor grief, stigma, and shame (SPSSI, 2012). Consequently, feelings may intensify and result in more pervasive negative outcomes, including depressive symptoms. Doka (2002), inferred that stigma has an effect on the grief experience, but he does not explain if stigma must be a single event or common occurrence, as possibly the case in the lives of my study's population (to be consistent with disenfranchised grief).

De Ruyter, Hissel, and Bijleveld (2013) indicated that social stigma becomes a label attached to women who are in relationships with offenders. At the outset of this study, I wanted to understand if social stigma plays any role in the severity and how African American women react to loss and grief when their loved one is in prison.

Critical race theory indicates that race plays a critical role in how individuals of color are treated, in an overt and covert manner (Alfred & Chlup, 2009). With this understanding, I sought to learn if women's grief associated with their loss was compounded by marginalization and stereotyping, whereby the woman is assumed guilty by association with a criminal (Wildeman, Schnittker, & Turney, 2012). Harman, Smith, and Eagan (2007) indicated that this population of women may show anger because of their mate's imprisonment. My study explored how anger and stigma is expressed by African American women in the context of loss and separation from their incarcerated partner or spouse.

Gavriliuță, Țăruș, and Vulpe (2013) explained that stigma is a psychological assignment that connotes a person is something less than good. The targeted individual may feel marginalized. Stigma perpetuates the feelings of disappointment and frustration while families adjust to a situation that is foreign to them and they have little experience interacting with law enforcement or the prison system. Recently, scholars have begun to bundle stigma, shame, and grief together as a general finding and consensus regarding children's responses to paternal incarceration (De Ruyter, Hissel, & Bijleveld, 2013). Congruently, Dennison, Stewart, & Freiberg (2013) agreed with this proposition, but added trauma as a prominent occurrence that was also observed in children. How do African American women adjust to stigma, shame, frustration, and new experiences associated with the penal system and the legal system in general, within the context of

their mate's incarceration? These questions were addressed through open ended research questions in the current study.

Scholars contend that stigma can be projected from within social circles and at institutional levels. The effects of stigma are broad in that they are felt in subtle ways, such as a friend's avoidance of mentioning the incarcerated person's name, or the embarrassment from a co-worker deliberately mentioning the person's imprisonment (Gavriliuță, Țăruș, & Vulpe, 2013). Stigma is not limited to a person's social network; the prison experience also exposes families to institutional treatment that they are not accustomed to, such as frisking and full-body security checks that are more intrusive than security conditions at airports. For example, some women have had to remove their underwire bras in order to clear security because of the sensitive metal detectors used for screening. At the outset of this study, I wanted to know how the prison security checks play out in the African American women's experience with an incarcerated mate. The answer to this question is reported in Chapter 5.

African American women with an incarcerated spouse must also contend with societal stigma associated with having an incarcerated mate (Gavriliuță, Țăruș, & Vulpe, 2013). The consequence of this labeling effect can promote discrimination at micro and macro levels (Hagan & Foster, 2012). Massogila, Remster, and King (2011) indicated that stigma experienced by these women may be salient because of public perception and collective justification to identify inmates as bad people or convicts. Consequently,

women may seek to conceal the whereabouts of their incarcerated husband or partner, which may be an indicator of feelings of guilt, shame, and stress.

Massogila, Remster, and King's (2011) study provided three critical insights for my study regarding the results of separation, and stigma: (a) separation may bring about decreased emotional interactions between couples; (b) when the woman and incarcerated man are separated, the stress associated with financial strain is increased and adversely bears on the relationship, and (c) long durations of separation pose a risk of individuals changing over time and growing apart, with less and less in common. Therefore, I posited that these three elements, compounded with the adjustment to an incarcerated partner, would be overwhelming and difficult for the woman to contend with over time.

Chui (2010) indicated that families of prisoners experience a plethora of emotions, added to the stigmatization. This spectrum of emotions included fear, grief, powerlessness, sadness, and guilt from hiding the offender's incarceration status. These feelings may exist, in some women, long before the family member's incarceration. Chui (2010) reported that family members endure intense stress and a range of emotions from the arrest through the continuum of sentencing, which brings about the significant loss and absence of the family member.

In summary, although the literature reviewed aligned closely with my study's aim to understand how stigma affects my study's target population, there was no singular theory that explained how loss and separation compounded by stigma manifest within

this population of women; this warranted a grounded theory approach for discovery (Glasser & Strauss, 1967).

### **Physical Loss**

It is unclear if women suffer physical health risks due to the loss and separation from their incarcerated mate. To address this uncertainty, researchers have recently turned their focus to how incarceration has affected the physical health of women. However, mainly, women's sexual health has been the main focus, not their holistic well-being.

Mahoney, Bien, and Comfort (2013) suggested that, given the diaspora of incarcerated men in the African American community, there is a lack of available partners for females to develop lasting and meaningful relationships. Consequently, narrowed options for partnership may result in an increased HIV risk (Mahoney, et al., 2013). As a result, the family structure is potentially weakened, and the woman's health compromised. Moreover, women who have sexual relationships with incarcerated or recently incarcerated men were found to be higher risk for HIV infection (Davey-Rothwell, Villarroel, Grieb, & Latkin, 2012; Reznick, Comfort, McCartney, and Neilands (2011). This finding was partially due to the high HIV rate in U.S. prisons, which are especially high-risk, in part, because the distribution of condoms is largely banned in U.S. prisons. Additionally, these authors found that there was a perception held by some women that incarcerated men are more faithful in prison (Harman, Smith, & Egan, 2007).

Extending the line of research on women's health risks, Mahoney, Bien, and Comfort (2013) found that there were women who covertly engaged in sexual relationships with multiple partners (while in a relationship with an offender). This behavior placed them at a higher risk of HIV than monogamous individuals (Mahoney, et al., 2013). Women used in the sample for this quantitative study were exposed to an evidence-based intervention program that provided education on HIV prevention, domestic violence, and other information for empowerment. Sixty percent of the women in the sample were recruited from a drug treatment plan. Women in relationships with offenders rarely are able to receive interventions and social services programs designed to meet their needs because they simply were not able to access them, for one reason or the other (Mahoney et al., 2013).

Examining other health-related risks, Lee and Wildeman (2013) studied the association between a family member's cardiovascular disease and the negative impacts and the correlation of an incarcerated loved one. The findings were exceptionally disturbing for women. Data obtained from the National Survey of American Life comprised a cross-sectional survey of African Americans and Caucasians. High-risk conditions, such as diabetes, obesity, heart conditions, and stroke were assessed. Women with incarcerated significant others were found to have a 95% greater chance of high-risk, health-related conditions than those who did not. In addition, if they were obese, the likelihood increased, as with poor health. Lee and Wildeman (2013) found that the majority of African American women in the sample were disadvantaged at the outset.

While the literature offered a partial picture of how women may be at greater health risk when in relationships with incarcerated men, it appeared that additional findings from my study could offer a more representative view of this group of women.

### **Proximal (Physical) Loss and Separation**

During the outset of this study, it was unclear how African American women's quality of life was affected by proximal loss associated with the separation from her incarcerated partner. Studies offered that these relationships become at risk of dissolution, and stressors are brought on due to financial hardship of the woman to maintain contact with the inmate (Shamblem, Arnold, Mckierman, Collins, & Strader, 2013). Typically, the non-incarcerated female's introduction to prison facilities is a direct result of family member incarceration (Lee, Porter, & Comfort, 2014). This experience, albeit good, bad, or humiliating, may shape her future desire to endure the prison visitation experience. Lee, Porter, and Comfort (2014) indicated that, within African American populations incarceration is prevalent, and it is possible that the family member or a romantic partner may have experienced incarceration as well. Depending on prison policy, this may bar the previously incarcerated individual from a visit (Lee et al., 2014). As a result, I sought to understand how the aforementioned prison policy and institutional barriers affect the family's ability to maintain contact and cohesiveness in their relationship. This question was addressed through an interview probe question.

Lee et al. (2014) indicated that families could petition for prison visitation policy changes that would enhance familial relations. This could be accomplished through civic

actions and advocacy for policy change. However, affected family members are likely to refrain from seeking this avenue for change because they feel disempowered as victims (Western & Muller, 2013). Therefore, these current policies may continue to inhibit familial cohesion.

Harman, Smith and Egan (2007) provided one of the limited qualitative studies that established a linkage between the aforementioned prison institutional barriers and grief experienced by affected individuals. Respondents in their study revealed feelings of grief and loss, resulting from reduced access to one another, loss of contact, and feelings of isolation. Although prisoners are allowed visitation, the lack of consistent contact and physical presence were found to be barriers to maintaining relationships (Harman et al., 2007). Although prison institutional barriers are only one of the conditions that may exacerbate feelings of loss, the Harman et al. (2007) study helped me to understand its potential effect on the current study's population of African American women.

Prison visitation may be viewed from two angles. First, the corrections staff may consider it a security risk (Dixey & Woodall, 2012). Second, inmates have a constitutional and administrative right to have visits from family and friends (as long as rules are followed). Research has shown that, in the majority of the cases, inmates' behavior is normalized, if not enhanced, when they anticipate a visit.

Researchers also have examined the impact of prison policy from different perspectives. Duwe and Clark (2013) highlighted three major barriers to prison visitation. First, a large degree of offenders originate from metropolitan areas, yet the

penitentiaries are geographically situated in remote areas, often 50 to 100 miles away (Duwe & Clark, 2013). With the prisons located in remote areas, poor families may not be able to afford travel by car, bus service, or other means. These restrictions reduce the options of contact to phone calls and letters (Duwe & Clark, 2013). Many of the phone calls produce extremely high telephone bills. Second, prison visitation is not conducive to family visitation. With the prevalence of incarceration in the African American community, prison visitation policies specific to background checks may omit family members from visitation. Third, prison settings are designed to enforce safety, not comfort of the family. Children and family are restricted to behaviors that promote safety, such as no touching except for the initial greeting and departure (Duwe & Clark, 2013). The visitation settings are usually large rooms with several rows of chairs where the inmates face their family members and all visitations are under heavy surveillance (Duwe & Clark, 2013).

### **Coping With Loss**

Adaptive coping strategy is concerned with how a person uses cognitive reasoning to adjust to a stressful situation such as the loss of a job, relationship, divorce, or separation (Jenkins, 2012). Drawing upon this work, my study was informed by the two types of coping mechanisms: regulation, and re-appraising. Jenkins (2012) offered that when regulating the situation, one can withdraw and pretend that the problem does not exist, or re-appraise it by drawing new meaning from it as if there is a life lesson to be learned.

Of salient importance to my study was the understanding that, within the Black culture, African American women are considered and expected to be *strong* (Hamilton-Mason, Hall, & Everett, 2009). This means that, although women may rely on external sources, research showed that there is an expectation that they will be resilient and have internal coping strategies to get her through difficult times (Hamilton-Mason, Hall & Everett, 2009). This expectation of exhibiting strength through employment struggles, caring for her children, and family, and taking care of her spouse or mate was found to place these women at greater health risks (Hamilton-Mason, Hall & Everett, 2009).

Mattis (2002) indicated that African American women, to deal with life's adversities, use a number of coping strategies, such as spirituality. Spirituality holds a prominent place in the lives of many of these women and has served as a means of helping them to overcome stress, financial hurdles, family problems, and daily challenges (Mattis, 2002). Some women use spirituality to help with meaning making when their assumptive world seems to be in disarray (Mattis, 2002). When this narrative of a person's world has radically changed due to a loss or dissolution of a relationship, coping strategies help the person to re-write the narrative into a more meaningful way of viewing her story (Harrison, Kahn, & Hsu, 2004). This change in the narrative can be accomplished through viewing matters through a spiritual lens (Mattis, 2002). In addition to leaning on their spirituality, African American women tend to draw upon the support of their family and friends (Harrison et al., 2004).

Black women have been found to use a variety of coping strategies to deal with financial crisis, as well. Chaney, Lawrence, and Skogrand (2012) indicated that this ethnic group of women may use spirituality and familial support to help them cope with financial difficulties. However, it was unclear from their study whether or not women would seek financial support during a mate's incarceration. From a financial perspective, African American women have earned less pay for their equivalent work functions and employment (Chaney, Lawrence, & Skogrand, 2012); therefore, the stress of maintaining a household where possibly the lack of income was also a source of stress.

African American women in general are independent; however, those who suffer from crisis and trauma are better served when accessing social support systems (Stevens-Watkins, Sharma, Knighton, Oser, & Leukefeld, 2013). This support is especially important, given that this cultural group of women tend to shy away from professional help for mental health support (Stevens-Watkins, et al., 2013).

Coping includes reconciling the difficulties associated with racism and gender (Hamilton-Mason, Hall & Everett, 2009). African American women experience many forms of oppression and marginalization in addition to the stigma of having an incarcerated mate, according to Thomas, Witherspoon, and Speight (2008). These authors offered that African American women are stigmatized on multiple fronts, making it difficult to separate the various challenges that they may need to cope because these are often compounded by issues associated with their color and gender (Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2008).

The brief literature on African American women specific to coping helped to inform my study through understanding how these women are perceived by others. This review also provided insights on the expectations of family and how these women are expected to be strong in their support roles. Spirituality was found to play an important role in assisting these women in surviving difficult times. Family was found to be a major support system for these women; therefore, it was critical to discern how family relationships might be impacted by incarceration of a significant other. These women also preferred informal support systems and using their faith rather than seeking professional or mental health support.

#### **African American Women's Responses to Loss and a Mate's Incarceration**

In addition to the obvious problems with a mate's incarceration, there were adverse outcomes that were not so apparent, such as the emotional impact, recurring negative thoughts, or loneliness that the African American woman may feel as a result of being in a relationship with an imprisoned mate (Chaney, 2011). Researched literature indicated that African American women are often subjected to multiple forms of marginalization and are one of the most understudied segments of the U.S. population (Lee, Porter, & Comfort, 2014). To partially address this gap, the current study aimed to explore questions related to psychological and social consequences of African American women involved with incarcerated men. This section examined pertinent literature that offers insights on loss specific to African American women's relationships with incarcerated mates.

Comfort (2007) argued that the research on African American women affected by mass incarceration was almost non-existent almost a decade ago. Although research in this area was and is continuing to grow, sporadic attention has been paid to this understudied population; the lack of research persists. The predominant literature offered multiple views that inform the current study through the lens of incarceration on the male offender or ex-offender perspective. Such was the case with Chaney's (2011) study, in which insights regarding male and female dyadic relationships were revealed through narratives provided by the mate. Chaney's (2011) examined the strengths and resilience of intimate relationships.

Chaney (2011) revealed that men's ulterior motives for forming relationships were not always obvious to the women. For the respondents, these relationships offered a chance for stability and successful re-integration, post-incarceration. The women, on the other hand, were reported as being attracted to the physical characteristics of the inmate. Additionally, for women, the relationship offered stability and accountability, as mothers. Chaney (2011) suggested that not all relationships were formed before the male's incarceration. Some women met their partner while he was in prison. These types of relationships are not uncommon. Women are typically introduced to an inmate through friends and family (Comfort, 2007).

Chaney (2011) informed this study by highlighting that the nontraditional configuration of dyadic relationships and the African American family does not align with the conventional nuclear family (biological mother, father, and biological children).

The African American family may comprise many different arrangements: for instance, a previously married man cohabiting with a new girlfriend. Other arrangements may include a woman living with a man where she has children from a previous relationship. Such complexity in family configurations sheds light on common misunderstandings associated with the African American contemporary family. Additionally, with the prevalence of mass incarceration, it is possible that the family configuration may comprise a woman as head of household, having a mate and one or more individuals imprisoned from the same household.

Families may also make up: married, cohabiting, same sex, single individuals, and other configurations of relationships. Nearly three quarters of women in these relationships provide care to children while their male counterpart is incarcerated (Dennison, Stewart, & Freiberg, 2013). These mothers are often the primary caregiver and the individual who helps to maintain familial cohesion through becoming the conduit for her children's communication and visitation with the incarcerated father (Chaney, 2011). Women also care for children, who may also be challenged with a host of negative outcomes and losses (Chaney, 2011).

Insights gained from the Chaney (2011) study provided guidance for this project in many important ways. First, by understanding the different configurations of the African American family, it offered guidance in selecting my unit of analysis and inclusion criteria for my study. Second, by understanding the varying roles that African American women have, it influenced my study's interview question design. Third,

Chaney's (2011) study provided additional conditions to consider: the African American woman may have multiple family members who are incarcerated—not just the spouse, or partner.

My current study also gleaned insights from Fahmy and Berman's (2012) study, which focused on the implications of paternal incarceration on children through the free mothers' perspectives. In their qualitative study, conducted in Sweden, the researchers used semi-structured interviews. Inclusion criteria required that the women ( $N= 16$ ) were mothers and in a relationship with the children's incarcerated fathers. Half of the respondents were considered girlfriends, and the remainder were either separated or divorced.

Women and children were found to have emotional and psychological reactions to separation by incarceration, consistent with other literature. For example, mothers reported observing that their children's anxiety, depression, aggression, loneliness, grief, and separation anxiety, and somatic reactions were pervasive. Additionally, familial separation brought about intense ambiguity in the family relationship with the father.

Mothers become the primary negotiator of children's visitation with the imprisoned father (Fahmy & Berman, 2012). If the mother interpreted the prison environment as negative and not conducive to the child's well-being, the child may not be offered the opportunity to maintain in-person contact with the father. Tensions may arise between the mother and child, mother and father, or a combination of all. Guilt may exacerbate the situation for all parties. Although the Fahmy and Berman (2012) study

offered insights on women in relationships with prisoners in a familial context, their unit of analysis comprised a limited socio-demographic representation.

Many studies depict female partners of inmates as poor, uneducated, and from highly-concentrated urban areas (Choi & Pyun, 2014). The Fahmy and Berman's (2012) Swedish sample comprised women who were employed in various professional capacities and who were well- educated. Their study created conflict in the literature as to whether or not it applied to African American women. As indicated, the demographic of African American women in relationships with incarcerated men may vary in types and arrangements. Black (2010) explored the various relationships held between free women and prisoners. In her study, Black (2010) painted a picture of females who fall in love with an incarcerated male without knowing him prior to his incarceration. Black (2010) also indicated that many of these women were heads of household and the primary caregivers in the family. Black (2010) reported that women viewed the imprisoned mate in an idealized and unrealistic light (almost fairytale love). Furthermore, the man was believed to be her soul mate for life. In this mindset, she does not have a clear assessment of the relationship, and she is content with this type of partnership. Black (2010) perceived these relationships as different from women who are in relationships with free men.

Black's (2010) study concentrated on African American women of a lower socio-economic status and less educated than their economically advantaged and educated counterparts. However, with the lack of additional clarifying and confirming research, the

literature painted a picture of African American women in relationships with incarcerated men as predominately poor, and uneducated. Therefore, research was needed to provide a holistic picture of other demographics; for example, (economically advantaged and educated) women who support and are in relationships with incarcerated men. Are there middle- class African American women in relationships with prisoners? My study included women of varying socioeconomic status in the hope of providing a balanced representation of the demographic of women in relationships with incarcerated men.

Other differences noted in Black's (2010) study included role transition. Women may take on roles previously performed by their imprisoned mate. Role modification may include providing financial support to the family and the incarcerated male. However, even when this new responsibility is accepted by the woman, the male may try to maintain control and dominance over the woman. This may occur in subtle ways, such as directing how the woman pays her bills, or requesting that she provide a stipend for his canteen (Black, 2010).

Black's (2010) study continues that the affected woman may become completely preoccupied with the prisoner. Her priorities may become skewed and misaligned. She may find herself spending inordinate amounts of time thinking about her prisoner lover. She may lose interest in her normal daily functioning and interactions, socially and with family.

In summary, Black (2010) provided several contributions and insights valuable to my study. In her study, she included one of the most comprehensive overviews of

intimate relationships shared among women involved with incarcerated men. Black utilized a grounded theory approach to examine how male and female roles were modified, according to need. Women were found to become strong leaders and advocates for their male prisoners. Men tended to overcompensate to account for things that they could no longer do, such as work and provide household income. Women were found to become more nurturing and supportive, as expected by a female, according to gender roles. Black (2010) offered that future researchers should seek to understand post-incarceration relationships. Black's study offered insights on how African American women may view their role in relationships with inmates; however, grief and loss were not the focus of this study. My study specifically focused on these characteristics.

Finally, greater than 50% of all incarcerated married men and their spouses are at a greater risk for divorce (Rindfuss & Hervey Stephen, 1990; Shamble, Arnold, McKiernan, Collins, & Strader, 2013). However, of those who remain in intact relationships, the associated stress on the relationship can be overwhelming when the relationship is subjected to the challenges and barriers of confinement of a loved one (Shamble, et al., 2013). Empirically evaluated interventions to encourage marriage and relationship stability are scarce (Shamble, Arnold, McKiernan, Collins, & Strader, 2013). Relationships are strengthened through intra-personal conflict resolution, effective communication, interpersonal skills, and relationship commitment (Shamble et al., 2013).

Scholars appeared to be divided on whether or not physical separation causes relationship dissolution. For example, Chui (2010) posited that marital breakdown may be due largely to physical and geographic separation and difficulties associated with maintaining long- distance relationships and contending with the anxieties of prison-based relationships. On the other hand, women in emotionally and financially problematic relationships may find reprieve (Cox, 2012). Supporting this line of study, Lee and Wildeman (2013) indicated that female victims of domestic violence found removal of the men from the home as a means of safety (Lee & Wildeman, 2013).

From this literature review, I assumed that there was not a consensus about incarceration's impact on relationship dissolution. More specifically, my study sought to provide insight related to how African American women experience emotional losses when their mate is incarcerated, how these women adjust to being physically separated from their mate, and how social stigma affects the African American female. I also wanted to know how this population of women coped with loss. Each of these queries was transposed into research subquestions.

### **Review of the Research Methodologies**

It was unrealistic for me to conduct a comparison of methodologies because of the limited context-specific studies for my topic area. Of the studies that were peripheral to my topic, the majority used quantitative correlational design (Apel, 2010; Chaney, 2011; Duwe & Clark, 2013; Wildeman, Schnittker, Turney 2012; Turney, Schnittker, Wildeman; Wildeman, 2013). Quantitative method is well suited when objective

measures and variables specific to the research questions are well-known (Yoshikawa, Weisner, & Kalil, 2013). However, for this research study, quantitative method was inappropriate, given that my study did not seek to confirm theory, but, rather, discover new theory (Paterson, 2013).

When using grounded theory, in general, the researcher refrains from preconceived concepts and does not force extant theory on the data to answer the research questions (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical foundations are derived from the data analysis process. This method allows the researcher to discover patterns of behavior that are captured during the iterative data collection process (Paterson, 2013).

Grounded theory is well suited for studies where groups of participants have similar interpretations of experiences but these interpretations are not well-defined (Maz, 2013). Studies with a non-traditional focus, such as this research, are ideal for grounded theory. This method allows for new discoveries and theory.

### **Summary and Analysis: Loss and Coping Strategies**

Disenfranchised grief and the dual process model helped me to understand how African American women may respond to symbolic, psychological, social, physical loss, and use coping strategies related to the separation from their incarcerated mate. Although I used this literature as a foundation for my project, the questions that remained became my research questions and researchable problem statement.

Related studies provided insights on how women may contend that both death- and non-death related losses may result in grieving. When analyzing select works of

Kubler-Ross (1969), Bowlby (1982), and Freud (1961), it became apparent that specific types of separation experienced between African American women in dyadic relationships with incarcerated men may cause the affected person to become preoccupied with feelings of grief, stress, shame, and guilt (Bowlby, 1982; Freud 1961; Kubler-Ross, 1969). Additionally, the affected woman may have feelings of despair, anger, and denial, and acute anxiety may ensue (Bowlby, 1982; Kubler-Ross). Other features that she may experience include possibilities of yearning to stay connected and, consequently, form a psychological attachment to the absent person through memories of the past relationship (Freud, 1961). However, both the historical and contemporary grief propositions failed to provide consistent and empirically based evidence or a theoretical model that explains how African American women in relationships with incarcerated spouses react to separation and loss.

Scholars challenge that classical grief theorists defined the grieving process as stages that were loosely defined – vague– and they failed to address the dynamic nature of grieving (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Stroebe and Schut (1999) provided insights relative to the dynamic processes of grieving and considered sensitivity to culture and the oscillating nature of grief; but failed to indicate if individuals strive to maintain bonds with the absent person as a means of coping. These seminal literatures offered insights relative to the phenomena of separation and loss. Yet, there continued to be a need to understand the understudied population of African American women, separated from an incarcerated partner, and in a family context.

As Charmaz (2006) indicated, in the absence of theory, in order to construct new theory, the researcher must examine existing theoretical categories first. Hence, the aforementioned constructive critique offered necessary insights as applicable frameworks, while recognizing that there is no singular phenomenon that explains African American women's losses specific to her relationship with an incarcerated mate. My study was founded upon the aforementioned work.

The themes identified in the seminal literature, such as: depression; anger; fear; numbness; separation anxiety; sleep disorders, and other problems (Fahmy & Berman, 2012), suggest that the phenomena of separation and loss due to incarceration may be consistent to that experienced by grieving individuals, as paralleled through the works of Kubler-Ross (1969), Bowlby (1980; 1982), and Freud (1961). Additionally, elements of postmodern theories from Boss (1999) and Doka (2002) were paralleled and analyzed. However, I found no scholarly consensus in the literature specific to this population. In fact, I found no literature which examined the African American female's perspective on loss and grief experiences because of having an incarcerated mate.

In general, the literature revealed that women who are a subset of the African American race are subjected to the phenomenon of mass incarceration through their relationship with incarcerated men (Apel, Blokland, Nieuwbeerta, & Schellen, 2010; Cox, R, 2010; Lee, Porter, & Comfort, 2014; Mahoney, et al, 2013). The perils and the hardships, such as emotional and psychological distress, the physical health risks, social stigma, and shame may be a result of these relationships (Chaney, 2011; Chui, 2009;

Comfort, 2007; Fahmy & Berman, 2012; Mahoney, Bien, & Comfort, 2014; Stewart, Lynn, Gobora, Kropp & Lee, 2014). This study provided the opportunity for specific and focused research on this population to confirm these assumptions.

These conclusions offered that, although there is literature specific to the inmate and his children's experiences for this topic area, there continued to be a gap specific to understanding the experiences of loss and separation through the lens of African American women's psychosocial responses (Apel, et al., 2010; Chui, 2009; Wildeman, 2012). My study was built upon the hybrid of grief theories and took into account other nuances of separation and loss possibly encountered by the aforementioned population.

What the researched literature failed to show is how this study's demographic of women process these disruptions in their relationships because of incarceration of their loved one. Several gaps remained such as understanding the impacts of forced separation on the familial system. Additionally, I wanted to know how these women make meaning out of psychological loss, proximal loss, and social loss. In addition to understanding loss, I sought to understand the social stigma and if the institutional barriers encountered by these women affect their relationships and overall lives and well-being. Finally, I wanted to understand what theory explains symbolic, psychological, physical, social, and grief responses to loss and understand the coping strategies. These gaps presented an opportunity to conduct a grounded theory study to gain insights from a sample of African American women. These questions were consolidated as research subquestions in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 3, I provide a rationale for selecting qualitative methodology to explore answers to this study's research questions. Further, I provide historical roots of the classic grounded theory paradigm. The basis for using constructivist grounded theory orientation in my study is included. I define my role as a researcher, and I disclose potential conflicts and biases, as well as methods to manage them. Later in the chapter, the sample strategy is covered. In the remaining sections, I discuss data collection, data analysis, verification of trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

## Chapter 3 Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative constructivist grounded theory study is to discover and build substantive or context specific theory that explains how the phenomena of loss and separation operates in the lives of African American women who have an incarcerated mate. Additionally, I sought to understand what, if any, experiences are consistent with grief. I also sought to understand how African American women process non-death loss and separation when their loved one is incarcerated. Further, I sought to learn how, if at all, African American women perceive their experiences of loss and separation as symbolic, psychological, physical, and social loss. Finally, I wanted to identify what if any coping strategies were used. In this chapter, I provide a rationale for selecting qualitative methodology to explore answers to these questions. Further, the historical roots of the classic grounded theory paradigm are described. The basis for using constructivist grounded theory orientation in my study is also included. I define my role as a researcher and disclose potential conflicts and biases as well as methods to manage them. Later in the chapter, the sample strategy is covered. In the remaining sections, data collection, data analysis, verification of trustworthiness, and ethical considerations are discussed.

A goal of this project was to discover substantive theory that explains how the processes of loss and separation operate in the lives of my study's population. It was my goal that, as a result of this study, I would uncover how these processes may relate in a

psychological, physical, and social context in the lives of African American women with incarcerated mates. While there are a number of grief theories that helped to explain the phenomena of death and non-death-related loss and the impacts of separation (i.e., Boss, 1999; Bowlby, 1982; Doka, 2002; Kubler-Ross, 1969), at the outset of this study, I did not find any explanatory theory in the literature that addressed my study's focus and research questions.

### **Research Questions**

In this study, I referred to grand tour questions as a consolidation of the research questions, problem, and the central concepts for this study. The primary grand tour research questions (RQ) are provided, below:

RQ01: What are the processes and theory that explains how African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate, and what, if any, are their coping strategies?

RQ02: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their current or past experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as psychological, physical, social, and symbolic loss and potential, resultant grief?

These grand tour research questions offered a succinct description of the problem, as identified in Chapter 1. However, when I deconstructed the aforementioned questions by central concepts for granularity and clarity, the following subquestions became the foci:

SQ01: What is the process and theory that explains how African American women perceived their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate?

SQ02: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a resultant grief?

SQ03: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a symbolic loss?

SQ04: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a psychological loss?

SQ05: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a social loss?

SQ06: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a physical loss?

SQ07: What, if any, are the coping strategies used by African American women with an incarcerated mate?

I further deconstructed the central concepts used in these subquestions by creating open-ended interview questions, using common language and general terms (see Appendix A). This process of decomposition allowed for continued alignment between grand tour questions, subquestions, interview questions, and conceptual framework. These questions were designed to help me gain an understanding of participant behaviors and processes related to the central concepts and to ultimately answer this study's research questions.

### **Central Concepts**

The central concepts that I explored in my study were loss and separation and its potential impact on African American women when a mate is incarcerated. My study focused on the following concepts: (a) symbolic loss and resultant grief; (b) psychological responses to loss; (c) physical loss; (d) social responses to loss; (e) unorthodox grief responses, and (f) coping strategies. These concepts allowed me to focus the study primarily on loss and grief.

During everyone's life course, there are experiences with loss of some kind and in varying significance, related to death, an object, a relationship, or otherwise (Toller, 2009). When individuals experience profound loss and separation, such as through crisis situations associated with a loved one's incarceration, adjustment and change processes associated with the loss may compound their reactions. Compounded loss may include the absence of companionship, financial resources, safety, and security (Geller et al., 2009). My study's research and interview questions were designed to understand how these elements may affect the target population. I selected constructivist grounded theory to address this study's questions.

### **Paradigm and Tradition: Constructivist Grounded Theory**

The conceptual focus for this constructivist grounded theory study aligned with my philosophy that a researcher co-constructs research with research participants (Maxwell, 2013). This paradigm has its roots in symbolic interactionism where its hallmark is the creation of theory from the data, constant comparison of data during

analysis and data collection, and a linkage to cultural processes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Qualitative grounded theory inquiry enabled me not only to understand processes that are related to events but also to understand how the individuals or participants interpreted and made meaning of these processes operating in their lives (Maxwell, 2013).

This methodology offered critical components that lent structure and rigor to my study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). More specifically, this methodology provides predictive qualities and explains phenomena, advances the research knowledge base, provides application and future use, allows for future replication, and provides a protocol to study behavior and behavior patterns. The intrinsic rigor built into the grounded theory method provided credibility for the study, given that the theory comes directly from the data which originates from the participant's verbatim responses (Charmaz, 2006).

In the past, theorists have used grounded theory methods to understand the phenomenon of loss (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Glaser and Strauss (1967) introduced grounded theory to the scientific community, resulting from studies on dying, using what has become the classic grounded theory method (Birks & Mills, 2011). There are multiple generations of grounded theory with Glaser and Strauss (1967) as the first generation, and Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory as the second. My epistemological and ontological orientation aligns with the latter.

In my study, I drew upon the structure of classic grounded theory (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, my belief is congruent with Charmaz (2006) in that the researcher cannot be separate and apart from the research. Although there were other

variations of grounded theory considered such as Strauss (1987), Strauss and Corbin (1990), or Strauss and Corbin (1998), I found the constructivist paradigm to be the most fitting for this project.

### **Rationale for the Qualitative Methodology**

The cornerstone of qualitative research is the ability to understand a social problem through the lens of the human's experience (Peredaryenko, 2013). Qualitative inquiry is a natural fit to answer open-ended scientific questions through an inductive analysis (Cromby, 2012). Similar to the quantitative tradition in research, qualitative inquiry seeks to provide scientific rigor, credibility, and reliability to analysis and methods (Watts, 2014). Although the qualitative tradition has a variety of approaches that can be used— case study, narrative, phenomenological, ethnography, and grounded theory— the commonality shared between them is the analysis of words and other artifacts such as photos, mementos, journals, or contraband cell phone messages, gleaned from the participants or related to observation of the participants (McMullen, 2002). Moreover, qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to embark in theory generation from interviews (field work) and subsequent data analysis (Elliott, Fisher, & Rennie, 1999).

Qualitative research has deep roots in phenomenology, philosophy, and hermeneutics (Elliott et al., 1999). While there are a small number of phenomenological studies specific to women's experience with incarcerated family members (Chui, 2009), I found no studies that provided a theoretical explanation of loss and separation specific to and experienced by African American females with incarcerated spouses. Moreover,

phenomenological studies focus on generating a description of the phenomenon of the essence of what occurs as a shared experience among individuals (Patton, 2002). My study sought to generate midlevel theory to understand processes underlying how African American women respond to the loss and separation from their incarcerated mate.

Ethnographic researchers have placed their focus on the cultural aspects of African Americans families experiencing hopelessness and despair related to having an incarcerated loved one (Lee et al., 2014). Ethnographic studies require the researcher to become immersed in the lives and culture of the specific group. Due to the sensitivity of this topic, it was not reasonable to consider living among this population. A case study and narrative research was considered because it offered an in-depth look into the lives and histories of one or more respondents. However, these designs did not match the objectives and aim of my study. My study was designed to provide an explanatory understanding of the processes that occur in the lives of African American women when faced with loss and separation.

The literature on this topic has been studied from a quantitative perspective as well, whereby known variables of interest have been examined and measured, offering valuable, but narrowly focused perspectives (Wildeman et al., 2012). I selected qualitative methodology to glean rich information with explanatory power to provide for a more in-depth conceptual analysis of the participants' experience, -beyond understanding narrowly selected variables (Maxwell, 2013). I selected grounded theory (GT) orientation because there was simply no other method that provided an in-depth

explanation of the dynamics (Gordon, Cutcliffe, & Stevenson, 2011) and processes that were operating relative to my sample population (Jamieson, Taylor, & Gibson, 2006).

This project was designed to do more than generate descriptive narratives, as with other qualitative studies; instead, my study sought to gain knowledge that has explanatory ability to rise to the level of midlevel theory generation (Charmaz, 2006). As Charmaz (2006) indicated, when there is a lack of literature and/or explanatory theory, the research study becomes a candidate for a grounded theory. New theory can provide a number of benefits, including developing new knowledge in unexplored topic areas (Charmaz, 2006).

My study provides new insights regarding the phenomenon of loss and separation, specific to this study's demographic, for researchers and practitioners. More importantly, the emergent theory and findings from this study help to validate and acknowledge the experiences of African American women who, potentially, endure the emotional hardships in silence. My study's theory may also enlighten the research community by providing a platform for future studies, based on my initial findings. As a result, future targeted support for this population may be developed, whereby scientific insights could be gleaned and applied to support programs that are developed and based upon theoretical foundations.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My primary role in this project was to assure that every aspect of this research project, its design, analysis, and execution, was conducted in a manner that adheres to

ethical standards and human subject protection for all research participants (Maxwell, 2013). It was imperative that I was fully and completely competent to conduct this research (American Counseling Association governance [ACA], 2014). Based on my character and integrity as a researcher, if appropriate training and consultation was needed, I would have sought it out. However, I possessed all the skills required to conduct the study. Appropriate record management practices were implemented to protect confidentiality and privacy based on Walden University's Institutional Review Board and ACA (2014) governance. My role also included ensuring that all research subjects completed informed consent before any data collection began. My responsibility as a researcher also involved developing an effective research design. As such, my philosophical beliefs were aligned with the chosen research paradigm (Mills, Bronner, & Francis, 2006). In other words, I believe in the quality and rigor of qualitative methodology.

My philosophical orientation is that of a constructivist with symbolic interactionism influence. I believe that individuals make meaning of their lives through social interactions and assign symbolic meaning to activities and interactions with others. As a researcher, I seek to understand the world through the lens of the human experience and believe that individuals construct and make meaning of their own realities. As a constructivist researcher, my research design was influenced based on the philosophy that there are multiple realities (e.g., my perspective, the participant's perception, and so

forth); during this study, I was integrated into the entire research process as the interviewer and interpreter (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012).

As a researcher, it was also important that I acknowledged and managed any history or experiences that may have presented biases in my research (Maxwell, 2013). I recognized that I brought background and experience to this project that may cause me to see and analyze data based on my training and history. This background could have been good or bad. For example, as an information technology manager, I have had extensive training in structured interview creation and in conducting more than 50 interviews. As such, this particular skill helped my study because, during that training process, I learned how to construct questions that met face validity. I also learned how to become a good listener and learned the importance of asking open-ended behavioral questions with follow-up probes. These skills were beneficial when conducting interviews for this study. As a researcher, I remained cognizant of my responsibilities and ethical role.

Finally, my responsibility included integrating safeguards throughout this study that aligned with ethical standards and Institutional Review Board (IRB Approval No. 09-03-14-0178552) protocol. I was responsible for creating an environment that protected all research subjects from harm (see also the following sections: potential conflicts and biases, interview guide, and informed consent).

### **Mitigating Power Differentials**

My study was concerned with how the participants respond to loss while involved in a relationship with an incarcerated loved one, where stigma may prevail in their lives;

therefore, power differentials had to be considered and managed. It was possible that participants may have had previous experiences of being discredited, stigmatized, or feel ashamed of their relationships with individuals who violated societal standards (Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti, McKinney, 2012). Therefore, as a researcher, I had to remain acutely aware of negative stereotypes and labels to which these individuals may have been victim (Cook, 2012). I managed this situation by acknowledging the potential vulnerability of this population. Second, I remained sensitive to how my interactions and interview questions affected the individuals whom interviewed (Cook, 2012). I drew upon the work of Cook (2012) to help mitigate any potential for re-victimizing these individuals, while ensuring that the power differential was managed, by demonstrating empathic listening, establishing a rapport with participants, showing respect, and insuring confidentiality and privacy.

### **Study Risks**

I did not anticipate that this study would pose greater risk than that which is experienced beyond stress or emotional encounters during day- to- day experiences. I prepared a resource listing of mental health resources that are located throughout the Washington metropolitan area. My study posed no risk of coercion or quid pro quo. I did not collect any financial data or medical records. No stipends, paid participation and other forms of compensation were offered for participation in this study. It is hoped that the primary benefit for volunteers participating in this research was to enable them to tell their stories and to be heard.

### **Potential Conflicts and Biases**

As a qualitative researcher, I was aware that my world views, interpretations, and how my biases had to be managed to protect human subjects, to increase validity, and to minimize any risks to my study's credibility. To manage bias, I used bracketing, which was concerned with placing any researcher assumptions, preconceived notions or judgments aside to avoid bias (Gee, Loewenthal, & Cayne, 2013). Peredaryenko and Krauss (2013) suggested that as qualitative researchers, we are considered the primary instrument used for discovery. As such, I used reflexivity to manage my bias (Maxwell, 2013).

My training, as a doctoral student and as a professional, has provided a strong foundation for conducting this study. Additionally, my dissertation committee provided oversight/mentoring and guidance. Finally, the design and detail identified in this study provided transparency so that the steps performed to execute my study may be repeated in the future by other researchers.

Another bias that was acknowledged and managed was related to being a part of the same ethnic group under study (Chenail, 2011). Being a member of the African American female cultural group may have offered insights to me as a researcher that was advantageous, or potentially, detrimental, depending on how I responded. For example, researchers who have cultural insights may not pose certain questions because they think that, as an insider, they know the answers to the question (Chenail, 2011). My study guarded against this by using a semi-structured interview guide, comprised of questions

and probes for each question, asked of a participant in the same manner, using the same content (Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti, McKinney, 2012). The interview guide was in place to ensure equivalence across the sample. I did not assume that I knew the answers to any questions before asked (Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti, McKinney, 2012).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Researchers are the primary instrument in qualitative studies; therefore, it was imperative that I conducted this work with the highest ethical standards possible. Therefore, as a baseline, the American Counseling Association code of ethics was followed (ACA, 2014). Second, to ensure that I would be competent as a researcher, working with human subjects, I completed the National Institution of Health (2011) Protecting Human Research Participants training (See Appendix D, Certificate Number: 565115). This training emphasized the important of beneficence, justice, and respect for persons. My study addressed these issues by ensuring that, (a) all precautions were in place that safeguard against harm to research subjects according to IRB and ACA ethical guidelines; (b) a fair distribution of the burden of the research was addressed by ensuring that the participant felt empowered to tell her story, rather than stigmatized, and finally, (c) the entire study was designed with consideration of respect throughout the project; privacy and confidentiality are the hallmarks of my study. My study was carried out with the goal of addressing all concerns specific to the Walden's IRB application for human subject research.

Potential risks of ethical violations included, privacy breaches; misinterpretation of data; inappropriate interactions with research subjects, biased behavior, and absence of academic rigor. These risks were mitigated by implementing the aforementioned practices, such as following document management and privacy, as identified earlier. These controls included using unique identifiers rather than participant names. Additionally, no deception in advertising and false promises took place. I also sought consultation regarding data interpretation from my doctoral chairperson, when and where I thought there was a risk for misinterpretation.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants and Sample**

This study's design, sample inclusion criteria, informed consent, and all documentation used for recruitment and/or document management and analysis was approved by Walden University's IRB (Approval No. 09-03-14-0178552). A copy is provided in Appendix E.

The sample for my study was African American females who self-select as having a significant intimate bond and relationship with incarcerated mates. The geographic setting was the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area (DC, MD, and VA). I selected this population based on the rationale explained in Chapter 2, where, as a result of the disproportionate number of African American men, many spouses or partners of these men remain at home, separated and apart from their loved one. Selecting this population was a natural and logical fit.

### **Description of Research Participants and Selection Criteria**

The sample of 20 African American women in my study was recruited using multiple sampling sites because the sample comprises a hard- to- reach population and the need for variation in the sample to test and validate theory. Miles (2008) suggested that community-based programs are ideal for recruiting some samples, but not all, such as hard- to- reach populations. This is was because not all individuals attend community centers or have the resources to travel to these sites. As an alternative, my study followed Miles' (2008) strategy, which suggested a more public-based approach. He referred to this approach as a combination of street-based and snowball sampling. Abrams (2010) also recommended that different sampling strategies be employed when individuals may be transient or hard to reach.

Another important benefit of selecting dissimilar sites was to assure that there was enough variation in the sample to ensure that I adequately tested theory against dissimilar samples. For example, if I drew a sample from an economically disadvantage area of Southeast, Washington, D.C., versus affluent Northwest, Washington, D.C., my sample was likely to provide different perspectives on the similar experiences. However, my theory was tested, and stood up to both samples (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

In order to answer my study's research questions, inclusion criteria was stated on the recruitment flyer to avoid inadvertently misjudging a person's race and other inclusions (See Informed Consent Appendix E and Demographic Survey, Appendix B).

### **Sample Size**

The sample size for this study was 20 participants. Qualitative studies are generally small samples; they do not seek large numbers to achieve external validity or generalizability. However, grounded theories could expand the sample size to allow for emergent conditions, whereby the tentative assumptions about the data may change during data analysis and, therefore, warrant additional participants in the study. As Patton stated (2002), there are no hard and fast rules for qualitative sample size. It simply depends on what the researcher is seeking to find. Because my study uses grounded theory design, the initial set of participants, was 6 participants were recruited first, followed by a second wave of 7 participants, and the final group of 7. During each cycle, the data were collected and analyzed, until saturation was reached (Charmaz, 2006).

Glaser (1992) recommended that grounded theorists begin with a small sample, establish emergent categories during analysis, validate the categories, and be mindful of the point of saturation. As indicated, saturation was reached when no new information emerged from the transcribed interview data— and when the themes became redundant.

### **Justification of Sampling Strategy**

For this study, I favored an inter-mix of sampling strategies, to, first, ensure heterogeneity among the subgroup of African American women and secondly, to provide a means of data triangulation and theory triangulation (Miles, 2008). Theory triangulation can be achieved when a sample is drawn from multiple sources (Patton, 2002). Although the same demographic criteria was used for all participants, drawing from multiple sources (multiple locations: urban; rural areas; affluent and other

neighborhood areas as identified below) introduced variation that achieved that goal. Hence, I used a combination of purposeful criteria and snowball sampling (i.e. using a methodological mix as a sampling strategy approach) in order to gain access to this hard-to-reach population. Also, by using multiple methods of recruitment it helped to mitigate selection bias, or inadvertently discounting research subjects when they actually met the criteria for the study (Malone, Nicholl, & Tracey, 2014). An example of selection bias would include using only online recruiting methods, thereby discriminating against individuals who do not have access to a computer.

### **Recruitment**

As reported in Chapter 2, many women may hide the fact that they have an incarcerated mate. Therefore, I found it reasonable and necessary to use multiple modes of recruitment. After gaining IRB sanction (Approval No. 09-03-14-0178552), I advertised, in an unobtrusive manner, such as in community newspapers (e.g. Keesing, Rosenwax, & McNamara, 2011); placed flyers on social network sites (see flyer in Appendix C); left flyers at multiple community centers (including church fellowship halls), nail salons, and distributed flyers at public locations, such as public malls. The IRB recommends the use of flyers as a means of allowing the participants to self-nominate. The appropriate letters of cooperation were provided, where required. In order to protect the anonymity of individuals responding to advertisement placed on the social network sites, I provided instruction for respondents to use the private messaging feature

of the site, to respond to the recruitment invitation. This feature is similar to private e-mail.

Sampling was conducted in three waves as described in chapter 4. Individuals who responded by calling the contact number on the flyer were offered an opportunity to select a telephone interview, or a one-on-one interview. The telephone interview option was provided to reduce the potential for financial hardship associated with travel to the interview site. For those who elected to do in-person interviews, they were conducted in a conference room located in Bowie, Maryland. I was prepared to also conduct interviews at another location located in Washington D.C. However, it was not necessary. It was anticipated that these interviews would last from between 30 minutes to an hour. In actuality, the first interview lasted 2 hours. The remainder averaged 30 minutes.

I recruited from a publicly accessible social network site, (i.e. a Facebook group site for African American women, where the current population is over 3,900 women, who have visited the site and made comments, or posted in a discussion thread). This site provides open access for all users; however, the content is targeted to African American women. This site is administered by one primary site content administrator. As indicated above, to preserve confidentiality, I provided specific instructions to all potential participants to use the private messaging e-mail feature to preserve their anonymity—absolutely no personal content was posted on the associated site. Administrators serve in primary roles of posting content of interest, deleting inappropriate content, and responding to various site visitors. Any visitor may post a topic to generate interest and

discussion. My flyer was posted in electronic format on the site, whereby the respondents could indicate their interest by “messaging” me. This was done by clicking a button to generate a confidential response. Once the respondent indicated that she was interested, a full flyer was e-mailed. The flyer, as included in Appendix C, had an e-mail and a toll-free number (using [www.FreeConferencecall.com](http://www.FreeConferencecall.com)), so that participants may contact the researcher and schedule an interview.

### **Instrumentation**

I was the primary instrument used for this qualitative research study (Maxwell, 2013). I designed a semi-structured interview guide for this project. This section discusses how I designed, thematized, analyzed, tested, and refined this interview guide.

The semi-structured interview guide was designed using presupposition questions that aligned with the research questions (see Appendix A). I constructed and configured these questions in a manner that would elicit insight from participants for each research question at a detailed level. In my study, presupposition questions were based on the assumption that the respondent was familiar with each question because she is the subject matter expert of her own life experiences. This purposeful design helped to shift the power differential from the interviewer to the respondent (Patton, 2002). The intent of this shift was to help the informant (participant) feel empowered to tell her story, while neutralizing the potential for bias or stigma. In other words, the participant served as the expert, rather than the researcher.

I prepared the interview guide by drawing upon multiple processes. I added rigor, using the protocol for constructing in-depth interviews, as recommended by Kici and Westhoff (2004). This process provided guidance on how to develop behavior-, feeling-, values- and concept-based questions that supported and aligned with my research questions. The second model based on Charmaz's and Belgrave's (2012) process helped me to define questions in a manner that would elicit insights below the surface. I included probes to elicit additional information, including, severity levels, elements of change, and high-level concepts to be used for theory. This design also aided in the later development of analytic categories and comparison during the data analysis and interpretation process. The third complementary process was gleaned from Rubin and Rubin's (2005) responsive interview model and built upon the framework that the interviewer and interviewee are on mutual footing. The process involved using in-depth and nuanced inquiry, and flexible and emergent interview questions. To ensure that I conformed to this model while integrating the aforementioned models, I drew compatible elements of each of the frameworks that enhanced my interview design. For example, Rubin and Rubin (2012) was found to be a complement to grounded theory theoretical sampling, whereby both approaches identify gaps recognized during the data analysis and, therefore, required additional interviewing to answer those questions. Another design-specific example included designing the interview questions with an overlapping/redundant style so that if the interviewee did not fully answer the question initially, she could answer and even expound upon her answer, later during the interview.

I designed the interview guide with the intent to minimize any power differentials between interviewer and interviewee (participant), by incorporating appropriate interview protocol and questions (see detailed guide in Appendix A). Power differentials may occur if the interviewee feels that she is losing face, shamed, or controlled (Cook, 2012). To minimize the potential for these occurrences, the interview guide used face-saving methods, such as emphasizing the confidentiality of the interview as well as their participation (Cook, 2012). Second, I treated the interviewees with respect and dignity. Third, the language in the interview was simple language, so I did not appear condescending. To simplify the language, I used MS Word readability statistics to ensure that all information that would be shared with participants passed readability scores (e.g. Flesh Reading Ease Test).

The interview guide for my study was comprised of multiple sections: interview protocol (opening script), interview questions, and debrief (see Appendix A for full guide). A demographic survey was also included (see Appendix B). The steps associated with creating and testing each question provided content validity for interview questions. I followed Patrick's et al., (2011) guidelines for creating instruments, using the concept elicitation approach. This means that a major concept is identified and becomes the core focus of the question. In my study, this process involved identifying the key concepts of the primary and secondary research questions using a mind-map diagram, and then designing questions based on a single concept.

Next, I validated that each concept was applicable or that it was reasonable to apply to each participant, and that the central concept used in the question was consistent across the grounded theory emergent process. In other words, the question had to be stable and consistent throughout the iterative grounded theory process (Patrick et al., 2011). I also had to ensure that the meaning of the questions could be understood by each participant, based on language arts comprehension standards for readers at a fifth grade level (World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment [WCIDA], 2011). Participant responses were validated by paraphrasing their statements and asking for validation. Finally, when appropriate I asked questions/probes to determine degrees of severity associated with the interview questions and responses (WCIDA, 2011).

I tested each interview guide question against the above processes to ensure compliance to meet content validity standards. Afterwards, the questions were arranged, based on themes and concepts. After the questions were ordered, they were further arranged by phase, using Charmaz's and Belgrave's (2012) model for interviews: (a) initial phase; (b) intermediate phase, and (c) final phase. I also elicited feedback from two subject matter experts. One was a grief expert who also worked with forensic populations. The second expert was a mental health/pastoral counselor. Both individuals vetted my research questions. The finalized questions were approved by Walden's IRB.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Data collection was accomplished primarily through semi-structured interviews. This research phase began after receiving Walden's IRB approval (Approval No. 09-03-

14-0178552). I collected data from respondents in two ways: by telephone interview, or face-to-face in conducted in a private meeting room located in Maryland. I prevented anyone else from collecting or handling the data. I conducted 20 interviews. The maximum interviews conducted in one day were three. This continued through the theoretical sampling process described. It was anticipated that the data collection period would last between one and three months. In reality, the data collection process lasted one month. A custom-designed interview guide was used for the interview process. This semi-structured questionnaire served multiple purposes for my study. First, it offered structure to the interview process to ensure that all questions and probes are previously prepared and asked of each participant, for uniformity and comparability. This also helped to minimize misinterpretation during the data analysis process. Second, the guide lent integrity to the interview process in that the questions were designed to be clear and not burden the interviewee with what was being asked. Third, the guide helped me as an interviewer to focus on the participant, so that I might listen carefully, demonstrate empathy, and show attentiveness without the need to develop extemporaneous questions or probes during the interview (Kici & West, 2004). This reduced the need for follow-up questions, because I paraphrased their responses. I did find it necessary to conduct 2 follow-up interviews to serve as member checking and to validate coded material.

During data collection, I anticipated that respondents would call the telephone number listed on the flyer, and I told them about the study, screened them, as it is defined on the informed consent form (see Appendix E). If they agreed to participate through

informed consent, I invited them to bring any mementos/artifacts that were meaningful and representative of their relationship with their incarcerated loved one to the in-person interview. Because most of the interviews were conducted by phone, participants described items that held symbolic significance by the phone. These sources served as a form of triangulation against the research findings and testing theory (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

The informed consent form was reviewed and the in-person participant was requested to sign the document before proceeding with the interview questions. Permission to receive a verbal acknowledgement of informed consent was requested as a part of the IRB application (see Appendix E). This was requested so that, during the telephone-based interview, I might request verbal informed consent.

Upon conclusion of the interview, the participant was debriefed about the next steps. I offered to answer any questions she had, and I offered a resource list of community health and mental health providers, in case she need those services. I also asked if I might follow up by phone if there were additional questions, and offered to share the transcript for validation.

Once the interviews were complete, I transcribed them as soon as reasonably possible. Timely transcription of notes and the interviews helped me to recall things of importance that should be included in the analytic memos typically used for grounded theory. The data analysis took place immediately following the transcription of the data. I used self-reflection as a means of self-evaluation of each interview and captured

reflective notes and memos (Ruin & Rubin, 2012). These memos were used during the entire data collection process (see example memo in Appendix G). I used memos to record my analytical thoughts and salient points about the data, which helped to augment the interview data. These memos were captured by using an online journal that was password protected. I also carried a hard-bound journal with me to record analytical thoughts and field notes. Each memo contained the unique identifier, as used with the interview guides, but the word “memo,” with a sequential number, was added to the file name. These memos contained ideas, concepts, and theory-related notes about what is going on in the data (Deady, 2011).

### **Data Management and Analysis Techniques**

Data analysis techniques and processes were presented in a sequential manner; however, these processes are interactive, and processes may occur repeatedly out of sequential order. What follows is an overview of data management, data analysis and coding, and data interpretation processes that was used for this grounded theory study.

To ensure confidentiality, interview booklets were marked with a unique identifier code based on a nomenclature that indicates, type; date; type, and sequential number to preserve anonymity. Type refers to in-person or telephone (P or T); date is: month, day, year; and dash-respondent number is the sequential assignment to each interview (e.g. where TP09222014-01T is the code for telephone interview, on 9/22/14, with respondent number 01). I also assigned pseudonyms to each participant. Although this coding hides participant identity, it allowed for the constant comparison analysis to

be conducted by differentiating interview content. Informed consent forms were retained separate from these interview guides in a physical safe for all physical artifacts.

### **Data Management**

To preserve data integrity, quality, and confidentiality before analyzing, data management was an important process that was followed. All raw material from interviews, including memos, field notes, tape recordings, and other documentation was coded and labeled (using the above nomenclature) and secured in an office safe, purchased solely for this project. I prevented any other individuals from accessing these secured resources. Electronic data were retained in a categorical folder structure and within the qualitative software, NVivo. All documents were password protected. To ensure search and retrieval was effective, naming conventions were used to uniquely identify each document. Draft and final documents of all types were labeled, following the same protocol. All draft material was also placed in the appropriate electronic folder at the end of each use. All data were backed up on a USB drive and stored in the project physical safe. This data will remain secure/archived with the project until 5 years from the project completion data has passed, then destroyed. Audio tapes were erased after interviews were successfully transcribed.

### **Data Analysis and Coding (Initial and Focused)**

The grounded theory data analysis was an inductive process, comprising: theme-based coding; analytic note taking (memos); theoretical sampling; reaching a saturation point; ordering and sorting; building theory; writing the results, and reflection of the

project (eg. Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory data analysis began immediately after the interview transcription. However, one could argue that analysis began during the interview process, as clarity of responses was sought to ensure that future interpretation and translation of the data were optimal. As with other qualitative analysis, the primary data under analysis are the words gathered during the interview process.

I compared the data to the primary and secondary research questions, to ensure that the research questions were answered. The interview questions were a derivative of these high-level research questions. The resulting answers became the raw data to be used for coding. I used two phases of coding for my study, initial and focused (second cycle) or pattern coding (Charmaz, 2006, p. 42). During the initial coding process, all words were analyzed, and high level summarizing codes were created (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

Because I used grounded theory method, I read and analyzed the raw interview notes and analytic notes and extrapolated high-level words or phrases that are reflective of the content. During this process, I assigned codes to major segments of data. This step was based on pre-coding of the data as it aligned with grief and loss concepts. These a priori categories formed the basis for theoretical sampling as well as the development of substantive theory: (a) stigmatized grieving; (b) hidden grief; (c) unorthodox expressions of grief; (d) coping strategies; and (e) symbolic losses. Secondly, there are three related major categories: physical; psychological, and social responses. These data are linked to the research questions provided below:

RQ01: What are the processes and theory that explains how African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate, and what, if any, are their coping strategies?

RQ02: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their current or past experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as psychological, physical, social, and symbolic loss and potential, resultant grief?

Each of the aforementioned research questions has embedded concepts of interest identified in the research questions. As these data were coded to the aforementioned concepts, a comparison of the data to the memos was conducted, serving as a means of triangulation and as an interpretation guide. The details of this process are outlined, below.

Line-by-line coding was conducted with consideration to my study's conceptual framework, but handled in a manner that did not force preconceived ideas on the data. Ideally, the data were rich and insightful, whereby descriptive (a word that summarizes content) and in vivo codes (verbatim words), were used.

To manage the data, the line-by-line coding was conducted using NVivo qualitative software. This method of data management allowed me to create codes/nodes, and it also helped me with managing large volumes of data. As each code was created, a brief description was also created to ensure that I would not lose the initial meaning and description intended when defining the code.

This analysis and coding process became iterative as new interviews were conducted. After the initial interviews were conducted, the data were transformed to codes, and previous codes were compared. As more interviews were conducted, the meaning of these data and subsequent categories became clearer, and were refined into major constructs. During the coding process, I remained open-minded to emergent categories, and sought to understand how processes under analysis begin, relate, end, or change. This provided a high-level structure to which to compare new data. This process also helped to identify and flag data that were not relevant (Charmaz, 2006). Artifact data (descriptions of photographs, cards, etc.) were also integrated into this pool of data for analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theoretical sampling was performed, and continued until no new properties in the data turned up. This is known as the point of saturation (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

This coding process enabled me to understand what type of data was needed next. I began to see a pattern in the data that became major concepts. This process is expanded upon in Chapter 4.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Data interpretation was interrelated with the data collection, analysis, and transformation processes. This iterative process allowed for revisiting questions that were found in the data as the data were interpreted and gaps were identified (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It also allowed high-level concepts and, ultimately, theory to be tested and confirmed. As detailed above, data interpretation and translation occurred on multiple

levels for this project. This process began with the initial analysis and continued throughout the theoretical coding and sampling process.

Theoretical coding was concerned with analyzing the codes and their relationships to each other. This process also involved what Glaser and Straus (1967) referred to as temporal ordering. Ordering occurs by using Glaser's (1978) coding families to discern the causes, context, processes, behaviors, and consequences. The outcomes became the preliminary steps used to create theory.

This process of analyzing the data, sorting it into manageable components, is an ongoing and continuous process during data collection (Charmaz, 2006). The sorting process is concerned with understanding the substantive processes that are under review and analysis. Although major concepts are ordered, they were also analyzed for connectedness. I sought to understand how each of these concepts related, how and when they occurred, and with whom. I also, searched for evidence of the outcome. Next, the data were sorted or organized accordingly. This orderly management of the data led to the initial steps that I used for interpretation.

Content analysis was conducted using matrices as an added process to ensure rigor (Patton, 2002). These matrices captured the high-level processes as well as identified any triggers, events, relationships, and changes. Matrices were used primarily as researcher tools that were later transformed into a code book and tentative conceptual diagrams that led to the creation of the theoretical model.

I created network diagrams, or logic diagrams (i.e. mind maps and cluster diagrams), once the processes were identified and crystalized. These diagrams offer a depiction of the discovered concepts and emerging theoretical categories. Ultimately, I used this model and supporting narratives to explain what processes I identified during the data analysis process. After I drafted the preliminary network diagram(s), the display(s) were verified against the data and analytic memos to ensure correctness. This was accomplished by constant comparison of the process to what was conveyed in the data.

Additionally, the data were triangulated against other data sources such as field notes and memos. Finally, conclusions were drawn and the final product became midlevel theory. Midlevel theory was created by following six steps: (a) defining the properties, hierarchy, and relationships for all categories; (b) clarifying the conditions in which the categories are present or not; (c) determining identity and goals; (d) determining placement in the structural hierarchy; (e) identifying social contexts; and, (f) determining how variations and differences in individuals affect the process (Charmaz, 2006). I analyzed discrepant cases to see how they conformed to the overall model. At times, discrepant cases may reveal something else going on in the data; during others, they could reveal a flaw in the theory (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). These cases were analyzed using reflexivity to determine if there were exceptions or if additional interviewing was needed, known as theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006).

Ultimately, these steps revealed and portrayed how the participants in the study constructed meaning from events and occurrences in their lives. All processes used, and research findings are reported in Chapter 4.

### **Verification of Trustworthiness/Authenticity**

One of the primary goals of my study included broadening the extent in which the research community is informed about this problem, while doing so in a transparent, rigorous, and credible manner, to allow for future researchers to repeat and extend this work. To make this possible, transparency of my work was critical to the success of this project. As a researcher, I documented all processes and made certain that all steps were integrated in my study's findings. It was also imperative that I conducted thorough research and ensured that my interpretation of my work is valid, not biased, and based on prescribed methods, as described below.

### **Establishing credibility and reliability**

Steps to add credibility for my study were executed in multiple ways, including the use of triangulation, saturation, member checking, and reflexivity (to establish confirmability). First, as stated earlier, one form of triangulation proposed for my study was through using a variation of sample recruitment methods. This provided multiple perspectives for the unit of analysis. Theoretical sampling was used to ensure that the study's findings could be tested and confirmed. Second, analytic memos were used to help validate the interpretations. Additionally, during the interviews, when key concepts were conveyed by the respondent, I verified the meaning (member checking) by

paraphrasing what the participant had said. Because I did not believe that follow-up meetings would be feasible for all participants (although I asked if I might phone the respondent, for follow-up and to seek clarification), seeking clarification on the spot served as member-checking. I conducted two follow-up interviews. One for clarification of data that supported a theoretical construct and the second was to share code interpretation for validation. Finally, reflexivity was achieved by recording my thoughts, assumptions, and reactions to the entire research study process by using dated analytic memos. I used this process during the design stage to manage my thoughts and any potential biases.

### **Validity Threats**

To reduce threats to validity, I guarded against researcher bias, reactivity, and faulty reasoning. One of the main ways to guard against researcher bias was through understanding my own assumptions and preconceived notions about the study (Kowalczyk & Truluck, 2013). Therefore, to mitigate bias, I documented these assumptions, as described in my analytic memos. By documenting my thoughts, I was able to manage the process. The goal of documenting my thoughts was to be able to analyze them and discern if my thoughts aligned with actual findings (Maxwell, 2013). Researchers cannot completely bracket their thoughts and ideas from a study; however, it was important for me to prevent rendering judgment and bias, based on faulty reasoning and opinions (Patton, 2002).

I managed reactivity through awareness and management of my behavior and influence on participants (Maxwell, 2013). To manage this process, I developed an in-depth semi-structured interview guide. This guide ensured that I refrained from any nonverbal cues that may have been leading, such as head-nodding, or conveying facial expressions as reactions. Second, I designed the research questions in a manner that empowered the respondent to be the subject matter expert, and minimized the chances of asking leading and manipulative questions.

There are also formal processes to guard against threats to validity. One of the most important threats is evaluating and testing the conclusions drawn pertaining to data interpretation and theory generation. To accomplish this goal, I employed multiple strategies: verified that theoretical sampling generates enough insights that could be applied to a variation of participants; looked for information-rich data that provided clarity about analyzed processes; ensured that, during the interview, probes and follow-up questions were thoroughly vetted with the informant through paraphrasing (Maxwell, 2013).

Additional steps included searching for discrepant and disconfirming cases that did not align with the other findings. Triangulation was used to verify that the theory generated is plausible and valid. This process was accomplished by searching for converging or common data/themes from multiple sources. For example, I used a documentary, autobiography, and a court case affidavit as sources to triangulate to my interview data. Themes that were coded the same were verified against the findings from

the sample. In brief, this process involved using multiple sources, theories, and analysis to interpret the data (Hussein, 2009). The theories are identified in chapter 5 under interpretation. This process of triangulation can be a strong indicator of predictability and transferability of the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hussein, 2009) Prediction of theory entailed using heuristics to make propositions or inferences about the data (Miles, Huberman, & Salada, 2014).

I used each of the aforementioned strategies as additional forms of credibility and trustworthiness. In this study, I referred to predictions as, identifying a set of processes, actions, and outcomes that, when all factors are present, the outcome is predictable and consistent. This concept was adapted from Glaser and Strauss (1967). To assist me in managing this process, I used a checklist to ensure consistency and to help me to remember all of the complexities that I handled and managed.

### **Additional Ethical Procedures**

#### **Data Confidentiality**

As previously discussed, I identified all interview booklets and information referring participants using unique identifier codes to mask their identities. The respondent names were preserved in a log that contained reference to a unique identifier and the participant's name for the purpose of follow-up. However, I disposed of this log after the data were successfully transcribed.

Support for participants included ensuring that each participant received a resource list of mental health and community-related resources available at no cost as a

precaution, in case the interview caused any distress (see Resource List, Appendix F).

Every participant was debriefed and informed that none of their personal identifiable data would be used for the study. All records were retained under lock and key in a safe (as an audit trail of what occurred with the respondent's data).

The only individuals who were able to request access to my study's data was my dissertation committee upon request and the Walden IRB. The next section provides ethical considerations relating to informed consent.

### **Informed Consent**

One of the highest forms of ethics is to protect the respondent's rights as a participant by providing informed consent (ACA, 2014). Therefore, my first step during data collection was to explain the study through the informed consent process (see Appendix E). This process ensured that the participant was fully informed, using clear language, as required in the Walden University IRB Consent Form. This form also provided an overview of the study's potential benefits, as well as any foreseeable risks. For my study, approval was sought to administer informed consent when telephone interviews are conducted.

No compensation was offered for my study; therefore, this was clearly articulated during the opening of the interview, and was also indicated on the consent form. The IRB approval number was listed and an internal Walden University representative name was also listed (see Informed Consent form, Appendix E).

### **Summary of Research Design**

In this chapter, I provided a rationale for selecting qualitative methodology, using a constructivist grounded theory approach. I restated my study's research questions and provided substantiation of how these exploratory questions are aligned with the qualitative paradigm. I provided my role and responsibility as a researcher, with specific attention paid to managing power differentials, conflicts, and biases.

Next, I discussed instrumentation and the data collection techniques proposed for my study. I provided detail specific to data management and data interpretation. Strategies to achieve verification and trustworthiness were provided. Finally, I discussed ethical considerations and researcher competence. In Chapter 4, I discuss the research setting, participant demographics, the data collection process that occurred, controls executed to ensure trustworthiness, and results.

## Chapter 4 Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to build substantive theory that explains how African American women respond to separation and loss from their incarcerated mates. Specifically, I sought to understand the psychosocial impact of separation and loss and coping strategies and to determine what, if any, responses were consistent with grief. I used the conceptual framework of disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2002) and the dual process model of grief (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) to establish theoretical sensitivity. Grounded theory method was used for analysis. Glaser and Strauss (1967) indicated that by using grounded theory, the resultant midlevel theory is extrapolated from data collection and subsequent analysis. This chapter provides an overview of the key results of participant stories that ultimately led to the development of midlevel theory. In this chapter, I describe participant recruitment, data collection and analysis, the research setting, participant profiles, elicited data sources, data collection, analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, overall findings, and my summary.

### **The Research Setting**

I conducted research for this study in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area (DC, MD, and VA). Interviews were conducted during September and October of 2014. The overwhelming majority (19 of 20 [95%]) of the interviews were conducted as private telephone conferences. One interview was conducted in person in a private meeting room, located in Maryland. Participants chose their preference of interview type. I

maintained a participant contact log, recording only the participant's first name and contact information, to preserve confidentiality. When participants responded to my research fliers or letters of invitation (via snowball sampling), we mutually agreed upon a scheduled interview date and time.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All ethical protocol, identified in Chapters 2 and 3, was followed. The Walden University Institutional Review Board approved the research protocol for this study, as well as the associated informed consent forms for in-person and telephone interviews (IRB Approval No. 09-03-14-0178552) before data collection commenced. Ells (2011) suggested that if a study's research design is thoroughly vetted through ethics review boards and doctoral supervision, the said study should be ethically sound if the associated protocol is thoroughly followed.

Informed consent was read to each participant to determine eligibility to participate in the study. Prior to their interview, each participant was informed of the duration, risks, benefits, expectations, and any follow-up activities that might be required. All participants were provided a mental and community health resource listing, as defined in Chapter 3. Telephone interview participants received an e-mailed version of the aforementioned listings. All documentation associated with each interviewee and any cross-referenced materials were assigned unique numeric identifiers. All interview data were stored under lock and key or in password-protected computerized files. Audio tapes were deleted after each file was transcribed.

### **Demographics (Participant Profiles)**

This section provides an overview of the research respondents who self-identified as meeting this study's inclusion criteria and who agreed to informed consent. I have purposely chosen to omit participants' city and state from the profiles listed below to reduce the risk of revealing a participant's identity, based on a combination of their location and unique stories. This process allowed me to use thick and rich descriptions of verbatim quotes without filtering detail. Pseudonym assignment allowed me also to honor the women by giving them a name rather than a number. As a researcher, I felt that the numeric identifier was too similar to prison inmate numbers. Their aliases, which appear below, will be hereinafter referenced in the text, where logical, when referring to participants. These profiles provide a context and background for future discussion. The profiles sometimes vary in content because the research questions were not designed to capture demographic information but rather to answer research questions. All profile information emerged as a result of general discussion related to a participant's answers to the interview questions. Each profile contains information that was current at the time of the interview. Table 1 provides an overview of disclosed information, followed by a narrative of participant profiles.

Table 1

*Summary of Participant Demographics*

Partici- pant	Age	Disclosed number of children	Participant's relationship definition	Relationship status (stable or unstable)	Mate's incarceration status	Years in relationship
1	48	1	Married	Stable	Released	24
2	24	1	Boyfriend	Unstable	Incarcerated	12
3	38	2	Married	Stable	Released	15
4	45	Undisclosed	Not legally married	Stable	Work release	22
5	75	1	Father of child	Unstable	Incarcerated	Undisclosed
6	58	1	Husband	Unstable	Incarcerated	.6
7	34	1	Engaged	Stable	Incarcerated	~9
8	55	0	*Grandsons	N/A	N/A	N/A
9	36	0	Boyfriend	Stable	Incarcerated	Undisclosed
10	24	1	Significant other	Stable	Incarcerated	Undisclosed
11	52	Undisclosed	Husband	Stable	Incarcerated	Undisclosed
12	>18	1	Boyfriend	Unstable	Released	Undisclosed
13	> 18	>1	Husband	Stable	Incarcerated	Undisclosed
14	24	1	Father of child	Stable	Incarcerated	Undisclosed
15	47	>1	Husband	Unstable	Released	>20
16	50	1	Significant other	Unstable	Incarcerated	Undisclosed
17	42	0	Husband	Unstable	Incarcerated	>7
18	48	0	Boyfriend	Unstable	Released	Undisclosed
19	38	0	Boyfriend	Unstable	Incarcerated	Undisclosed
20	45	6	Husband	Stable	Released	Undisclosed

Note: \*Participant Number 8 was identified as a discrepant case.

Data contained in Table 1 is self-explanatory, as conveyed through participant stories that are narrated as profiles, below. The description “unstable versus stable” serves as a consistent form of reference that captures whether or not the participant’s relationship was intact or not.

Participant 1, #09111401, *Lotus*, is a 48-year-old woman who identified as an African American woman. She is a mother of at least one child; the exact number of children was not disclosed. She indicated that her daughter is the biological child of her formerly incarcerated husband. According to Lotus, they were married for 24 years. She further stated that at the time of his incarceration, their relationship was considered “on-again, off- again.” She offered that, prior to his arrest, she planned to divorce him but changed her mind because she could not bear to see him suffer in prison, both from divorce and incarceration. She did not disclose how long her husband was sentenced to prison. She also did not reveal how long they were in their relationship prior to her mate’s incarceration. She indicated that while her husband was incarcerated, in federal prison, she communicated with him 3 to 4 times a week, by phone or through letters, and she supported his prison commissary or canteen. Occasionally, she made the 3 hour trip to visit him. At the time of her interview, she said, her husband has been released from prison and they continue a relationship but live in separate dwellings. Lotus indicated that her husband provides financial support for their daughter.

Participant 2, #09041402, *Sage*, is a 24-year-old who identified as an African American woman. She described her role as mother of a 4 month-old son, and referred to her mate as “my baby, my boo.” At times, Sage referred to her mate as an extension of herself: “That’s me.” Sage clarified her relationship status by stating, “I don’t ever call him my boyfriend, if anything, I would say: ‘that’s my husband,’ but truly that’s not my husband... I am actually married [to someone else].” She later indicated that her husband

by marriage is the father of her young child. Sage reported that she has been in the relationship with her incarcerated mate for 12 years. She described her relationship with her incarcerated mate as having periods of not being together. Specifically, she stated: "...we broke up. Then we got back together." According to Sage, they are currently in a relationship again. She said that her incarcerated mate is currently serving time in federal prison. He has been incarcerated for over 10 years. Sage recalled that she was only 13 when they began their relationship. She indicated that she communicates with her incarcerated mate several times by phone every night, from approximately 6:30 p.m. through 10:45 p.m. She said this arrangement is possible because other inmates barter their "phone time" with him.

Participant 3, #09111403, *Jasmine*, is a 38-year-old who identified as an African American woman. She indicated that she is the mother of at least two boys (the exact number was not provided). Jasmine said that she is married to her formerly incarcerated mate. She stated that prior to his incarceration they were in a relationship for approximately 15 years. She described her mate as "husband and head of household." She indicated that her primary contact with her mate during his incarceration was by telephone because of the distance to the prison. She further offered that she did not visit him due to a lack of reliable transportation to drive to the prison. She stated during her interview that she and her spouse were currently together as a family.

Participant 4, #09071404, *Violet*, is a 45-year-old who identified as an African American woman. She is the mother of her incarcerated mate's children; however, the

exact number of children was not disclosed. Violet described her mate as her husband; however, she clarified that they are not legally married. She further indicated that he is “granted that status” because they have been together for over 22 years. She reported that although her mate was incarcerated, at the time of the interview, he was in a transitional program for inmates who are serving the last part of their sentences, and he will be returning home soon. She said this program is called “work release.” Violet indicated that their contact is frequent because she is able to “informally visit” him at his various work locations. She stated that prior to his involvement in the work release program she communicated with him by phone and visited him at the prison facility with their children. However, Violet noted that visits were extremely stressful on their children. She clarified, “[w]hen they see daddy, they want to run and jump on him and hug him...they can’t grasp that fact that there’s a glass right there in the middle of them and they can’t get to him.”

Participant 5, #09061405, *Dahlia*, is a 75-year-old who identified as an African American woman. She indicated that she had a daughter by a man who is currently incarcerated. During our interview, Dahlia made it clear that that her relationship with the incarcerated inmate is solely maintained as an extension of the father-daughter relationship. She disclosed that during the latter stage of her relationship, he cheated on her with another woman. She offered, for a period of time, to help her daughter write letters and maintain contact with her father. However, due to the crime and the

circumstances of his arrest, she distanced herself. She reported that he is serving time for molesting the young daughter of the woman with whom he had the affair.

Participant 6, #09151406, *Rosemary*, is a 58-year-old who identified as an African American woman. She described her role as wife of her currently incarcerated mate and mother to his child. Rosemary stated that she was in the relationship with her husband 6 months prior to his incarceration. According to Rosemary, she maintained contact primarily through letters and phone calls. Given that he was serving time in a prison facility several states away, she explained that her in-person visits were few. She said that she provided financial support to her mate throughout his incarceration and upon his return from prison. She stated that at the time of the interview, they were not living together.

Participant 7, #09121407, *Hazel*, is 34-year-old who identified as an African American woman. She has a daughter by her incarcerated mate. She indicated that her mate “does not have a title.” When referring to her relationship, she indicated, “The [incarceration] didn’t really give us reason that we could put a title on it...” However, during parts of the interview, she referred to him as her husband. She is not married, however, during one visit her mate “got on his knee and proposed.” Later, during the interview she reflected, “...it was just hard to stay committed.” Hazel reported that her mate has been incarcerated since the age of 19; he is currently 28. She revealed that they have been together for the duration of his incarceration, without break-up. She noted that her loved one is incarcerated in another state, which means she must make a 3 hour

journey to visit. At first, she traveled “every weekend just to show [her] commitment;” now they maintain contact by phone. She disclosed that at the time of the interview, her mate was still in federal prison.

Participant 8, #09151408, *Peony*, is a 55-year-old who identified as an African American woman. She indicated that her significant other is serving time in federal prison. However, when answering questions specific to her incarcerated mate, she repeatedly made references to her grandsons. This may have been a result of the wording contained in the research flier, which provided relationship examples such as “significant other.” In respect of her dignity, I did not challenge her credibility and continued on with the interview. The IRB process caused me to be cautious about offending individuals via exclusion. Consequently, to preserve the integrity of the research, I included this interview as a discrepant case but did not include the resultant data in the initial and focused coding process.

Participant 9, #09161409, *Olive*, is a 36-year-old woman. She reported that she was not legally married to her incarcerated mate. Her relationship began as a high school friendship; however, she now considers him “her husband.” She indicated that after high school they lost touch; however, when he went to prison, they reconnected. They have been together for about 6 years. He is still incarcerated, serving a 213-year sentence. She hopes to get married to him one day, on the “outside,” when he is released, rather than have a prison wedding. She does not have children but hopes to one day have a family. She maintains daily contact with her mate through “Corlink,” the prison’s version of e-

mail. Rarely does she use the phone to connect with him because it is too expensive and she wishes to save that phone time for his parents and relatives.

Participant #10, 09151410, *Petunia*, is a 24-year-old who identified as an African American woman. She described herself as a single mom. She referred to her incarcerated mate as her “best friend” and “significant other” whom she plans to marry one day. Her mate was sentenced to 3 years in federal prison. During his absence, she said that she has had other relationships but purely for physical reasons. However, she said that she has now come to realize that she does not want “sex buddies” any longer. She indicated that she is now being faithful to her incarcerated mate.

Participant 11, #09161411, *Mansi*, is a 52-year-old who identified as an African American woman. During her interview, she referred to her incarcerated mate as her “husband.” She recalled their wedding as one of the happier times in their relationship. She did not indicate whether or not they had children. Her mate was sentenced to 3 years in prison.

Participant 12, #09171412, *Willow*, is a self-identified African American woman, over the age of 18 but of unspecified age. She refers to her incarcerated mate as her “boyfriend.” She communicated with her mate often when he was in the local jail; however, when he was sentenced and transferred to federal prison, the communication ceased to be as frequent because of the distance. At the time of her mate’s incarceration, her son also became incarcerated. She indicated that experience of her son’s incarceration placed an overwhelming amount of stress on the dyadic relationship. This relationship

has been “on-again, off-again.” Currently, she said, she has deep feelings for him and is still deeply “depressed” over the entire incident.

Participant 13, #09171413, *Iris*, is a self-identified African American female respondent, over the age of 18, but of unspecified age. She referred to her incarcerated mate as her “husband,” with whom she shared a happy marriage and family. They have biological children together. Prior to her mate’s incarceration, she considered her life to be a normal, middle-class family. When reflecting, she indicated, “I was spoiled.” At the time of her interview, she indicated that she maintained her relationship through letters and twice- a- month visits. Her husband is serving his sentence in federal prison. She reported that he has been away for 5 of a 7 year sentence.

Participant 14, #09241414, *Holly*, is a 24-year old who identified as an African American woman. At the time of her interview, she was in a relationship with a 24- year-old incarcerated mate. When asked directly to define her relationship, she indicated, “... some days” she feels “unattached to him...like we are not together, anymore....” During other times, she reflected fondly on their relationship. She indicated that her mate is the father of their young child. During the interview, she stated that he was serving his time in a federal prison. Holly said that she maintains consistent contact with her mate and is encouraged by the new skills that he is learning in federal prison. She looks forward to his return.

Participant 15, #09301415, *Daisy*, is a 47-year old who identified as an African American woman. She met her mate during college. During the following twenty or so

years, she had children by him. The children did not know where their father was during his absence, during a number of early incarcerations. She reflected, over the years their relationship was unstable in that they would break up and then resume their relationship. Over the 20- year span, he was incarcerated six or seven times, for different offenses. She recalled, “canceling” or not celebrating all holidays during his first incarceration and further, she “disassociated” from friends and family. Daisy, reflected on her now estranged mate’s incarceration and indicated that she thought that she “could fix it...but couldn’t fix it.” However, Daisy said, she has now returned to a normal life. Her ex-significant other, is no longer in prison and she maintains a relationship with him; she said, for the children’s sake. She said she still loves him, but cannot live with him or stay married to him. This is because she had to rebuild her life too many times. In retrospect, she said, “I had to ‘sell everything to get him out of the jail, to pay his attorney, to do whatever needed to be done in order to get him back home.’” At the time of the interview, she suspected that he would return to prison at any time.

Participant 16, #10011416, Ivy, is a 50-year old who identified as an African American woman. She was/is in a relationship with an incarcerated mate. She defined her relationship as “on-again, off-again.” During the interview, she said she was married to another man, but maintains an outside relationship with the incarcerated male. Only once, she said, did she resume intimate relations with him, outside her current relationship with her husband. Ivy revealed that she speaks to her incarcerated mate regularly by phone. She says they understand each other and connect on a deep level on

many topics. She indicated that she still loves the incarcerated male and will always love him. She recalled, had he not gone to prison, they probably would have gotten married.

Participant 17, #10041417, *Indigo*, is a 42-year old who identified as an African American woman. At the time of her interview, she had been in a relationship with her incarcerated mate for over 7 years. She considers her relationship as having its “ups and downs.” During his first incarceration, they terminated their relationship, and resumed it again after his initial release. She then became pregnant. Subsequently, he was arrested again. However, before his transfer to prison to serve his sentence, they were married at the jail. During their wedding ceremony, they were unable to touch. However, she said that she was able to embrace and kiss him before his departure to serve time in federal prison. Indigo said that they primarily communicate by phone. She is currently awaiting his next release.

Participant 18, #10031418, *Poppy*, is a 48-year old who identified as an African American woman. She indicated that she was her mate’s “first real girlfriend.” She recalled that he has been in and out of prison since he was ten years old. During his recent incarceration, she supported him, and took care of him, she said, when his family would not. At the time of the interview he was out of prison, and they were not living in the same household. She reflected that things were fine upon his initial release; however, he decided not to enroll in drug rehabilitation programs that were offered. He also violated his parole. She said that his return to prison is imminent. He is currently facing approximately 17 years in prison, for violation of parole.

Participant 19, #09241419, *Rose*, is a 38-year old who identified as an African American woman. According to Rose, her incarcerated mate was the love of her life when they first met. She referred to him as her “boyfriend.” She indicated that communicating with her mate during his incarceration was difficult because she was homeless at the time. She recalled that during that time, it was “horrible.” She said, “I’m on the street by myself...I was messed up...about it, he was gone.” Her mate was special, she said, because her dad was not always around when she was growing up. She revealed that she “had self-esteem issues.”

Participant 20, #09241420, *Flora*, is a 45- year old who identified as an African American woman. She was married to her husband seven years prior to his incarceration. Flora said that his incarceration caught her off guard because “life was not supposed to happen this way.” At the time, she had a respectable job, she said, and worked around professionals that thought highly of her husband. She said that she “placed her husband on a pedestal.” She recalled, as husband and wife,” they had a schedule, they were a team-- they each had roles.” “He broke the contract,” and she was hurt, shocked, stressed, disappointed, and more than anything, she was angry because he shouldn’t have done this to her. He, on the other hand, “got to go off to prison, receives three square meals, plays cards all day, and [watch] television, while she had to take on a second job and take care of six kids.” The situation wasn’t fair, in Flora’s opinion– he broke their partnership. After time passed, she said, they mended their relationship and are now back together as a team.

### **Data Sources (Elicited Material)**

I used three data sources or data points to augment the interview data captured from the 20 interview subjects. I used these additional data points for the basis of analysis and triangulation. Charmaz (2006) considers nontraditional sources, sources such as news articles, documentaries, and other supplemental materials to grounded theory research, as elicited material. These elicited materials broaden the sample and help to confirm my interpretation of the data. I named each source, using the same nomenclature as used with the participant interviews. Each source was treated equivalent to all other sources of data, according to protocol of Glaser and Strauss (1967). These data points follow.

Data Point 01, #101514-01DP, *Latoya's* case was drawn from an Investigative Discovery television documentary. She is an African American female. She was introduced to her now- husband by her cousin. At the time of their introduction, she said, she believed that her beau was serving a three-year sentence. After falling deeply for him, she later learned that he was serving a life sentence in federal prison. Latoya indicated that at the time of television airing, she filled her days working one full- time, and two part-time jobs to help support her husband and to pay for his attorney fees for his appeals process. She is isolated from family and wept over the loss of not seeing her brothers grow up even though they live in a nearby town. She indicated that she spends the majority of her day focusing on working, talking to her mate by phone or reading his letters, looking up case law, and investigating/researching his case. She indicated, "I

became an overnight lawyer, investigator, and paralegal” (ID, 2010, Frame 2:14 seconds).

Data Point 02, #092814-02DP, *Alyssa's* case is similar to those of the above interview participants. Her story is not unlike those of the other women who met and formed a relationship with their mate while he was incarcerated. Alyssa's age, and other identifying information, will not be disclosed because of the extreme sensitivity of her own criminal-related situation that is currently pending an appeals process in the United States' court system (pending at the time of this writing). Only relevant data to advance theory of how separation and loss plays a role in an African American woman's psychosocial functioning has been coded in this dissertation. Alyssa's case is drawn from an affidavit and news articles. Alyssa became involved with an inmate and maintained a romantic relationship with him for more than 10 years. She became pregnant twice by the same male while he was serving his sentence in federal prison. Alyssa is currently facing a different type of separation and loss. Their forced separation came about because she was a corrections officer working at the prison where her inmate boyfriend was housed. She became romantically involved with the inmate, while he was incarcerated, according to the affidavit. Alyssa's extreme case helps to shed insight on the complexities of relationships involving forced separation and loss. To preserve her anonymity, references to Alyssa's story will be paraphrased and not quoted since she is currently an inmate in federal prison.

Data Point 03, #100114-03DP, Asha, was a 25- year old who identified as an African American woman. Data from her story is captured from her autobiography. At the time of her first encounter with her mate, she was a college student, who volunteered at a prison to read poetry. Through this role, she met and fell in love with an inmate at the same prison. She later married him. Her mate was serving a sentence of 20- years to life. When describing herself, she offered, she is filled with “...secrets and sadness, an emerging woman hampered by insecurities and anger, a human being fighting off loneliness while craving solitude, needing an open love, long honest discussions, a quiet touching at my core” (Bandeled, 1999, p. 17). Asha’s story helps to provide insight on how similar and consistent the participant stories are with hers, even though decades have passed since her autobiography was published.

Collectively, the aforementioned data sources provide insights from 20 participant interviews, and three data points that are used for the basis of analysis.

### **The Data Collection Process**

This study’s data collection process was guided by the inductive nature of qualitative inquiry, combined with grounded theory methodology. I began data collection on September 04, 2014. I recruited a homogenous sample of 20 self-identified African American women from the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area (DC, MD, and VA). I distributed fliers on the day of approval after applying this study’s IRB number on the final draft of the research flier. I distributed research fliers to multiple locations throughout the tri-state area (MD, VA, DC). These fliers were placed on church bulletin

boards, -community bulletin boards, at community centers, and in libraries. Additionally, an electronic version of the flier was placed on various social networking sites that granted permission. Letters of invitation were provided to friends, colleagues, and others who saw my flier and indicated that they knew someone who might qualify for the sample. Participants responded by texting, e-mail, or telephone inquiry. My cell phone voice recording was modified especially for this study, directing participants to leave a contact telephone number if I was unavailable when they called.

### **Recruitment**

As described in Chapter 3, I used multiple data sampling strategies, including purposeful, snowball, and theoretical sampling methods. My goal was to recruit a homogenous sample because, with grounded theory, the more homogenous the sample, the smaller the sample required to reach theoretical saturation (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). This is because participants, who share the same understanding of the research problem, are thought to be subject matter experts. Thus, saturation is thought to be achieved with fewer participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit the initial participants. This was followed by theoretical sampling. I originally sought to recruit at least 25 individuals, speculating that I would lose approximately 5 individuals through attrition. Ultimately, I achieved the goal of recruiting 20 participants. I used theoretical sampling to focus on specific gaps or unanswered questions that emerged during data analysis. Theoretical saturation was reached well before interviewing 20 women. I saw signs of saturation during the first

wave of interviews, as explained below. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found that saturation occurred within the first twelve interviews of their study. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) reached data saturation in a sample of 20 participants. Glaser and Strauss (1967) indicated that a pattern can be seen in the data, using only one case or research subject, but more than one case is preferred. My study's recruitment was conducted in three contiguous waves.

During the first wave of interviews, I sought to recruit approximately 6 female respondents, transcribe the recorded audio, perform a self-assessment, and identify research gaps. The first interview had the longest duration. The remainder averaged 30 minutes in length. After the first interview, my critique revealed that I should conduct shorter interviews to avoid having to conduct two-hour interviews. I felt that it was too much to ask of participants, given the emotional nature of the interviews. Therefore, during subsequent interviews, I guided the interviews using probe questions to help the respondent remain on topic.

During the second wave, I interviewed 7 more women. I asked the same interview questions, but I was able to narrow my focus and probe for greater specificity in areas where my analysis revealed gaps. I developed early propositions and hypotheses, using the abduction process described by Charmaz (2006). I was also able to answer any gaps or questions that emerged during data analysis. During the third, and final, phase of interviewing, I recruited 7 more women, to ensure that theory was validated through constant comparison, as described in Chapter 3 (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Finally, I

concluded that saturation was reached when no new information emerged from the last wave of interviews (Birk & Miles, 2011).

### **Interview Process**

After receiving informed consent from participants, according to the protocol identified in my IRB application, I provided each participant with a listing of community mental health services via e-mail or over the phone. Informed consent for telephone interviews was received verbally. The in-person interview took place in a private office located in Maryland and the informed consent was signed by the participant. I received permission from each respondent to audiotape the interview. All notes and cross-referenced documents were stored in a secured location as identified in my IRB form.

### **Variations or Unusual Circumstances**

I encountered two circumstances that might be considered unusual during the data collection process. First, I had to deny two men the opportunity to participate in the research study because they did not meet the study's inclusion criteria. The second circumstance was concerned with a female who did not want to be audio recorded, but asked if I would simply include in my study, the following information, "things fall apart."

### **Data Management and Tracking**

Data management techniques involved organizing all data for this study using consistent records management practices. I maintained password-protected files and secure hard-copy files. I also kept two research journals. One was for contact and follow-

up, the other was for field notes. All procedures identified in my IRB application for data storage were followed. Participant unique identifiers were used as calendar entries when scheduling interviews; I used my private Microsoft Outlook calendar. This identifier was used on all cross-references, including the interview guide and the associated folder in NVivo qualitative data analysis software. I transcribed interview audio tapes, no later than 72 hours after the interview as recommended by Charmaz (2006).

### **Data Analysis**

The hallmark of grounded theory is the iterative process of collecting data, performing analysis, identifying research gaps, or open questions, and the formation of a theoretical model. Grounded theory is a qualitative research approach that results in the construction of context specific theory, grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2006). In this study, a theoretical model forms the basis of communicating context specific theory. Whereby, the narrative describes how antecedents, behaviors, and outcomes align with the model. My primary goal of data analysis was to manage, understand, and distill the large volumes of raw data into categories and themes that ultimately contribute to the construction of substantive theory (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). In summary, this process entailed: (a) reducing the voluminous data into a manageable dataset; (b) identifying repeat themes in the data, and (c) building theory from identified processes, relationships, and outcomes identified in the data. To accomplish this work, I used first- and second cycle coding. Using the aforementioned approach, I reduced 199 pages of transcribed audio recordings; 10 memos; 20 journal pages of handwritten memos (see

Appendix G example memo), and field notes into the summarized data that appears later in this section. The next section describes how first- and second- cycle coding was accomplished.

### **First Cycle Coding**

I carried out first cycle coding by identifying and labeling relevant text to summarize the data specific to my research questions (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p.37). I loaded all transcribed interviews into NVivo qualitative data analysis software. I conducted line-by-line analysis, searching for re-occurring words that held significance to my research questions. I tagged relevant text using NVivo's highlighting tool and assigned this text to nodes. Nodes are a collection of references that pertain to a specific category or clusters of words, paragraphs, or themes identified in the data. I used NVivo's query features such as word-cloud and word frequency, to validate my relevant text identification.

I used multiple code types to label relevant text. For example, I used in vivo (participant verbatim quotes); emotion coding (words that express emotion); process coding (words with gerunds or "ing" endings), and holistic coding (used to code large chunks of data such as paragraphs). This mixture of coding appears throughout this document. In this document, verbatim quotes are identified by quotation marks; constructs are identified by both capital letters and italics. Ultimately, the coding process and analysis was repeated until I could reduce the data into manageable themes and categories. In parallel with coding, I created memos that described my initial thoughts

about the data, emerging analytic propositions, or any follow-up work that I needed to do (Charmaz, 2006). I found this practice supported capturing my analytic thoughts that emerged while coding the data. The final draft from the first round of coding resulted in 53 condensed pages of text and 151 nodes (combined categories, sub-categories, and properties). Ultimately, these data were condensed into five themes.

### **Second Cycle Pattern Coding**

Second cycle coding helped me to further categorize, sort, and group the data into themes and theoretical constructs (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). During the second cycle coding, I focused on sorting and organizing the first cycle codes as they aligned with themes, processes, and ultimately, constructs. These major constructs became the basis for my tentative theoretical model (see Chapter 5). During this cycle, I was concerned with identifying patterns found in the data and finding relationships. I searched for examples of clarifying data that provided parameters, boundaries, and alternative explanations related to the constructs (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) consider this step theoretical or intermediate coding, which involves understanding how the categories or constructs relate to each other. Charmaz (2006) uses yet another descriptor, focused coding, to describe this process. In this study, I used an iterative three-step coding process: first- cycle coding, second- cycle pattern coding, and theoretical coding. I performed these steps sequentially, or, when needed, in tandem. Initially, all codes were compared to the identified conceptual framework comprised of disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2002) and the duel process model

of grief (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Codes were then expanded, depending on what patterns emerged in the data after sorting and categorizing. I then raised the codes to analytic topology. I accomplished this by organizing the categories by antecedents, processes, actions, consequences, relationships. I then began to analyze how these categories or themes of data related to the women in my sample and their communicated, patterns, and behaviors (Charmaz, 2006; Miles, et al., 2014). Ultimately, I compared these themes and patterns to each research question.

I sorted this data under tentative theoretical constructs in a master code list of the five major constructs discovered in this study. This master code list can be found in Appendix J. Additionally, an excerpt is provided below which illustrates the construct that I named *Vicarious Imprisonment*. This table contains thematically coded data which depicts respondents' characterization of their self-identification with physical and psychological constraints, reported, as a result of their mate's incarceration. This is one of five themes identified in the data to be discussed later in this chapter. The remaining themes are provided and discussed in the section entitled, *findings*. Table 2 shows the sample coding, while the complete code book is contained in Appendix J.

Table 2

*Sample Coding, Experiencing Vicarious Imprisonment*

Participant response (in vivo text)	Tentative code assignment (gerunds)
“I’m locked up too...even though I could walk out freely”	Inducing physical separation/isolation
“I’m a prisoner in my own mind”	Feeling psychologically constrained
“I didn’t do anything like I said...”	Placing freedom on hold
“On the floor pregnant...I was hostage for like hours”	Feeling criminalized
“On the floor pregnant...I was hostage for like hours”	Experiencing humiliation and confinement
“I restrict myself, I do it a lot”	Creating social isolation
“If he was in pain then I was in pain”	Emulating the mate’s physical and mental state

Note: The complete code book is provided in Appendix J, Table A.2.

## Results

The overarching finding and discovery from this study was the construction of Symbolic Imprisonment, Grief and Coping (SIG-C) theory. There are five nested theoretical constructs that make up this midlevel theory: Grieving Akin to Experiencing the Death of a Loved One; Experiencing a State of Vicarious Imprisonment; Responding to Charismatic and Controlling Mate Encounters; Emoting Psychosocial Reactions to

Loss; and Using Metaphoric Rituals and Other Coping Strategies. Collectively, these constructs contributed to the creation of the context-specific theory, SIG-C, which entails: women's descriptions of their grief; self-induced confinement that emulates their mate's incarceration; reactions to their mate's charismatic and controlling behaviors, and how some women use metaphoric rituals and other coping strategies in attempt to normalize. The primary grand tour research questions (RQ) are provided, below:

RQ01: What are the processes and theory that explains how African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate, and what, if any, are their coping strategies?

RQ02: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their current or past experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as psychological, physical, social, and symbolic loss and potential, resultant grief?

These questions were deconstructed into seven research subquestions (SQs) and served as the basis for identical interview questions as illustrated in Appendix A. Given that these subquestions decouple the aforementioned research questions to focus on specific concepts, they will be used for the remainder of this study. Additionally, two emergent research questions (EQs) are included in the results and findings sections:

EQ01: What is the process that initiates/triggers symbolic imprisonment?

EQ02: What is the process that maintains the state of symbolic imprisonment?

Participant answers to all research subquestions are aligned with theory, and five emergent themes presented below.

### **Research Subquestion 01, Results**

Research Subquestion 01, asked: What are the process and theory that explains how African American women perceived their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate?

#### **Symbolic Imprisonment, Grief, and Coping Theoretical (SIG-C) Constructs**

The following theory and five constructs make up the system of SIG-C theory. Each of these constructs will be thoroughly reported as results later in this section:

1. This study offers symbolic imprisonment, grief, and coping theory as the answer to Research Subquestion 1. SIG-C theory comprises five theoretical constructs that make up this context-specific theory. These constructs are a part of a system comprised of interdependence and overlapping processes. They are presented here in the order that they appear in the theoretical model.
2. Grieving, Akin to Experiencing the Death of a Loved One: The majority (16 of 20, [80%]) of the research participants reported experiencing a form of grief. Over half of the women (12 of 20 [60%]) expressed that they experienced grief akin to losing someone through death.
3. Experiencing a State of Vicarious Imprisonment: The overwhelming majority (18 of 20 [90%]) of the research participants reported experiencing variations of psychological and physical states of self-induced confinement. Additionally, the overwhelming majority (18 of 20 [90%]) of women described emulating states of incarceration. Some of the women (6 of 20

[30%]) expressed feeling criminalized or treated like a criminal, and feeling stigmatized through harsh treatment by corrections officers and others outside of the criminal justice system.

4. **Emoting Psychosocial Reactions to Loss:** Many (15 of 20 [75%]) of the research participants reported experiences of multiple psychological and social responses (psychosocial), as well as positive benefits of having an incarcerated mate.
5. **Reacting to Charismatic/Controlling Mate Encounters:** In response to an interview question about what makes her mate special, the majority (17 of 20, [85%]) reported charismatic and controlling encounters from their mate, including charm, charisma, intelligence, controlling, manipulative, deceptive, betrayal, co-dependency, and romantic behaviors. This emergent theoretical construct is explained below.
6. **Using Metaphoric Rituals and Other Coping Strategies:** Many of the women (8 of 20 [40%]) reported using metaphoric rituals to cope with their separation and loss. All (20 of 20 [100%]) of the participants engaged in variations of coping and relief strategies as a means of normalizing their lives. This emergent theoretical construct is explained below.

**Research Subquestion 02, Results:**

Research Subquestion 02, asked: How if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a resultant grief?

Research Subquestion 06 is also related to the theoretical construct that follows. Research Subquestion 06, asked: How if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a physical loss?

**Grieving, Akin to Experiencing the Death of a Loved One**

The majority of the women who participated in this research study reported that they experienced feelings of grief on physical and/or psychological level. This was in response to the research question and associated interview question that elicited, what if any, grief was experienced (See IQ06 in Appendix A). Women's answers were not compartmentalized into specific psychological or physical categories, but rather blended responses revealed their holistic experiences associated with grief. Reportedly, when these intense emotions arose, many women expressed feelings of "helplessness," or a lack of control, as if they were on "autopilot" without an understanding of what to do next. Some women expressed debilitating responses to their mate's arrest and subsequent incarceration:

Olive: I felt grief when he called to tell me he was sentenced to three years in prison when we expected, way less. I felt like I lost my significant

other, like someone took a part of me. I cried as if I was told a close family member had died because that's what the pain felt like.

Hazel: "...it was a sick feeling and when I [left] him, I would get migraines...physically I was wearing myself down. I was breaking myself down."

One woman in the study group indicated that, prior to her separation and loss from her mate, she experienced psychological and physical impacts as well as a foreboding sense of grief and that separation or even death of her mate was imminent, if he had not been arrested:

Sage: Like I'm grieving over someone that's died— You know, he's right there, he is alive. But that's how I feel sometimes. I do feel like in essence, he is gone. Not like dead. But I do feel that he's gone. He's not there... I can't roll over to him and touch him. I can't get up in the morning and say goodbye to him, or say good morning, you know. He's not there...I have several dreams of him being dead. He wasn't even supposed to make it to jail. Somebody was supposed to kill him before he even got there. And as like, I said it is by God's grace the he made it you know. But if this-- there is a difference and I'm just like, I've been stressing. I can show you my hair. I have bald spots everywhere; because right now I am physically stressed...It's just really stressful. It's really stressful.

During her interview, Sage acknowledged that she knew the difference between death-related losses and her experience, yet her rich description conveys that her grief was just as valid, as if, to her, there was little difference. *Mansi*, on the other hand, indicated that she needed to remind herself that her mate was not really gone [dead], and that he would one day come home.

*Mansi*: Yes. I felt I have lost my best friend. I really do [feel that] I lost my best friend. Okay. He's still here. He's got to be able to get out one day. So, I try to remind myself that he's not gone [dead], you know but it feels the same way too.

*Iris* compared her loss to that of losing her mom to cancer. She then indicated that this loss was so great, it caused her to socially withdraw, and remain indoors. This finding regarding social isolation also provides a linkage to an emergent construct in data related to a phenomenon and theme number two: vicarious imprisonment.

*Iris*: I can compare that pain to the one I felt when I lost my mom-- sorry but that [is] how I feel then, not knowing where to start, I could only cry. I didn't want to leave the house I was indoors for almost 3 months just going out when I didn't have choice.

The overwhelming majority of the women (16 of 20 [80%]), reported experiencing at least one adverse psychological reaction to their loss as they described their grief. These women reported feelings of stress, anger, denial, depression and other responses in the grief category (see Appendix H for summary of participant responses).

Conversely, the majority of the women (14 of 20 [70%]) described at least one positive benefit resulting from their mate's incarceration, even though they may have experienced concurrent negative circumstances. For example, Lotus indicated that her husband was finally sober after so many decades as a chronic alcoholic. She also indicated: "I've gotten stronger. Um, I've gotten better." Violet, stated "So, I was like, you know what? I'm going to have the man that I always wanted, drug-free, alcohol-free, and you know, clear- minded."

Four women reported feeling no grief associated with their separation and loss from their mate. In contrast, these women reported "anger," "stress," and "disappointment" and shame. For example, one woman described her loss as going through a progression of "shock," "denial," feeling "disappointed," feeling "stressed," and angered, to, finally, reaching a point of acceptance; she then reflected that she reunited with her husband after getting over her anger. This respondent indicated that her anger overshadowed any feelings of loss. When asked specifically about her anger, she recanted, "I didn't think that it was fair that [he] would go and we are married and we have a family and [he knew] right from wrong." Chapter 5 explains what these variations could mean. The next section will provide findings specific to the next theme: vicarious imprisonment.

### **Research Subquestion 03, Results**

Research Subquestion 03, asked: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a symbolic loss?

Research Subquestion 06 is also related to the theoretical construct that follows. Research Subquestion 06 asked: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a physical loss?

#### **Experiencing a State of Vicarious Imprisonment**

The theoretical construct, vicarious imprisonment (VI) is one of five components that makeup the theory: symbolic imprisonment, grief, and coping (SIG-C). VI is nested under SIG-C as a construct that describes the physical and cognitive states of self-induced confinement, as described by women in this study. This construct answers the research question that seeks to understand how women experience symbolic loss. However, it is reasonable to understand that women's responses to this research question, again, overlap and become a part of a complex network of integrated responses, related to physical, psychological, symbolic, and socially related impacts and circumstances.

This state of confinement conveyed by the construct, VI, includes women's descriptions of adhering to strict regimens and routine, while as reported, denying self of any (or limited) pleasurable interactions with others. It also describes how women detail emulating their mate's state of imprisonment, as if they, too, were incarcerated or on house arrest. Their rich descriptions concerning confinement were an emergent and an

unanticipated finding in this study. Women's answers to the aforementioned research question(s) are conveyed through participant responses specific to symbolic loss and physical loss.

For example, some women reported feeling guilty, labeled– or stigmatized– which triggered the described processes of self-induced social alienation and restriction,

Hazel: ...it's like people will make us feel like it was just certain areas that we were never going to be welcome...It's just that [incarceration] label over us...just the whole—knowing he was incarcerated. Yes, can't function, he was all I thought about.

Mansi: So, I think I'm a prisoner in my own mind. ...And, yes, this is how... Yes. I mean when I-- as far as I restrict myself, I do it a lot. That's something that, you know, he always-- he tries to help me through. You know, sometimes, you know, I'm stuck in the house so you know, not wanted to get out of bed, that type of thing. So, I have to-- I need to look every day and be blessed that I can get out of bed. And even though I can walk out freely, you know-- those types of things. Well, yes, I think I am-- I have restricted myself.

In addition to women isolating themselves, some of the women identified as feeling humiliated and criminalized. For example, Rosemary and Olive expressed how it felt during a prison visit:

Rosemary: Actually going through the process of you know being searched and everything ... and almost feeling like a criminal myself for a small window of time and then for, it's taken all of that brokenness and passing through to actually see his face and knowing that I had to be strong even though I felt very vulnerable and I wanted to break down.

Olive: But then there were other ones [visits] that weren't nearly as good and happy. There was a guard who just didn't like him and didn't like him for many years so he would look at me and say "You know what? You're parked in the wrong spot. You need to go move your car." Okay, so I go move my car and I'd come back, "Yeah, you can't wear that today. We don't let girls in with those kind of pants." So I go change my pants [Yet there was] a girl wearing the same pants right behind me. You know, there was one thing after one another.

Another woman described how criminalized she felt on the evening of her husband's arrest, which happened to be the due date of her pregnancy. She recalled packing clothing in preparation for the hospital:

On that evening, the house was surrounded by police. All I see was a lot of lasers and stuff like that, pour[ing] into my window-- lasers [high power laser sights on swat team guns]. I was thrown to the ground and handcuffed, nine months pregnant, and laid there for 3 hours, while they continued [to] search of the house.

Although, many women described both negative and positive psychological reactions to their separation and loss, very few reported having positive social experiences.

### **Emergent Question 01 Results**

Emergent Question 01, asked: What is the process that initiates/triggers symbolic imprisonment?

#### **Separation, Loss, Guilt, and Shame as Triggers**

According to the responses revealed by women, separation, loss, guilt, and shame appear to be prominent triggers of symbolic imprisonment. This result is partially reflected, for example, in Daisy's description of self-blame or guilt in falling short of fixing her husband's situation.

Daisy: I thought I could fix it, but I couldn't fix it. And then, at holidays, we had two children by that time and— we didn't even celebrate Christmas one year because he wasn't there. Because I felt guilty that we were still living and he's locked up. I mean the first Christmas that he was gone. I think he was locked up at September. We didn't do Christmas because I felt guilty because he wasn't able to do Christmas. I mean it got to the point to where I [wouldn't] sleep in our bed until he got out. I [slept] on the couch because why should I be comfortable if he's uncomfortable?

Hazel, on the other hand indicated that her isolation and withdrawal was due to the stigma and shame associated with incarceration of her husband. She

said: “I feel like we’re just an incarceration family...” “Yes, it’s like people will make us feel like it was just certain areas that we were never going to be welcome...”

When Lotus was asked what made her remain in her self-induced confinement, she indicated, its “trickery.” She went on to say that her mate was like a “chameleon.” She clarified this statement by offering her views of men in prison, they “change their behaviors to fit the circumstances.” Lotus’ description of her mate’s chameleon-like ways are similar to what other women referred to as “charming” and “manipulating.” These responses are reflected in the construct, which describes Reacting to a Charismatic and Controlling Mate Encounters, below.

### **Emergent Question 02 Results**

Emergent question 02 asked: What is the process that maintains the state of symbolic imprisonment?

#### **Reacting to Charismatic and Controlling Mate Encounters**

The overwhelming majority of the women experienced a phenomenon that I coded as Reacting to Charismatic and Controlling Mate Encounters (RCCME), uncovered during data analysis. This theoretical construct is used to describe the collective references made by women when describing their reactions to their mate’s charming, controlling, deceptive, romantic, and manipulative behaviors.

Notably, many of the women described their mate, using dichotomous terms, depending on the context of the discussion. On one hand, they used favorable terms

conveying his positive qualities or charm; on the other hand, their definitions were reframed to negative terms when reflecting on their mate's manipulative and even deceptive qualities:

Mansi: "This gentleman was kind of crazy. He'll look at my nails, 'Oh, let's go get them. Let's go get your nails done.' Little things like that, bringing some roses to my job."

Lotus: "He really tried to brainwash me, that's what I feel like."

Daisy: "You know, he's a manipulator ... I mean- he can use [and] manipulate a situation...He was -- controlling, control everything when he were at home."

Sage: "[Oh,] those words. Like I said his intellect is on point...He's such a good person and he's very smart."

Although some women described the influence and power that their mates had over them, other women clearly described having set established boundaries. For example, Indigo described how her mate tried to convince her to leave her children and move to another country to aid and abet him in his crime; however, she refused to leave her children.

Indigo: And so, he did this [crime] and he had to leave "the state" and he ran to Canada. And then, he got a trouble in Canada. So, the situation didn't involve me. The situation when we start that he was dealing with because I was done. And I told him that if he did this again, I'm not going

to follow you. I followed him from --state--to ---state--, back to --state--to Atlanta, back to Dallas to another state---, and another state--- and he want[ed] me to follow to him to Canada but he [also] wanted me to leave my children, our daughters. No, no.

Some of the women described their mate as “romantic” and “charming.” For example, *Rosemary* described what it was like to experience getting engaged, “He got on his knee and proposed. Even though you know others might not think that it was a significant day that was just the day he proposed (at the prison).” She then reflected on that moment as her most special visitation at the prison. Indigo also became engaged at the jail, before her husband was sentenced and transferred to prison:

Indigo: Actually we got married in the jail. He wasn't transferred to the prison yet...Honestly, I laughed around the whole thing He's on one side glass...I'm on the other side with notary republic...we were not allowed to touch when you're in jail. We were unable to touch. The only time we were allowed to touch each other is when he got transferred to the prison system.

The majority of the women recalled their mate's positive qualities. When asked what they think is special about him, many of the women discussed how nice he is or how he had a charming way, as reflected in the quotes, below.

“The nicest person you'll ever want to meet.”

“...[S]omeone who makes me happy and understands me better than anyone else...”

The next section describes the intersection between the process of charismatic and controlling encounters and women’s accounts of psychological and social impacts of separation and loss.

### **Research Questions, 04, 05, and 06, Results**

Research Subquestion 04, asked: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a psychological loss?

Research Subquestion 05, asked: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a social loss?

Research Subquestion 06, asked: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a physical loss?

### **Emoting Psychosocial Responses to Loss**

The aforementioned research questions are answered through the theoretical construct: Emoting Psychosocial Responses to Loss. The overwhelming majority of the research participants experienced multiple, adverse psychological and social responses to having an incarcerated mate. The adverse psychological and social responses often came in tandem with responses conveying physical distress.

Some participants described adverse reactions as the triggering event leading to their depression, trauma, stress, shame, guilt, and other potentially dysfunctional behavior, that interfered with their ability to resume *normal life* (as they knew it, prior to their mate's arrest or sentence). For example, *Sage* reported experiences of depression combined with a physiological impact. She provided a deep and rich insight into the state of being depressed, socially isolated, and insecure:

When your significant other gets incarcerated is not just like okay your days just moved on. It really puts it takes a toll on your life.

I'm not comfortable, um, and like I said when I do feel depressed...It was just a sad, I was, not even sad, more so depressed, that this guy, that I'm madly in love with is really incarcerated. It took a toll on me. Like I said I went through the, uh, depression. I lost weight. I gained weight. I was sick. I didn't want to eat. I don't have friends. I didn't want to talk to nobody. I couldn't go out, to mingle. I was uncomfortable. I didn't feel secure. I, I felt like I really needed him to be around. And I felt like I wasn't able to enjoy myself... And I'm just, like I've been stressing.

Sage's account provides insight as to how women may experience physical, psychological, social responses to loss, while also feeling a need to withdraw and isolate. Many of the women described their psychological responses as depressive symptoms or feeling as though they were sad or unhappy.

Peony: Terrible. I've had to talk to therapists then take depression pills. At this point, I got to sketch my heart out. I take medication ordinarily anyway. Sometimes I get into those moods that I just want to maybe sleep it away and I would drink, but now I'm still waking up with the same problems as I'd go and get all drunken. I'd be at home. I don't be out in streets.

Mansi: It's torture. I feel horrible a lot of the times. Yes, I really do. I feel really bad a lot of the times. It's every day, but I have moments. I have good or bad days but it's every day, you know, it's not constant all day, every day but it's every day (laugh). At times, you know, I may have a bad morning but I have okay afternoon and it varies -- what I mean, I haven't had one good day yet and I thought like, you know, had to go through moments. Sometimes, they last longer than others, so yes. And I'm not showing that to others every day. I pray that I can get out of bed.

Women also reported not feeling joy or not fully appreciating what moments of joy they may have encountered:

Willow: Like I said I was going [through] so many different things at that time. So, I can't think enough as good. And I mean 5 days, if you're no one is away from you if a bad situation with itself. To be honest with you, I haven't had a happy, joyful moment-- well then let me say this. Let me say that, I have struggled and then for a while as far as dealing with the

loved ones, being in incarcerated. But I can say that little things do happen but I don't get the full of joy out of that because of the --, the level of depression that dealing with my loved ones being in incarcerated has put for me. So, I don't really get the full joy out of anything because I'm so stuck in there depression that situation... Actually like-- [if] one more thing happens, I can lose my mind-- [its] just like- let me see, dark, depressing life failing. I mean, it's very draining...it's almost like-- you're grieving. So you can't really focus. This process becomes like the center of your attention.

Iris: To be honest with you, I haven't had a happy, joyful moment well them let me say this. Let me say that, I have struggled and then for a while as far as dealing with the loved ones, being in incarcerated... But I can say that little things do happen but I don't get the full of joy out of that because of the --, the level of depression that dealing with my loved ones being in incarcerated has put for me. So, I don't really get the full joy out of anything because I'm so stuck in there depression that those situation.

Indigo: I mean I am, I've...When he went in, I was very depressed. I was very upset. Not to an angry point, but just upset, like, 'Why would you do this again? Why would you put us through this again?' I just get so angry because he only thought about himself--and not nobody else. And when

parties came around or a certain song would come on or whatever, you'd just want to just break down and cry.

Other women described the psychological impact of loss as a lonely state with a dependency on telephone contact with their mate:

Sage: So I started to feel depressed, um, my first Thanksgiving alone and Christmas. Because we have been talking about, you know, just spending time with each other, and having Christmas with each other. Of course, that's when you want someone, you know, someone you love...that's why you want someone to be around on a holiday season. I cried six times last night, just for no reason at all, whatsoever, because I hate when the lady comes [corrections facility pre-recorded message] on the phone and says you have 30 seconds remaining.

One participant described her psychological state as one of disassociation on a social level, as she adjusted to her mate's incarceration:

Daisy: "... I experienced being disassociated from everyone else."

Lotus, on the other hand, recalled her experiences with separation and loss as psychologically and physically draining, as she recalled her prison visit:

Lotus: I don't know if the visit was just overwhelming because you know, he wanted to come home and I wanted him to come home and it was just like we know he's not coming home right now so— physically I was wearing myself down. I was breaking myself down....Can't function, he was all I thought about, just – I just want to go home and just lay down

and get myself together. I didn't know what life had in store for me so I always kept that in my mind even though I was in love with him and he was in there and I was out here, I always kept in mind that you know, this may never be.

Willow introduced the emotional challenges associated with experiencing multiple incarcerations. Specifically, she described the psychological stress and challenges of having her son and her mate incarcerated at the same time:

[S]o he's calling and stressing me out about sending these papers down there and coming to Kentucky with his mother and them. But I'm so mentally drained by the situation with my son [incarcerated son]. I really didn't have the energy or the motivation to go down there to these courts and do all these motions and do all this stuff. But I wasn't able to explain that to him. If I'm not mistaken, I told lies like he'd call and say did I go down there and I'd say "Yeah, I went and they're giving me the run around." So that put friction on the relationship. I was never – I could never just say to him and I think I've said to him but he didn't really understand it, when I'm like, "This is too much for me. I can only deal with one thing at a time." Either I said it and he didn't understand it or maybe I didn't even say it but I wasn't able to communicate with him openly so it really seemed like I was closing him off. He got the impression that I was closing him off. But I'm really screaming for help,

asking him to “Look, just give me a minute. Understand what I’m going through with my son.” For instance, when I was going through that and him being locked up and I’m going through what I’m going through with my son, I wasn't able to focus to write letters to him anymore. I wasn't able to focus to go look for cards or to take pictures so instead of just saying “Look, I’m not focused to do this stuff,” I would probably lie about it. “Oh yeah, I sent you a letter and some pictures” or “I’m going to do it” and never did it and you know, that caused anger on his behalf, thinking like I’m just totally deceiving him when realistically I’m going through this incarceration situation with my son and I can’t deal with you.

The aforementioned responses convey women’s physical, social, and psychological reactions to separation and loss from their incarcerated mate. Although women reported feeling psychologically devastated by their mate’s incarceration, as Willow described above, by contrast, *Petunia* expressed both negative and positive effects. For example, she described the positive feelings associated with developing a social networking site as a virtual support group to help other women going through the same experience of having an incarcerated mate. Additionally, she started to work out in the gym on a regular basis to help with her loneliness. However, this benefit also had its downside. She learned that she was “repulsed” by the touch of her fitness trainer’s hand—this disturbed her.

*Violet* also found positive psychological benefits from her separation. She indicated that she was uplifted, and that she experienced, for the first time in her relationship, a sober and deeply emotional mate. Daisy also reported feeling empowered to pursue a quest for higher education. The next section provides findings specific to women's emotional and psychological responses to their charismatic and sometimes controlling mates.

Women's social experiences included feeling unsupported, "shunned," and sometimes, alienated and stigmatized by people who would not fully listen to their accounts and how they felt. When recalling how she felt, one respondent indicated, "I really felt scared and alone and just by myself, a lot;" and "I don't really have anybody to talk to;" "[I] just had my mom, my sister, and that's it. Everything –everyone else was totally against incarceration [and] dealing with anybody incarcerated. Some the things I will have to hear is you know, it is possible that he's been messing with men. You know, just, everyone was against it." Some women felt stigmatized; other women made the choice to isolate from others: "I didn't want to talk to nobody." "[E]ven now it's like, you can't speak about it going forward and you know you are hiding something from everyone." Some women also were fortunate to have the support of close family members to talk to or support them, even if just for a short period of time.

Many women in the sample indicated that their mate was the only one whom they could talk to and who understood them. In addition to familial and mate support, many women used a variety of coping strategies, as discussed below.

### **Research Question 07 Results**

Research Subquestion 07, asked: What, if any, are the coping strategies used by African American women with an incarcerated mate?

Additionally, the Subquestion: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a symbolic loss?

#### **Using Metaphoric Rituals and Other Coping Strategies**

Women in the sample expressed a variety of coping strategies. Their answers to the aforementioned research questions can be found in the descriptions provided below. Their responses detail metaphoric and ritualistic behaviors used by some women, to help cope with the separation and loss from their incarcerated loved one. For example, Sage provided a graphic and descriptive overview of one of her rituals used for coping:

And the last time that I physically see him, there was a scent. There was a smell that it just I smelled it. On him I smelled it, physically on him. And so I think I know what it was. I think it was Ivory soap. And so I buy that from the store and I wash my clothes in it. And I wash my pillowcases and my bedspreads with it. And when I do is at night before I go to sleep. I rolled the cover up ... and I have my son, in front of me, on his pillow. And then I'll take the cover like he's a person, roll it up like he's a person. And I would lay it in between my legs and I wrap my legs around it and me and my son are just holding on to the cover like there's actually a

human being there but nobody's there, of course, I know that. But it's just about that. The thought that's triggering in my mind, I smell that the wind the pictures are in the windowsill where we're right there. So I'm seeing the pictures of him. I read the letters every night. I hear him while we are on the phone and as I go to sleep as if he's actually there. It makes me feel a lot better.

Other women also described their engagement in other symbolic rituals as proxy for the absent mate/father.

Jasmine: Um I tell you what, there were times when I would actually wear his shirts and read the cards over and over again. Also, I think that it made me kind-of closer to my, my children because I have all sons and I never want to see them in that position. So they would, I would even go as far as have them sleep in the room with me just so I know that they're alright, just so that, I don't know it's like being closer to the kids was being closer to him as well... Because you know it was just, I don't know, I felt the need to hold on to what I had left even though he was not there and maybe hold onto them even closer.

Lotus: Yeah. She [his daughter] would put on his shirt and she would say to me, "Mommy I know that you could bring daddy back 'cause you can do it, you can do it..." Um, and, "Bring my daddy back! I want my daddy!" And she would put his clothes on and just hug herself or hug me.

Women also described coping through communication via letter, phone call, visit, or, in some cases, the prison e-mail system (Corlink), as conveyed below:

Lotus: “No, no. I would just read the letters constantly over again and see if I missed something.”

Asha (Data point): “I would throw, with disgust, all of my roommate’s mail aside along with anything that came for me which was not clearly stamped *Eastern Correctional Facility*. It was a ridiculous ritual (Bandeled, 1999, p.32)

Sage: And with the letters too, the letters are definitely, um, special to me, as well those words. .. It, it just sometimes it's just the little things because he, um, speaks metaphorically. So, just those little things he can say something and I'll be... I have to read it like six times

Holly: “What I did to cope– is I see another letter.”

Rosemary: He would send me things home. He would send me all types of crafts and artwork and I would just post it up around the house and it was always something that was unique. A cross that was handmade to a flower that was made out of paper towels. A vase that was made out of glass. It was – CD’s with our face on it and songs that he had handpicked. It was all kinds of things that just always kept me – he always reminded me of the love that he had for me.

Although rituals and other methods of coping were prevalent in the sample, there was another metaphoric phenomenon that emerged in the data that I coded as a property of Using Metaphoric Rituals and Other Coping Strategies: “the family ghost.”

Participants described having pictures of their mate in their homes, at work, in their cars, in their purse, and in other prominent places. However, when asked who the person was, by a stranger, they indicated that they would lie about who he was. Yet, this picture was very special and represented someone they loved, who was never physically present, or whose identity was not revealed.

Hazel: I was a cosmetologist at the time so it would get to the point where a lot of my customers just kind of knew the situation and I just would, you know, I had his picture up in there too. So it was just kind of you know, awkward, this picture of this man that no one ever sees, so it was explained... What I did say, [is] that [he] was my best friend... Even now, it's like you can't speak about it going forward, you know? So you always feel like you're hiding something from everyone.

Olive: So I just told them: “That's my friend [in the picture] and I do what I do to help him out.” I felt guilty for that but I think that's probably when I felt the most grieving and the most alone and the most conflicted about it. Does that make sense?”

Sage: I seek for other's opinion but no one can really you know provide me with the best feedback because nobody that I know has actually been through this, of what I'm going through. I'm like all alone. So, I don't really have anybody to talk to. And then when I do talk to people, they like I don't want to hear that. I really want to hear, I really [don't] want to hear what it is that you have to say or do you have anything to relate to where I'm coming from and it's just that nobody has that for me.

This phenomenon, coded as “the family ghost,” along with its possible meaning, will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5. Each of the aforementioned themes is illustrated in Table 3, Summary of Findings, below. This table summarizes the high-level progression of initial coding to construction of theory. The entire code book with the detailed coding is contained in Appendix J. Table 3 provides research questions or subquestions, followed by initial codes and subsequent theoretical constructs. The final column in this table reflects the emergent theory and supporting description.

In summary of the aforementioned constructs and their alignment with each research question, it should be noted that each contribute to the make-up, SIG-C, and could apply to other common occurrences of separation, loss, and grief. Loss is universal and applicable to many situations (Noret, 2012). However, I offer that the distinguishing qualities of symbolic imprisonment, grief, and coping (SIG-C) theory:

1. Answers this study's research question, specific to understanding the process and theory that explains psychosocial loss within in the context of how incarceration of a mate affects African American women;
2. Uncovers theoretical inconsistencies in the literature by offering a construct that describes women's accounts of non-death loss that is both anticipatory and prolonged. Anticipatory grief is normally accepted in the literature as applicable only to death related loss. This study offers that specific grief theories generally reserved for thanatology should be reconsidered as applicable to non-death situations;
3. Introduces the construct, vicarious incarceration, as a phenomenon that has not been found in the literature. VI is a state of self-induced confinement and restriction that is reinforced by grief and sustained through charismatic and controlling mate encounters.

Finally, SIG-C comprises a system of tightly coupled constructs that operate as related and interdependent antecedents, processes, and consequences, working together as a reinforcing cycle, possibly growing in intensity. They are: Grieving Akin to Experiencing the Death of a Loved One; Experiencing a State of Vicarious Imprisonment; Emoting Psychosocial Responses to Loss; Reacting to Charismatic and Controlling Mate Encounters, and Using Metaphoric Rituals and Other Coping Strategies.

Each distinction is depicted in Table 3.

Table 3

*Summary of Theoretical Constructs and Findings*

Research questions, subquestions (SQ)/ raw data	Description of code	Theoretical construct (gerund)	Theory
What are the <i>processes and theory</i> that explains how African American women perceived their experiences of separation and loss, from their incarcerated mate, and what, if any are their coping strategies?	Consolidation of all codes defined below. These are the codes that describe the processes and theory that explain how women with an incarcerated mate experience separation and loss.	(SEE #C01 – #C05)	SYMBOLIC IMPRISONMENT, GRIEF, and COPING: This context specific theory describes how women with an incarcerated mate experience separation, loss, shame, and guilt as triggers to grief, self-induced state of physical, social (vicarious imprisonment), and psychological isolation. Metaphoric rituals are used as defense and coping mechanisms. This theory also explains how some women avoid experiencing grief and symbolic imprisonment through positive or negative influences related to coping.
How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a resultant grief?	Grieving loss, similar to the death of a loved one. Or No impacts	#C01: GRIEVING, AKIN TO EXPERIENCING THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE	
How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a symbolic loss?	Feeling shame, guilt, and stigma. Feeling unsupported by others, Triggering self-induced punishment	#C02: EXPERIENCING A STATE OF VICARIOUS IMPRISONMENT	
What is the process that maintains the state of symbolic imprisonment? ( <i>Emergent Question</i> )	Perceiving new role as stigmatized and criminalized as a partner; resulting in a state of symbolic imprisonment as a defense mechanism to the outside world.		
How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a	Experiencing positive and negative psychosocial impacts.	#C03: EMOTING PSYCHOSOCIAL RESPONSES TO LOSS	

Table 3 continues

psychological loss?

How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a social loss?

How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a physical loss?

What, if any, are the coping strategies used by African American women with an incarcerated mate?

What is the process that initiates/triggers symbolic imprisonment? (Emergent Question 1)

What is the process that maintains the state of symbolic imprisonment? (Emergent Question 2)

Coping in response to adverse or positive influences in the relationship. Experiencing psychological states of habitual-ritualistic behaviors as coping.

Loss and Separation. Feeling shame, guilt, stigma, and unsupported as triggers of self-induced punishment. Feeling as if only the mate understand her Responding to charismatic And controlling mate encounters that maintains the relationship bonds.

#C05: USING METAPHORIC RITUALS AND OTHER COPING STRATEGIES

#P01: SEPARATION/LOSS/ GUILT/ STIGMA and SHAME (antecedents)

#C03: REACTING TO CHARISMATIC AND CONTROLLING MATE ENCOUNTERS

Note: Data in this table is further depicted in Figure 1. SIG-C model

### Discrepant and Nonconforming Data

Discrepant cases were used to examine the data to determine if conclusions drawn were accurate. For example, if the majority of cases supported a proposition, but there were a minority of cases that did not, I examined the data rigorously to understand why they did not conform. Accounting for these differences/ variations, strengthened this

study's theoretical model, as well as my conclusions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). These cases provided variant perspectives and ways to analyze the data. There were five discrepant cases. Four women did not experience grief or the state of vicarious imprisonment. Two of these women maintained a semblance of a relationship with their once- intimate partner, but indicated that the crime associated was a cause for termination of a romantic relationship. Therefore, their relationship continued as distant and platonic. One woman indicated that she was somewhat used to her mate's incarcerations; therefore, it bothered her to a lesser extent. The fourth woman, who did not experience grief, reported distancing herself from the relationship because her mate cheated on her and molested a young girl. Information from these discrepant cases provided the alternative explanation of why some women did not experience VI. This variation is explained in Chapter 5.

Another anomaly, a fifth case, involved a woman who self-identified as being eligible to participate in the sample. However, after the first few interview questions, I discerned that her reference to the significant other was actually a reference to her grandsons who were incarcerated. However, I could not stop the interview without challenging her integrity and possibly embarrassing her. The interesting finding is that she, too, experienced psychosocial responses and grief on par with the rest of the sample. It was clear that she wanted to participate and to have her story heard. I did not include her results in the initial data analysis when trying to achieve saturation. She was participant number 8.

### **Grounded Theory: Gaps and Hypothesis**

As Glaser and Strauss (1967) indicated, during grounded theory analysis, gaps will emerge as the codes and patterns are revealed. As such, I identified a number of gaps during the first and second wave of the data collection process. These gaps were recorded in my journal and addressed through theoretical sampling. For example, two emergent questions were identified as gaps and aligned with associated hypothesis (H1 & H2):

EQ01: What is the process that initiates/triggers symbolic imprisonment?

H<sub>1</sub>: Separation, loss, and stigma will be reported by respondents as triggers for symbolic imprisonment.

EQ02: What is the process that maintains the state of symbolic imprisonment?

H<sub>2</sub>: Theoretical sampling will reveal that stigma is the factor that maintains the state of symbolic imprisonment.

After generating the aforementioned hypotheses, for each of these questions, I conducted theoretical sampling to address and verify each hypothesis and emerging research question through the use of focused interview probes. It should be noted that the data influenced my initial hypotheses. However, it was important to confirm these assumptions via theoretical sampling.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness and Credibility**

I ensured trustworthiness and qualitative rigor by following thoroughly the identified research protocol outlined in my proposal and IRB application. This process included: implementing document management practices; bracketing my biases and

thoughts through the use of memos; engaging in extensive field work by conducting 20 interviews; using multiple data sources; performing member checking when needed, and seeking out advice and support from my dissertation chairperson and peers.

I used memos to record my reflections and thoughts as a means of bracketing any biases. I engaged in fieldwork for an extended period of time (September and October). Familiarity with my research population was gleaned through extensive research on the sample. Member checking was accomplished in two ways: I paraphrased interviewee response and summarized their statements during our interviews to ensure accuracy of my interpretation and through follow-ups with two of the interviewees. I sought peer feedback on my coding from fellow doctoral students to ensure that my code interpretation was accurate. Finally, I checked in with my dissertation supervisor during various phases of the coding and analysis to elicit feedback.

### **Transferability, Dependability and Confirmability**

To achieve transferability, I created detailed descriptions of participant narratives, to support the development of the theoretical narrative and my interpretations of the data. The depth and breadth of the data was gleaned primarily from the interview process. To preserve participant meaning as much as possible, I used in vivo coding to retain the participants' voices. Haper and Cole (2012) suggested that member checking serves as an additional layer of quality assurance; adding to dependability in a qualitative study. Dependability is often concerned with an independent examination of the research. I managed this process through dissertation committee oversight. Additionally, I verified

my code assignment with two participants to ensure the correct application of codes and verification of their meaning. Additionally, I shared my coding with my chairperson during the coding process. Finally, to achieve confirmability, I established an audit trail by following the steps outlined in my IRB data collection steps and research protocol.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the research setting, the interview process, participant profiles, and elicited data sources. I provided participant responses through the introduction and alignment with five major themes discovered during data collection and analysis. I noted that the distinction of symbolic imprisonment, grief, and coping (SIG-C) from phenomena generally reported in the literature, as consequences of loss, and introduced a new phenomenon not identified in the literature, which is vicarious imprisonment. To reiterate, the distinguishing factors of SIG-C:

1. Answers this study's research question, specific to understanding the process and theory that explains psychosocial loss within the context of how incarceration of a mate affects African American women;
2. Uncovers theoretical inconsistencies in the literature by offering a construct that describes women's accounts of non-death loss that is both anticipatory and prolonged. Anticipatory grief is normally accepted in the literature as applicable only to death-related loss. This study offers that specific grief theories generally reserved for thanatology should be reconsidered as applicable to non-death situations;

3. Introduces the construct, vicarious imprisonment, as a phenomenon that has not been found in the literature. VI is a state of self-induced confinement and restriction that is reinforced by grief and sustained through charismatic and controlling mate encounters.

In summary, SIG-C comprises a system of tightly coupled constructs that operate in parallel, as well as interdependent antecedents, processes, and consequences; working together as a reinforcing cycle, possibly growing in intensity. They are: Grieving Akin to Experiencing the Death of a Loved One; Experiencing a State of Vicarious Imprisonment; Emoting Psychosocial Responses to Loss; Reacting to Charismatic and Controlling Mate Encounters, and Using Metaphoric Rituals and Other Coping Strategies.

I presented these themes and constructs as they originated from initial codes through the progression of midlevel theory in a summary Table 3. Each theme was then supported thoroughly by answers to the research questions via participant interview responses as illustrated by in vivo quotes. Discrepant cases were discussed, and this study's trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confidentiality were noted.

In Chapter 5, I present my interpretation of the findings. I explain each of the thematic findings as they align to the literature in Chapter 2, as well as research subsequent to the proposal stage. This study's limitations are expressed, and

recommendations and implications of this study are discussed. This study's contribution towards positive social change is provided. Finally, I offer concluding thoughts.

## Chapter 5 Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to build substantive theory that explains how African American women respond to separation and loss from their incarcerated mate. Specifically, I sought to understand the psychosocial impacts and the respondents' coping strategies as well as explore what, if any, responses were consistent with grief. I concluded that constructivist grounded theory was best suited for this study because I found no holistic theory or theoretical model to address my study's research concerns and knowledge gap.

This study builds upon and extends the qualitative research conducted by Chui (2010), who identified psychosocial and financial hardships encountered by women with incarcerated spouses. Although Chui's (2010) study richly contributed to the body of knowledge in this content area, I identified a research gap in understanding how African American women experienced separation and loss from their incarcerated mate (specifically, through the conceptual framework and lens of grief theories). My study also extends the content area on African American studies specific to incarceration, through the development of context-specific theory that includes a newly identified phenomenon: vicarious imprisonment. Finally, my research findings help to close the research knowledge gap and scarcity of literature specific to understanding how African American women are impacted by incarceration of their significant others. These results are explained through symbolic imprisonment, grief, and coping theory.

In this chapter, I present a brief overview of my research findings followed by detailed interpretations aligned with each research question. I identify how the findings are linked to the literature review. I introduce emergent questions and address how these new questions were satisfied through this study. I integrate discussion specific to this study's theoretical sensitivity and the conceptual framework of disenfranchised grief and the dual process model of grief theories. I provide limitations, recommendations, implications for social change, and my reflections as a researcher. Finally, concluding thoughts are provided.

### **Overview**

This research study was accomplished through naturalistic inquiry. Participants in this study included 20 self-identified African American women. I used semi-structured interviews to collect data. I also followed traditional grounded theory methodology of using additional data sources to augment the sample and for triangulation. The primary grand tour research questions (RQ) are provided, below:

RQ01: What are the processes and theory that explains how African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate, and what, if any, are their coping strategies?

RQ02: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their current or past experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as psychological, physical, social, and symbolic loss and potential, resultant grief?

The aforementioned grand tour research questions were distilled into seven subquestions so that each concept could be thoroughly vetted and posed as identical interview questions to research participants during their interviews.

These research subquestions were addressed and satisfied through the findings presented in Chapter 4. The overwhelming outcome from this study revealed that many women with an incarcerated mate experienced co-occurring adverse psychological, physical, and social consequences associated with their loss and separation. Many women experienced a state of prolonged social isolation and withdrawal from familial and social networks. These women also reported using variations of coping strategies. This section provides interpretations and plausible alternatives to these findings.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

In this study, I offer the symbolic imprisonment, grief, and coping (SIG-C) theory as an answer to this study's research questions. SIG-C describes the antecedents, processes, and outcomes associated with African American women who experienced separation and loss from their current or previously incarcerated mate. This theory is grounded in participant testimonies and their accounts of psychosocial processes and coping strategies as a reaction to their separation and loss. This theory encompasses the collated themes of how women described their experience grief, shame, guilt, and stigmatization as processes that trigger the inducement of the physical and psychological state of their self-inflicted punishment of confinement.

It should be noted that SIG-C applies predominately to women who were a part of intact relationships prior to their mate's forced separation through arrest and subsequent incarceration. However, the theory and theoretical model accounts for these counter or opposite scenarios, responses, and reactions to separation and loss as well.

### **Research Subquestion 01 Findings**

Research Question 01 asked the following: What is the process and theory that explains how African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate and what, if any, are the coping strategies?

### **Theoretical Narrative and Model**

The answer to the aforementioned research question is addressed through grounded theory and reflected in the theoretical model, in Figure 1. The model for this study is entitled symbolic imprisonment, grief, and coping (SIG-C). This model is based upon a set of theoretical constructs that reflect women's psychosocial perceptions and their realities, as reported in this study. This narrative explains the processes and relationships as identified by alpha-numeric cross-references in the narrative, below. This model comprises a system of tightly coupled constructs that operate as related and interdependent antecedents, processes, and consequences, working in tandem as a reinforcing cycle of intensity.

SIG-C theory explains the processes encountered by African American women with an incarcerated mate (see process #C00 in the model). Based on respondents' accounts, separation, loss, guilt, and shame (#P01) are triggers and antecedent to multiple

possible outcomes. First, it is possible that women will not be impacted by their separation and loss because their relationship was insignificant or not intact prior to their mate's incarceration (see #P02). These women may avoid the state of symbolic imprisonment and grief by redefining their role in the relationship, disassociating, or transforming their [former] relationship into that of a platonic acquaintance. It is also possible that women avoid adverse impacts such as grief and symbolic incarceration through the positive benefits of an absent mate, or through coping strategies (#P03a and #P03a1).

The evidence from the current study also shows that the two primary responses to separation, loss, guilt and shame may lead to both grief and symbolic imprisonment as shown in the system of combined constructs: grieving akin to experiencing the death of a loved one (#C01) and the state of symbolic imprisonment (comprised of three major constructs); vicarious imprisonment (#C02), reacting to charismatic and controlling mate encounters, and (#C03) emoting psychosocial responses to loss (#C04). These constructs are presented as a system because of their interrelated and interdependent processes (identified by the dotted line and bidirectional arrows, in Figure 1). Evidence shows that these processes work together as a system of reinforcement to maintain the state of symbolic imprisonment; possibly moderated through women's use of metaphoric rituals and other coping strategies (#C05). This coping may lead to resilience and abstinence from both grieving akin to the experiencing the death of a loved one (#C01) and the state

of symbolic imprisonment. It should be noted that this final assumption is not included in the model because it is beyond the scope of this study.

Women's accounts of experiences and events having psychosocial impacts were mostly adverse. However, some positive psychological benefits and experiences led to enhanced coping (#C05). Additionally, the data show that factors such as faith in God, familial support, family responsibility, structure, and control served as stabilizing factors (C05b). Other forms of coping reported included women's accounts of using rituals and other symbolism as coping (#C05). On the other hand, failed coping due to destabilizing factors (#C05a) such as a mate's multiple incarcerations, having more than one family member incarcerated, or a mate's betrayal were contributors and triggers of re-engaging in the cycle of symbolic imprisonment (#C02, #C03, #C04) and possible grief (#C01).

This study also revealed that, for some women, post-incarceration of their mate (#C00a) also contributed to a relapse into grief (#C01). This may lead to failed coping (#P05) and also relationship dissolution, or what some women referred to as "on-again-off-again" status (#P04). This relapse accounts for women who enter the state of prolonged grief and symbolic imprisonment. The model is presented in Figure 1.

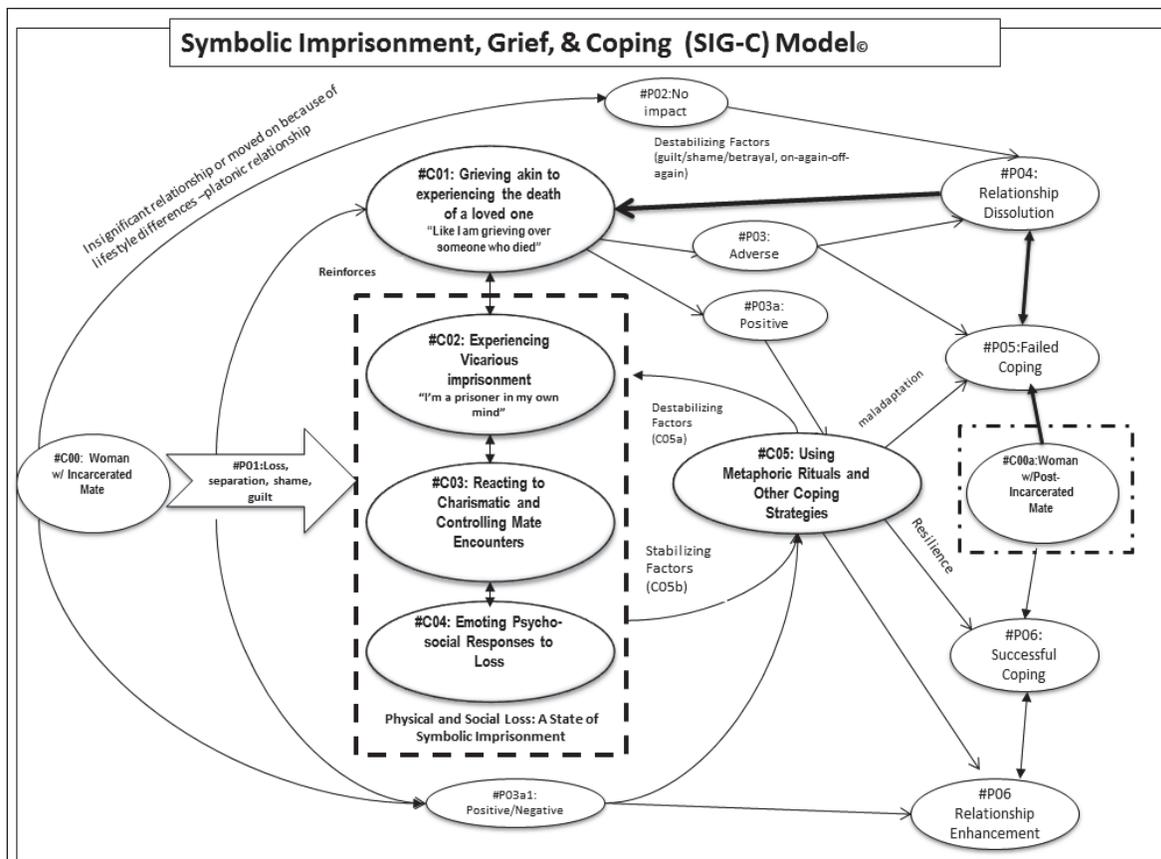


Figure 1 SIG-C Model

The counter effect of experiencing grief and/or symbolic incarceration is shown as opposite processes to grief (#P02 and #P03a). Women who do not encounter vicarious imprisonment (VI) may use coping mechanisms, such as engagement in metaphoric rituals (continuous letter reading, idolizing photographs, and others) to cope (#C04). Women also reported that they draw upon their intrinsic strength to overcome the adversity of their mate's incarceration by redefining their roles and focusing on their careers or directing their focus on their children's well-being. Additionally, some women cope by idealizing their mate's characteristics, such as their intellectual ability and charm (#C03), which was found to help women reframe their mate's criminality to a point that is acceptable and rational. In the section below, I explain each of the constructs as aligned with each research question.

### **Research Subquestion 02 Findings**

Research Subquestion 02 asked the following: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as resultant grief?

#### **Grieving, Akin to Experiencing the Death of a Loved One**

Findings in this study suggest that the application of general grief theories found in the literature could be extended to include or generate a scholarly debate about the applicability of non-death losses as a legitimate form of grieving, as confirmed by this population of women. An overview of the findings precedes interpretations substantiated by the literature.

This research study provided insights on how women in the sample with incarcerated mates experienced guilt and shame as triggers of their grieving and expressed anticipatory grief and, in some cases, prolonged grief. Additionally, these grief experiences included feelings of denial, shame, and abandonment. Notably, many women in the study expressed their grief as compared to experiencing grief associated with the death of a loved one and indicated that their grief was, at times, debilitating.

This study highlighted how forced or involuntary separation can manifest as physical, social, psychological responses to grief. This finding adds to the body of literature specific to how incarceration impacts African American women in general. At the outset of this study, it was noted that there was a paucity of literature available to understand the countervailing consequences of a mate's incarceration on this group of women.

In this study, the women rarely compartmentalized manifestations of loss as separate responses; rather, their stories revealed varied stages and complexities of grieving. Based on women's accounts, it is possible that grief, guilt, and shame are related, and, specifically, a trigger, when forced separation occurs through incarceration.

Such findings support the claims of Fahmy and Berman(2012), who indicated that inward directed feelings such as guilt or shame are a form of introversion, manifested as self-blame and a direct result from the affected person's lack of control over a situation. In alignment with Fahmy and Berman (2012), my study identified women's linkage between self-blame and helplessness or lack of control, as seen through two different

examples from this study. One woman acknowledged her mother's advice to recognize the limitations of her span of control. She admitted, "There's like you know, [I have] to stop trying to have control over things you can't have control over." Another woman blamed herself for not being able to stop her mate from violating his parole: "The streets got more control over him than I did. I tried, but the streets got him. I helped him for more than 10 years... Now he is facing 17 years."

The current study's findings are also aligned with Muris and Meesters (2014), who indicated that there is a relationship between shame, guilt, and pride; taken together, these emotions may lead to unhealthy and dysfunctional behaviors. Self-conscious evaluative responses are generally a result of self-judgments that fall short of what others expect (Muris & Meesters, 2014). Based on women's accounts of feeling culpable and not able to control their mate's decisions and choices leading to arrest, it is plausible their feelings of guilt contribute to self-punishment and living in isolation.

**Guilt and shame as triggers of disenfranchised grief.** In Chapter 2, I offered that Doka's (2002) theory provided a lens that helped to make up the conceptual framework to examine symbolic losses. However, unexpectedly, the interview question specific to symbolic loss provided unanticipated and additional insights related to two constructs: experiencing a state of vicarious imprisonment and using metaphoric rituals and coping strategies, as explained in the next section.

This study confirmed the assumption that women in this study group were likely to feel disenfranchised grief. I examined the data coded as grief through the conceptual

framework of disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2002) and the dual process model of grief (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). When examining the data closely, I found that most women in the study described the onset of grief as a consequence of their sudden and traumatic separation from their mate. In many cases, women in the study stated that their grief began with feelings of shock, denial, and subsequent guilt, in relation to their mate's arrest and resultant incarceration. Lotus' recants, "I was in shock. It was pandemonium, I froze."

In alignment with Doka's (2002) theory, and according to the women's accounts, guilt and shame may be triggers that manifest as different outcomes. On one hand, the guilt and shame may exacerbate grief. On the other hand, these factors may contribute to relationship dissolution. Wille (2014) described shame as a deep feeling that swells up, within, and feels like one's total being is uncovered—unmasked— and flaws are revealed, along with all shortcomings and inadequacies, completely visible and exposed. It is reasonable to conjecture that shame was the catalyst to women's' withdrawal, alienation, disassociation, and isolation vis-à-vis symbolic imprisonment.

The conceptual framework of disenfranchised grief may also help to understand one of the discrepant cases. More specifically, Dahlia was one of four women in this study who did not express any grief. She indicated that, prior to his incarceration, she and her mate "were in a relationship for years" before their breakup. Given the long-term investment in her relationship, it was puzzling why she was so adamant about having no feeling associated with the loss, especially no feeling of grief. It is possible that Dahlia's

lack of expression of grief may have been due to her shame and the stigma associated with the incarceration of her once- husband and now- estranged mate. Recall from chapter 4 that her mate was incarcerated for molesting a young child of the woman with whom he had an affair. She voiced, “I wasn’t as close to him at the time, in fact I wasn’t dealing with him. He molested the young daughter of some woman he was messing with...we were shocked for a while, but that is the kind of stuff that that ole’ family would do. [My] daughter did react to the loss and I talked her through it.” Note that she says she wasn’t *as* close—indicating that perhaps there was a decline in their relationship status, but also indicating that it is possible that something remained between them. It is possible that she may have grieved her mate’s infidelity, prior to his incarceration.

Doka (2002) suggested as plausible reasons why shock, denial, shame, and guilt can be contributors to grief. He offers *disenfranchised grief* as a reason that individuals feel the complexities of negative emotions such as shame and guilt while immersed in grief. These emotions are a means to defend self while avoiding ridicule. Similar patterns were discovered in this study’s data. When grief is disenfranchised, the affected person feels invalidated to share grief responses with others (Doka, 2002). This is due to the fear of being judged, criticized, or shamed as a result of the stigma associated with the circumstance of the loss. The aforementioned finding helps to understand the linkage between grief and the states of symbolic imprisonment, which includes vicarious imprisonment as a prominent construct.

**Vicarious imprisonment, shame, and self-efficacy.** The findings in this study align with the literature that indicates that shame is associated with alienation, and self-efficacy is associated with empowerment. Wille (2014) indicated that a shamed person always believes that other people have seen what should have remained a secret or hidden. It is reasonable to conjecture that many women in this study wanted to hide their relationship or the circumstances surrounding their mate's criminal arrest and incarceration. This exposure may have caused women to defend, hide, or cover up their mate's offending behavior (Wille, 2014). It also accounts for why women were inclined to idealize their mates (explained more thoroughly under Emergent Question 02). It is also possible that women in the study who did not feel shame, felt a sense of pride and self-efficacy. Wille (2014) expressed that the opposite of shame is pride and self-empowerment. This may help to explain why some women avoided the state of grief and *Symbolic Imprisonment*. Wille (2014) further indicated that rather than to withdraw and hide, pride helps one to exercise self-worth and boldly move forward with ambition. The most obvious example of this is the woman in this study who decided to go to college rather than remain in a romantic relationship with her incarcerated mate. She clearly indicated during her interview responses that she wanted to do great things with her life.

Findings also suggest that women who felt the co-existing presence of guilt, shame, and grief felt, in some manner, responsible for their mate's incarceration.

Rosemary experienced mixed feelings of guilt, shame, and subsequent grief:

Of course I feel it, when it first happen I wouldn't talk about I wouldn't tell nobody and you know like there and like the, say how you say, it's a walk around my head come down and then now I came to my senses and say, Okay why I'm doing this? It's not me– it went up the right way. So why do [I have] to walk around my head coming down. I didn't do anything wrong?

Mansi: I feel a little full of guilt constantly. I always – yes, I feel guilt... Yes. I felt I have lost my best friend. I really do felt I lost my best friend. Okay. He's still here. He's got to be able to get out one day. So, I try to remind myself that he's not gone, you know but it feels the same way too.

Kouchaki, Oveis, and Gino (2014) indicated that guilt serves two purposes: self-critique, and a catalyst for change, as a result. It is possible that although some of the women felt guilt and the guilt exacerbated feelings of loss and associated grieving, this may have led to a means of transformation, or coping. As Kouchaki, Oveis, and Gino (2014) indicated, guilt has the power to transform individuals from a state of discomfort to that which helps them to move beyond that condition to that which resolves the cognitive dissonance. Therefore, it is plausible that women with an incarcerated mate may find ways to resolve feelings of guilt and self-blame, possibly through coping as the

SIG-C model suggests. This may also explain why the four women in the study group did not experience grief.

**Anticipatory grief (AG).** This study's findings suggest that grief can be anticipatory and foreboding. However, it is acknowledged that this study did not offer validation or assessment, nor did it serve as any form of intervention. However, based on women's accounts, they described responses that were consistent with what has been described in at least one study in the literature as AG (Coombs, 2010). Further, I argue that anticipatory grief theory should be reconsidered and examined through future empirical study to determine if its application, normally reserved to literature on finite losses (death), could be extended to non-finite loss (non-death). Currently, there is a disagreement among scholars about how AG should be defined (Coombs, 2010). This lack of consensus provides opportunity to examine whether or not AG could be applied in the manner suggested by this study.

At least one woman felt a looming sense of grief prior to her mate's incarceration. Recall from Chapter 4, Iris and Sage's anticipatory grief, prior to their mate's incarceration.

Iris: The 2 years that we didn't have a life just guessing n praying to have a positive outcome after all, his trial started and we were still believing that we will win it, that day when he left [went to prison] and was 5, 6, 7 o'clock and I didn't hear from him I felt like my life was ending.

Sage: Like, I'm grieving over someone that's died- You know, he's right there-- he is alive. But that's how I feel sometimes. I do feel like in essence, he is gone. Not like dead. But I do feel that he's gone. He's not there... I can't roll over to him and touch him. I can't get up in the morning and say goodbye to him, or say good morning, you know. He's not there...I have several dreams of him being dead. He wasn't even supposed to make it to jail. Somebody was supposed to kill him before he even got there. And as like, I said it is by God's grace the he made it you know. But if this, there is a difference and I'm just like, I've been stressing. I can show you my hair. I have bald spots everywhere because right now I am physically stressed...It's just really stressful. It's really stressful.

Coombs (2010) used anticipatory grief theory to explain how individuals begin a grieving process prior to the actual loss encountered. This foreboding of death of a loved one is then expressed and resolved through grief work, as with a post-death experience (Coombs, 2010). It is possible that what Iris and Lotus felt, further underscores how non-death loss can take on the characteristics of bereavement associated with finite loss.

**Denial and grief.** This study also confirmed that women felt denial as a marker of grief. In Chapter 2, I discussed the premise of Kubler-Ross (1969) and Freud's (1961), research who both indicated that denial plays an important role in the grieving process. In this study, recall that Sage indicated, "...I was in denial

for maybe about two years...He's looking at doing some serious time and my mind was just battling with my heart telling my heart-- like no this is not true.” Iris stated similarly “The 2 years that we didn't have a life just guessing and praying to have a positive outcome after all, his trial started and we were still, believing, that we will win it.” Petunia offered yet another view of denial and shock, “...it took a month or two to completely accept he was gone and go back to my normal routine.” These accounts of denial underscore the similarities of the characteristics of finite losses to what has been uncovered in this study as characteristics of non-death loss.

**Grief akin to experiencing the death of a loved one: Nonfinite loss.**

One of the most revealing findings in this study is that non-death loss was perceived as having the same intensity as death- related grief. This finding offers insight on literature related to non-finite loss. Bruce and Schultz (2002) described non-finite loss as having a lasting presence that is initiated by a traumatic event whereby there is usually a lingering sense of physical or psychological presence. This term is usually applied to individuals diagnosed with a debilitating illness or chronic loss of cognitive functions. However, non-finite loss should be considered as a plausible alternative to understanding how women in this study reported feeling traumatized and in stress while experiencing significant grief from their loss.

Non-finite loss also provides a linkage to women's self-report of the need to isolate and socially withdraw. Bruce and Schultz (2002) indicated that another feature of non-finite loss is the "...sense of disconnection from mainstream" (p. 9). The evidence from this study clearly indicates that women's grief was related to withdrawal, while concurrently experiencing a spectrum of other losses, including the loss of a partnership, familial stability, financial support, anticipated dreams, normalized routine, physical touch, and status. Secret (2012) indicated that women who are in relationships with inmates tend to experience a tremendous sense of loss, which is potentially intensified by the collateral effects of incarceration (Secret, 2012). The destabilization of the family unit, the loss of a partnership and the loss of family stability, all may add to the adverse consequences associated with the loss.

Some women indicated that their grief did not abate once their mate was released from prison. Based on this study, it is assumed that there are interrelated forms of loss that exacerbate and extend the grief experience. This grief may become prolonged for some and shortened for others. This condition is typified through Mansi's description:

It's torture. I feel horrible a lot of the times. Yes, I really do. I feel really bad a lot of the times. It's every day, but I have moments. I have good or bad days but it's every day, you know, it's not constant all day, every day but it's every day. At times, you know, I may have a bad morning but I have okay afternoon and it varies -- what I mean, I haven't had one good day yet and I thought like, you know, had to go through moments.

Sometimes, they last longer than others, so yes. And I'm not showing that to others every day. I pray that I can get out of bed.

From women's accounts, we learn that grief can feel like torture, with lingering and lasting effects. Mansi described her grief as torture and a feeling that would not go away. Lobb et al, (2010) indicated that when grief is accompanied by trauma and extends for long periods of time, it may become a prolonged and complicated form of grieving. Two primary predictors of complicated and prolonged grieving are insecure attachments (during childhood), and dependency, particularly on a mate (Lobb et al., 2010, p. 676). He further stated that a primary risk factor and contributor to complicated grief was due to the absence of reaching closure (Lobb et al., 2010). Lobb's et al. (2010) study was applied to the analysis of death-related loss. However, evidence from my study's sample provides a clear comparison of non-death related grief to death-related losses. At least one woman in the study indicated that her grief was persistent long after her mate was released from prison.

**Grief as debilitating.** This study provides insights that support Stroebe and Schut's (1999) dual process model of grief, which describes how individuals experience a loss orientation (LO) and restoration orientation (RO). When LO is experienced, individuals do grief work, by acknowledging their loss and finding ways to redefine their roles and move on with life. When RO is expressed, individuals tend to break or respite from their grief work. This study offers that this model could be extended in two meaningful ways. First, the evidence from this study suggests that the need to oscillate

from grief to recovery is not merely driven by *wanting* to take a break from the task of grief work, as Stroebe and Schut (1999) suggested, but rather, there is a *need* to break from grief out of a larger responsibility (i.e. mothers caring for their children or maintaining the household). Second, we can clearly see that non-death losses tend to take on the same characteristics as death-related loss. Specifically, my study revealed that the affected griever or mourner may substantiate her loss by comparing her void to that which is commonly accepted by the public— a death-related loss. Therefore, it is offered that the Stroebe and Schut (1999) model could consider enhancing their model to account for non-finite losses.

Finally, findings also convey that some women felt that their grief was paralyzing and stopped them from normal functioning. Jasmine's account of grief conveys how debilitating she felt that the condition could be: "Definitely um, [I felt] helplessness and also [had] a constant awareness of how much of a struggle I had ahead of me ..." On the other hand, Lotus described how she was able to force herself to move beyond the state of debilitation by prioritizing her daughter's needs as a means to move beyond the paralysis of her own grief: "I was in robotic mode—in a fog, you got to do it. A child is depending on you—all the things to take care of on the outside...you don't want to do it. *You have to do it,*" she said. This contrast provides an understanding and linkage to how women are able to cope, in spite of the difficulties that they face, when grieving, especially if they feel somewhat responsible or guilty. This finding supports the idea that the LO and RO model could be extended to reconsider why women enter the state of RO.

### **Research Subquestion 03, Findings**

Research Subquestion 03 asked: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as symbolic loss?

Research Subquestion 04 is also related to the theoretical construct that follows. Research Subquestion 04 asked: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a physical loss?

### **Experiencing a State of Vicarious Imprisonment**

Notably, I found no other literature that described the state of vicarious imprisonment, an African American women's state of self-induced isolation, as a result of having an incarcerated mate. What makes this phenomenon different from what has been reported in the literature related to depression or other forms of withdrawal is that women in this study indicated that they felt criminalized and incarcerated. This important finding should be explored further. An operational definition and reasonable interpretation of this finding is that women emulate their mate's confinement as a defense mechanism, an extenuation of grief, and as self-punishment. Recall that the state of vicarious imprisonment (VI) is described as women's self-induced confinement, restricted social activities, and emulating their mate's state of incarceration. Evidence from data analysis conveys that shame, guilt, and grief are tightly coupled with the state of VI. This state is also reinforced through the grief process.

The only similar finding that I uncovered in the literature, at the time of this project, was a study that was conducted in 1938. In this study, Davis (1938) examined the behaviors and personality traits of juvenile inmates who were institutionalized for lengths of time and exposed to rigid structure. Davis' (1938) finding is applicable in the following way: individuals with a high degree of emotional stability, self-efficacy, extroversion, and confidence were least likely to be institutionalized. Inversely, those with low emotional stability, low self-esteem, introverted, were more likely to display characteristics of institutionalization. Although this theory was applied to a different study group and context, it is plausible that the attributes identified by Davis could be compared to women experiencing VI. However, the difference is that these women *did not report any experiences with jail or prison*.

These findings are also supported and base-lined in Teasedale's (2014) premise that suggested that shame is the catalyst to alienation and social isolation. According to women in this study, their experiences were prolonged and social isolation, intentional. Pantell et al. (2013) described social isolation as a state of disengagement from one's social networks (p. 2056).

It should be acknowledged that not all women in the sample experienced VI. Three women were exempt. However, of the women who did experience VI, they openly acknowledged that they were comparing their states of isolation and confinement to their mate's incarceration.

**VI reinforced by stigma.** Vicarious imprisonment may be a reaction to family, friends, and others who reportedly “shunned” the woman or believed that she should walk away from or terminate her relationship. Social isolation also provides two valuable functions: It may help to resolve the guilt and shame of not being able to save the husband or boyfriend from his criminal behavior (or perhaps from having knowledge of his criminal act that led to his incarceration). Second, given that many women experienced a failure of their social support systems, their isolation may have provided shelter from alienation, stigmatization, and judgment from others. This is explained in part through Doka’s (2002) disenfranchised grief. Women in the study group reported feeling minimized, or their grief negated because of their criminalized mate. This state of isolation is possibly reinforced as a necessary boundary to avoid external stigma and shame, because her mate “is the only one who understands” her.

Teasedale (2014) offered an additional consideration that can be used to understand this finding of VI. He explained that women who have low self-worth or low self-esteem may be prone to familial disintegration, unhappiness, and alienation. Teasedale’s premised that women who are controlled or have been controlled have difficulty connecting with others. Teasedale (2014) said, individuals desperately need to be loved and will try to sustain it at all costs. It is possible that women with low self-esteem are the primary candidates who need support from a familial and social network to avoid seeking out affection from controlling individuals.

When asked why she remained in her abusive relationship, Rose reflected on her childhood; not having a father figure led her to seek out validation from her mate:

Rose: My dad wasn't in the house. So, it was just me, my sister and my mom. So, no this man should—this man shall be something he said he loved me. Even though I know in my heart the part he was out doing other stuff. Do you know what I'm saying? --Cheating and all that stuff. I mean self-esteem. I just didn't love myself. I really did not love myself for even taking myself through that [prison experience with mate].

DeFina and Hannon (2010) defined the state of incarceration as a criminal justice remanded sentence to confinement of individuals behind bars, in jail, or prison. Similarly, the women in this study described their confinement as feeling in prison.

Comparable to an inmate, affected women in this study reported feeling stigma, feeling criminalized, and experienced guilt. Vogel, Bitman, Hammer, and Wade (2013) posited that the effects of public stigma can be damaging. This stigma is corroborated through public norms. Or, said differently, an example would include a large percentage of the population who may agree that it is okay to look down upon criminals, and their wives as an extension. Vogel et al. (2013) suggested that a form of public stigma includes the notion that individuals suffering from depression are emotionally unfit, not in control of their emotional faculties.

Based on the aforementioned discussion, it is reasonable to conjecture that women in this study group may have withdrawn into a state of VI, or perhaps it was reinforced as

a result from the public stigma as well as self-stigma. Corrigan and Shapiro (2010) help to substantiate this proposition that stigma can lead to withdrawal, isolation and avoidance. As a detriment to women who are stigmatized, they tend to abstain from seeking out treatment and intervention, when and if needed (Corrigan & Shapiro, 2010).

Isolation may also be a form of self-protection to avoid scrutiny and judgment by others. One woman indicated that, initially, when the arrest of her husband took place, friends, and family wanted to know what happened; later, they tired of hearing about the situation. Lotus recalled, “Well, there was a lot [support] in the beginning, umm, when he first got incarcerated. Everybody wanted to know what happened. And um, eventually there were about three of them—family members—that I could speak with. And you know, it's almost like the rest kind of shunned you.”

In this study, social isolation appeared to serve as punishment as well as a defense mechanism. This next section discusses in detail the possible triggers to VI.

### **Emergent Question 01 Findings**

Emergent Question 01, asked: What is the process that initiates/triggers symbolic imprisonment?

#### **VI Triggers: Separation, Loss, Guilt, and Shame**

Findings from this study indicated that loss, separation, guilt, and shame are not only reinforcements of VI, but also appear as prominent triggers of this phenomenon.

Through Daisy’s story conveyed earlier, we learn that the triggering event for her emulation of her mate’s discomfort and confinement was her guilt and inability to “fix”

the situation. In alignment with self-defeating thoughts could be triggers of VI. Hazel indicated that her isolation and withdrawal was due to the stigma and shame associated with the incarceration of her husband. Recall from chapter 4, she said, “Yes, it’s like people will make us feel like it was just certain areas that we were never going to be welcome [because of his incarceration]...”

When Lotus was asked what made her remain in the state of confinement (Vicarious Imprisonment), she indicated, its “trickery.” She went on to say that her mate was like a “chameleon.” She clarified this statement by offering that men in prison “change their behaviors to fit the circumstances.” She also indicated that at the time of her self-induced confinement, she was “[I was] not feeling confident—looking for a relief, until you know that there is going to be hope, but it stays the same. That is the only way to shed a layer of bad skin.” She then acknowledged, “While he was in prison, we were in prison, and we should have broke free.” These findings are in alignment with Teasedale’s (2014) thoughts on how individuals can become empowered to develop strategies to change or, in some cases, remain within the bounds of shame and self-doubt.

**Benefits of a mate’s imprisonment.** Although this study’s findings indicate that there can be adverse consequences for women with an incarcerated mate, some women also report of benefits. These findings are consistent with Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney (2012), who also found that some women actually benefit from the respite that a mate’s incarceration offers. Therefore, this study finds that it cannot be concluded that the only outcome of having an incarcerated mate is a negative one.

Four women in this study reported a lack of grief, as well as reduced levels of stress and trauma. These variations in the sample may be a result of the benefits associated to the imprisonment of the man. For example, one woman indicated that prior to her significant other going to prison, they used to have physical altercations. "...so for this experience I think it was more better off for him because he's gotten clean, he's got a lot of alcohol out of his system like the other things out of his system...he is thinking clear." She further indicated that her mate finally has the mental health resources that he needed. She reflected "I'm glad because now we're sitting there waiting for him to you know, play catch up to be the family and, to hang out with us." Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney (2012) also examined the psychological and physical wellness of mothers of children whose fathers were incarcerated and found one of the reasons that women benefit is because the threat of physical abuse is removed.

The section below offers an understanding of why women may remain in a state of VI; even though each woman had the option of resuming a normal life, they chose to remain confined to their designated self-made prisons.

### **Emergent Question 02 Findings**

Emergent Question 02, asked: What is the process that maintains the state of symbolic imprisonment?

### **Responding to Charismatic/Controlling Mate Encounters**

Evidence from this study indicates that women's responses to their mate's charismatic and controlling behaviors had an effect on their states of vicarious

imprisonment. This theoretical construct, Responding to Charismatic and Controlling Mate Encounters is used to convey how many women in the sample described their mate as an idealized partner who romanced them and understood them more than anyone else. Yet, contrasting descriptors were also used to describe their mate when reflecting on their feelings of abandonment and separation.

This construct helps to answer the emergent question (EQ02), concerned with understanding what factors contribute to maintaining the state of vicarious imprisonment. According to women's accounts, many of the men were characterized as charismatic and idealized. They used words such as: "intelligent", "smart", "romantic", "loving," "kind," and "loyal" when discussing his positive qualities.

During times of deeper reflection on their mate's criminality and, consequently, being "left" and "abandoned," their descriptions changed to that which described as: "manipulative", "deceptive", "controlling", a "pathological liar", "a brainwasher," "a chameleon," "dependent," or an "untrusting individual."

Many of the aforementioned terms for negative behaviors described by the women tend to align with what Watkins et al. (2014) referred to as intimate partner aggression. These behaviors described by women are not necessarily characterized by physical violence, but psychologically damaging, verbally abusive, and controlling behaviors demonstrated by a partner.

Through women's stories, it is conjectured that many incarcerated men also use women's empathy as another means of controlling their behavior and loyalty. Mirror

(2011) considered this type of behavior as manipulating and bullying. Banaie (2012) found that the symbiotic relationship between women and dependent men may be a result of the women's sense of feeling less-than, incompetent, and insignificant. Consequently, men take advantage of these perceived weaknesses and prey upon women whom they see as weak (Banaie, 2012).

Women, on the other hand, may receive a psychological payoff as well from being in their nurturing role. Prison offers protection from physical abuse, as Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney (2012) offered. Women on the outside may feel a sense of empowerment and control over the incarcerated male. In this study, some women reported that they assume a very important role as supporter and caregiver—their mate depends on them. They become the conduit of communication and, by fiat, a connection point to the outside world for the incarcerated mate. They also reported assisting in maintaining the prison commissary or canteen and contributing to the inmate's phone card. This role may lead women to feel that they are needed and provide them with a sense of importance. As Teasedale (2014) indicated, on the opposite side of the equation, women with self-defeating behaviors often are seeking to be loved and needed.

An additional consideration of this analysis includes the phenomenon that feeling needed and perhaps, to a degree, in control may lead to the idolization and idealizing of their mate. This phenomenon discovered in the data is discussed further in the next section.

### **Idealized Mate**

During their interviews, women presented conflicting responses when describing their mate. On one hand, they spoke highly of them and justified why they were in the relationship with them. Fishman (1990) offered that prison wives sometimes create stories of justification to rationalize in their minds how they could possibly be in a relationship with a criminal. One of the stories they tell is that their mate is ideal, smart, loving, kind and caring. Their "...distorted arrangement of facts ... highlights an extremely dismal past and, presumably, explains an individual's present state" (Fishman, 1990, p. 29). More specifically, Fishman explained that prison wives often convince themselves that their mate was somehow wrongly charged, and that he is truly an honorable man or idealized mate that happened to be a victim of a past circumstance that led him to committing his crime. In other words, it is not his fault. Therefore, women excuse, ignore, and overlook his crime and negative behaviors in order to rationalize why they remain in a relationship with a criminal.

On the other hand, many women also expressed how dependent, controlling, and manipulating this same person could be. Pincus, Cain, and Wright (2014) considered the latter traits as consistent with exposure to narcissistic behaviors. They described the domineering qualities as maladaptive behaviors imposed on others, as we see in the evidence presented in the data.

**Low self-image and mate's dependency.** A few of the women expressed having a lack of self-confidence; feeling less- than -worthy image, or had low self-esteem, as

documented earlier; yet, these women drew upon internal strength to support their mate during his incarceration. The data also show that many of the women had a strong sense of loyalty that superseded their needs to display their adverse emotional responses to their situations (mate's incarceration), especially while in their mate's presence. It appeared as if they wanted to shield and protect their mate from seeing their vulnerability, sadness, and distress. Their sacrifices and loyalty were often intermingled with stories that conveyed love and their nurturing roles to a dependent mate. This type of allegiance and support is conveyed through the following narratives:

Lotus: I wanted to appear strong as if I was the backbone, which I was. A lot of times, I hid it [my emotions]; I hid it well. Because I really didn't want to...I knew under the circumstances, where he was and what he was going through. But I kind of hid my emotions to— not burden him. And at the same time I was burdened with, you know the things he was going through. But I hid it well.

Olive:...it means not having him to hold me at night and to tell me everything ok, to not be able to be there for him when he needs me and hurting him and his pride for him to depend on me for his needs because he doesn't have it and it means more time in between us getting married.

Jasmine: Um, I think that through it all he knows like I'm gonna be there no matter what. Like I, I've stuck it out. We've come through all kinds of hard times, tests, and trials and um I mean I think that I am the backbone

to the family and I think that he recognizes that on a daily basis because of all that we've come through.

To reconcile how these women appeared to have low self-confidence on one hand but show strength and nurturance on the other, Zeigler-Hill, Clark, and Beckman's (2011) description of *fragile-high-self-esteem*, is offered. These researchers suggested that when individuals have a high degree of fragile-high-self-esteem, they have a need to hide their weaknesses and fragility while superimposing their superiority over others— even if it is through deception or masking behaviors (p. 510). It is possible that some participants in the current study may have suffered from low self-image, yet in their nurturing role, they felt a sense of power or, perhaps, control over their incarcerated mate. Perhaps, the masking of their emotions was a means of showing that they could remain strong under stressful circumstances. These conditions also may have been buffered by what this study refers to as Charismatic and Controlling Mate Encounters.

**The linkage between charismatic encounters and vicarious imprisonment.**

Teasdale (2014) posits that women who normally cling to men in an effort to build up their own status could be described as women who have an emotional deficit— are detached from the world— yet they seek to find and fulfill their lives in a relationship. By doing so, Teasdale (2014) offered that the union of two is better than going it alone. He goes on to say that the delicate women in these imbalanced relationships find themselves enveloped in separateness, aloneness, and are emotionally depleted (Teasdale, 2014). This finding helps to understand the linkage between women experiencing the

charismatic and controlling encounters and remaining in a state of vicarious imprisonment.

It is plausible that the charismatic behavior and romance received through letters and phone calls offer to fill the void and help to provide the love that these women seek. Men reportedly offered charm and romance while incarcerated, but this was not always sustained. The outcome could have both positive and negative consequences, as illustrated through Poppy's story:

Poppy: When he was gone, I always made sure that he had money. I am 48 years old. [Just] think where I could have been. I have grown daughters who told me – don't blame yourself. It is him, not you. What a loss. I have cried a many days and night. I feel so betrayed. I needed him to be back. Boy..." It is a vicious cycle. I tried to stop [him from] dealing with those things [drugs]. A week or two later he comes back and he wants to know about my attitude. The person you broke bread with—now you going back to prison for 17 years—calling and asking for me –you need your friend back. The last time I opened the door, he put a gun in my face.

Sage, on the other hand, reflected on her mate's romantic gestures: "It, it just sometimes it's just the little things because he, um, speaks metaphorically. So, just those little things he can say something and I'll be... I have to read it [letter] like six times."

Other women reflected on how their mates would lie or deceive them: "I knew it was a lie but just for people to say, "Oh you know bury it-- and put it away" I buried it. I put it

away. I forgave him.” As indicated, the letters and charming ways of the mate may have helped the women to cope, but also helped them to reconcile and reframe their mate’s behavior into one that was of a positive light, even if there was underlying deception.

**Women with high self-worth and relationship disassociation.** Individuals with high self-worth tend to place an importance on how they are viewed by their peers and by the public (Kandemir, 2014). This study corroborates that finding in that results show women with strong self-images, such as those reported in the discrepant cases, created a distance from their relationship with their incarcerated mate. For example, recall that Dahlia disassociated from her mate who had molested a young girl. Ivy also moved on, with a college career, but remained in a platonic relationship with her mate. Ivy indicated that she maintained her distance. She could not see herself visiting the prison where friends would see her and possibly judge her: “It’s like people from your hometown – I just didn’t feel comfortable with it so I didn’t go back again. But I did continue to write him while he was there.”

The next section discusses the psychological and social impacts of having an incarcerated mate.

### **Research Subquestions 04, 05 and 06 Findings**

Research Subquestion 04 asked: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a psychological loss?

Research Subquestion 05 asked: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a social loss?

Research Subquestion 06, asked: How, if at all, do African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as a physical loss?

### **Emoting Psychosocial Reactions to Loss**

This study finds that women's psychological responses ranged from feeling helplessness to feeling empowered to make change. Many of the negative and positive psychosocial impacts have been discussed. This section will discuss how it may be possible that women respond differently to loss, based on their world views and assumptive world.

In chapter 2, I described this concept (assumptive world) as an individual's narrative that is based upon a template of personal expectations relative to their assumptive world. These convictions held about their assumptive world or worldview of order, stability, and expectations, help to establish a barometer of perceived normalcy. When threats occur to a person's internal model, the ill effects may result in debilitation and helplessness (Mattis, 2002; Stroebe, 2002). Life-altering trauma due to forced separation and loss can be a threat to the assumptive world that challenges the belief system (Mattis, 2002; Stroebe, 2002). Loss of love, security, self, safety, justice, and fairness are all challenges that women conveyed as they recalled what loss of a loved one

meant to them. These challenges clearly may alter a person's perspective of their assumptive world.

One woman said that she felt "helplessness and also a constant awareness of how much of a struggle [she] had ahead of [her]." All participants revealed that they were impacted, to a certain extent, on a psychosocial level. Many women described their loss as adverse reactions that led to depression, trauma, stress, shame, guilt, and other potentially dysfunctional behaviors that interfered with their ability to resume normal life. These findings are consistent with previous findings of Chui (2009), who indicated that loss associated with a mate's incarceration could be both overwhelming and cause psychological distress.

Some women felt no social impact at all. Hazel indicated that the reason that she felt no negative social impact or stigma was because everyone knew him. She said, however, that, if she was just meeting someone "she wouldn't go into detail where [her mate] was." In other words, it was a bit easier to deal with her mate's incarceration when it was common knowledge that he had been arrested. This finding is in contrast to Doka's (2002) disenfranchised grief theory. However, this alternative reaction presents the argument that if no stigma is present because incarceration is commonplace, then, perhaps, the grief experience is negated or at least ameliorated by the lack of being labeled.

As described earlier, other women felt that their mate's incarceration gave them a sense of self-efficacy. They felt as though they had an obligation to be the matriarch of

the family, for the family as well as the mate. Their nurturing and maternal instincts can be conveyed in the following passage: “I didn’t want [my kids] to see me crying. I didn’t want them to have a dad incarcerated and an unstable mum.” They were my rock more than anything because of them– I tried to keep myself whole. Luckily, I got to see him just two days after his incarceration.”

Finally, supporting Wildeman et al.’s (2012) theory that women are likely to suffer depression if in a relationship with an incarcerated mate, women in this sample did, also. Hence, many women self-reported depression as well as physiological impacts. For example, women reported having alopecia, migraines, and weight loss/weight gain. Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney (2012) also found that women who are in relationships with an incarcerated spouse are more likely to be predisposed to depression and health issues. The next and final section discusses coping strategies used by women in this sample group.

### **Research Subquestion 07 Findings**

Research Subquestion 07 asked: What, if any, are the coping strategies used by African American women with an incarcerated mate?

#### **Using Metaphoric Rituals and Other Coping Strategies**

In this study, women used various rituals and other means of coping. For example, one woman washed her bedding in a soap/fragrance that reminded her of the scent last smelled on her mate. Some women carried a photo, a mate’s wallet, read letters over and over, or retained letters for decades after their mate was released from prison.

Findings specific to women using metaphoric rituals and other coping strategies may be understood through Long's (2011) description of how families of death-row inmates cope with the imminent death of their loved one. The icons may represent what Long (2011) referred to in his study as the "family ghost" (p. 485). The family ghost represents an image of the incarcerated person whose crime is so heinous that it is too shameful to discuss, yet the family incorporates the person in their day-to-day activities as if he or she were there. All considerations, familial decisions, and family priorities are carried out with consideration of the absent person as if he or she is present (Long, 2011).

According to Long's (2011) accounts, the families of death-row inmates become so enmeshed in the lives of the inmates that the integration of his "spirit" is as real as him or her being there—at home with the family unit.

Likewise, women in this sample reported using proxies as an icon of their mate or family ghost. Their substitutes enabled them to be close to their absent mate. Rituals such as using music playlists with their mate's favorite songs, or carrying a photograph with them everywhere, or carrying his wallet, wearing his shirt, or going to his favorite "food joint" served as comforts and reminders of a time of togetherness.

It is also plausible that women used the metaphoric rituals as a means of coping with their loss. When change occurs to our assumptive world or to that which we have become accustomed to, grieving over that loss is natural (Mattis, 2002). Faith is sometimes used to help individuals make meaning of their lives when chaos and trauma is encountered (Mattis, 2002). Although many women spoke of using their faith as

coping, it is also possible that metaphors and rituals also help to re-write personal narratives. The reframing of their stories may have helped them to create new meanings that were easier to accept and cope with (Harrison, Kahn, & Hsu, 2004).

### **Summary**

This section offered the theoretical narrative of symbolic imprisonment, grief, and coping (SIG-C) theory as the answer to the overarching and grand tour research. This primary question sought to understand African American women's, loss, grief, and coping strategies when they are separated from their incarcerated mate. SIG-C theory was based upon the foundation and conceptual framework of disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2002) and the dual process model of grief (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). This chapter also explained how the current study extended Chui (2010) and Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney's (2012) work specific to the understanding the adverse psychological and social impacts on women when their mate is incarcerated. This study reveals that the impacts could be immediate and prolonged.

Additionally, Chapter 5 discussed the findings on women's self-defeating and low-self-esteem behaviors aligned with Teasdale's (2010) study; coupled with disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2002), shame, and the newly identified construct of vicarious imprisonment (VI), it invites further scholarly discussion to understand how to negate the adverse impacts identified in this study. The triggering dynamics and antecedents of VI were examined through the lens of Lewis' (1971) seminal research on shame and guilt to understand how women may self-alienate and withdraw from social

networks. The current study's results suggest that there is a need to further understand the nature of vicarious imprisonment and stigmatization beyond what was revealed in this study.

This chapter offered that there are positive benefits to a mate's incarceration, as well. This finding lends support to the small body of literature that examines the impacts of incarceration on African American women, such as the work of Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney's (2012) and Chui (2010).

Finally, findings discussed in this chapter extend the literature, in the following meaningful ways,

1. SIG-C is offered as grounded theory that explains how African American women experience separation and loss from their incarcerated mate on a psychosocial level and accounts for their experiences of grief and coping.
2. This study's results confirm that disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2002), which is largely applied to finite losses, was consistent with experiences reported by African American women with incarcerated mates.
3. This study offers vicarious imprisonment as a phenomenon that should be empirically investigated as future research to determine its application to both homogenous and heterogeneous samples.
4. Although this study was exploratory in nature, it precludes any offering of intervention strategies; however, based on the findings, future studies should consider testing and possibly extending the theory of anticipatory grief to a

similar population and study group to determine if its application to non-finite loss (non-death loss) is appropriate. As stated, historically, anticipatory grief has been aligned with individuals who anticipate imminent death of a loved one. At the very least, practitioners or future researchers may consider how various grief modalities could be tailored as possible intervention strategies for women who are equivalent to this study's criteria.

5. Finally, this chapter revealed that despite the challenges that women faced, many women found ways to continue to support their families, and households, as well as their incarcerated mate.

### **Limitations**

It should be noted that the findings of this study are based on a small sample, ( $n=20$ ) African American women. While my conclusions are based on this small homogenous sample of women, these women are considered subject matter experts. There is evidence that this study's design should be applied to other racial compositions, different gender groups, and heterogeneous samples. During this study, I excluded two males from participating because they did not meet the study's criteria. However, they may experience the same responses to separation and loss because of incarceration of a loved one. Although a small sample is a noted limitation, it is important also to acknowledge that the purpose of this grounded theory study was to develop context-specific theory as a foundation for future research. As noted in Chapter 2, qualitative samples are intentionally small in order to provide a wide depth and breadth of

participant experiences (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). It is possible that this theory can be extended to other samples to further develop the basis provided from this study.

Another possible limitation of this study is that research participants were asked directly, what, if any, feelings of grief they may have experienced. It is possible that individuals compared their experiences with the death of loved ones because most people think of death when they hear the word, “grief.” Future research may consider not asking the question using the word, grief, to determine if results would be consistent with this study’s findings.

Finally, a limitation is that most of the interviews were conducted via telephone rather than as in- person interviews. Consequently, any non-verbal reactions and in-person observations could not be recorded. However, I was able to make note of long pauses, sighs, and emotions, such as laughter. I also believe that, as Reuben and Reuben (2012) suggested, telephone interviews offer a sense of privacy and the security of the interviewer not revealing any expressions or reactions as value judgments.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the accounts of women detailed in this study, a lack of perceived support may impede their recovery from their often sudden and traumatic separation. My analysis reveals that there are fundamental recommendations that are a natural outgrowth from this study. These recommendations include the need for establishing group-based support systems; using participatory action research (PAR) to advance the knowledge of this problem and how support groups might be effective solutions; the use of therapeutic

intervention strategies designed specifically for this population, and a consideration of family-friendly prison visitation policy.

It is recommended that future support systems be designed to insure that each type of loss is addressed. This study underscored that women's separation from their incarcerated mates may bring about shame that manifests in multiple forms of loss. These losses can overlap and be reinforced as a cycle of shame and guilt-based physical, psychological, social, and symbolic losses. Acknowledgement of their grief may be the first step towards healing and liberation for these women. Liberation is the contrasting expression of shame (Kaufman, 2002). Grief is enfranchised when it is socially acceptable (Kaufman, 2002). It is reasonable to recommend that a first step of social acceptance may be through establishing targeted therapeutic group work, where women who have experienced similar circumstances may acknowledge each other's grief. This validation in itself may bring about healing.

Group intervention work may include helping women to understand how to transform their shame, anger, guilt, and other expressions into acts of self-empowerment. For example, women may learn to acknowledge their sources of guilt and come to terms with not being able to prevent certain outcomes, such as their mate's incarceration. Additionally, facilitated group work may help women to explore ways to transform their feelings of helplessness into negotiating new roles and redefining how they adjust and respond to their losses on multiple levels. One woman in this research study started an

online support group where hundreds of women have begun to share their stories in a manner that is acknowledged through shared experiences.

The aforementioned recommendation may be extended and enhanced through participatory action research (PAR). PAR researchers recognize the oppression of specific groups and engage the affected individuals and stakeholders in a collective examination of program design, gap assessment, and collective identification of solutions, validated through empirical research (Glassman & Erden, 2014). It is recommended that this approach be applied initially to two areas: examining support group requirements, and identifying specific counseling needs in support of this population. PAR could be used to evaluate an existing support group's effectiveness to ensure that women's needs are assessed and a grief component is addressed. In this type of study, affected women would serve as key stakeholders and subject matter experts, working with the primary researcher and program designers and counseling resources. PAR is ideal because of the confidentiality and ethical protections offered through this type of research, which naturally ensures that women's identities remain confidential. This offers a safeguard for women who may be ambivalent to share their insights openly with a small group of stakeholders. This approach could also be applied to examination of pastoral counseling programs, since women in this study indicated that spirituality has been sought as a primary external resource for coping.

Future research may also include quantitative experimental research using an intervention group and a control group to determine whether a grief and bereavement

model of support helps to restore normalcy and coping to women who struggle to make meaning of their lives once the separation has occurred. As a researcher, I caveat that these results should be considered preliminary. It is imperative that this research be advanced through future qualitative and quantitative research. Future researchers should consider a quantitative study using a randomized sampling approach. Each of the offered theoretical constructs could be studied as variables with the independent variable being, grief response. It would also be beneficial to examine each theoretical construct as a separate study.

Another area that should be considered for future research is to explore how males are affected by their female mate's incarceration. Given that there were two males who wanted to participate in this study, it is an indication that there are other populations that could benefit from this focused research. Extended family members could also be a focus.

Finally, it is reasonable to recommend that social change program developers consider incorporating strategies that support women through their continuum of experiences during different phases of their mate's incarceration. Support may include increasing women's knowledge of what to expect when their mate is incarcerated and how to stay connected. A resource guide could be designed to include information specific to prison visitation, communication strategies, and mental health support resources. Support resources may minimize the potential for women experiencing compounded and intense grief. Neimeyer and Jordon (2002) indicated that when society

fails to recognize the grief associated with specific scenarios, such as the loss of a loved one, family members, and other losses, it is an “empathic failure” (p. 95). Therefore, on a societal level, we have a responsibility to acknowledge this problem as a social problem that needs a solution. This study revealed the fragile state of women and how many of them felt criminalized during prison visitation (i.e. *Rosemary*). Based on respondent’s interviews, prison visitation policy should be written in a manner that encourages familial support and decreases the possibility of criminalizing visitors.

The information presented in this study may only be the beginning of uncovering the findings associated with an incarceration of a loved one. It is possible that the impacts of mass incarceration are far greater than the research community currently understands.

### **Implications**

Research has shown that the incarceration of a significant other negatively impacts women with whom they partner (Chui, 2010; Wildeman, Turney, & Schnittker, 2012). One of the prevalent findings was that grief is a prominent response to separation and loss from their mate. Findings from this study provide an opportunity to extend the relevance of examining nonfinite grief to that with finite grief through empirical studies. Additionally, this study offers multiple phenomena for researchers to examine fully in future studies: vicarious imprisonment, responding to charismatic and controlling mate encounters, and using metaphoric rituals and other coping strategies.

These findings may be applicable cross-disciplines and specialty areas, including, thanatology, health and human services, and psychology researchers. The implications

and insights from this study, although preliminary, offer and in some cases confirm that grief can be experienced as any significant loss, not just from the ultimate loss, death. Therefore, grief counselors, who specialize in grief intervention, may consider how their practice could include an evaluative approach that considers grief for populations of women similar to that which was used in this sample.

The acknowledgement of non-death grief experienced in the context of this study, by the research community as well as practitioners, not only enfranchises this study's population, but also gives a name to their condition. When a condition is recognized by the research community, transformative change can occur that may also foster well-being and enhanced quality of life for these women. This change is perpetuated through advancement of a phenomenon as mutually agreed upon by the research community as a problem solving initiative that is of value, significance, and importance.

### **Positive Social Change**

This study was conducted with the goal of positive social change in mind. During this project, I sought, first, to understand the social problem, and ,second, to give voice to the underserved and largely underreported population of African American women. As indicated, one of the primary findings from this study is that women lacked holistic support. Their lack of perceived support may impede possibilities of recovering from their often sudden and traumatic forced separation. Therefore, as my social change initiative, it is important that affected women are provided with information resources

specific to the findings from this study that may help them to recognize triggers and symptoms of grief, that may lead to potentially debilitating states. My social change goal is to ultimately provide information resources to help women improve their well-being and quality of life when exposed to situations that challenge their assumptive world. I will do so by disseminating this research to program administrators and community organizations who are in a position to reach women who experience loss associated with their mate's incarceration.

Second, I plan to disseminate this study's findings to the research community, professional, and legislative conferences. This distribution is essential to raising the awareness of the implications of a mate's incarceration on the affected African American female population. The context-specific theory grounded in participant stories may help to provide firsthand insights to generate a scholarly discussion on how to best ameliorate, or at the very least minimize the potential damaging impacts of a mate's incarceration on this study's population of women.

Finally, this study revealed the fragile state of women and how many women felt criminalized during prison visitation. It is hoped that one channel to disseminate this study's findings is to faith-based institutions and community resources that tailor their support to women in a safe and nonjudgmental manner, in hopes of offering healing and enhanced quality of life.

### **Researcher Reflections**

During this research study, as a grounded theorist, I learned how this research method could be used to uncover significant insights and understanding of participant processes, actions, and outcomes. I found that engagement with the literature prior to the study enabled me to truly have theoretical sensitivity. This study's conceptual framework not only guided this study, but it also provided boundaries.

Finally, the greatest experience was the education offered through the research participants' stories. These women trusted me with some of the most intimate stories specific to their relationships and vulnerabilities. They opened up to me and shared their strengths and weaknesses, with what I assess to be without reservation. The iterative nature of grounded theory allowed me to become fully immersed in the data where I understood the processes as well as the linkages that formed relationships in the theoretical model. Ultimately, I have come to realize that although I would like to conduct a quantitative study subsequently, I am drawn to the rich data that accompanies grounded theory studies.

### **Conclusion**

It is my belief that transformative change primarily comes about through two impactful ways: legislation and research. This study offers an opportunity to pursue both channels. For example, women in this study were found to retreat and to isolate, sometimes for an extended period. Therefore, it is imperative for helping professionals first to find a means of reaching these women prior to their self-imposed isolation,

through preventative strategies, legislation, and research. Symbolic imprisonment, grief, and coping theory (SIG-C) is a context-specific theory that gives a name to a complex system of constructs that explains how African American women experience separation and loss from their incarcerated mates. This theory encompasses the possible non-death grief that may be both anticipatory and extended. Vicarious imprisonment and its linkages to both grief and charismatic and controlling mate encounters are also accounted for in this model. Grounded theory was the best option in answering this study's research question because there was no theory or model found at the outset of this study. The discovered theory, SIG-C, now provides a foundation for future researchers to build upon.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

**Experiences of Separation & Loss:****African American Women with an Incarcerated Mate (initial study name)**

**To the Participant:** This research is about you and your feelings of loss and separation from your mate - to maintain that focus, please do not use any specific details about a crime or criminal event, and do not talk about details of any investigations that may be criminal in nature.

- a) Are you okay to move forward with this interview? If so, today, we are here to talk about your experience of separation and loss from your mate. Some people refer to their relationships differently. Some women may refer to their mate as their boyfriend, significant other, husband, spouse, or use many other descriptions. Could you tell me how you would categorize your relationship with your mate? Could you tell me how long you have been in the relationship with your mate, before to being separated by prison?
- b) Could you share how often you interact with your mate and how often you interact with him? Probe: by what means (in person, letter, by phone, etc.)?
- c) Please tell me how if at all, that you communicate with him?
- d) May I ask how long your mate has been in prison?
- e) Could you tell me what you think is special about your relationship with your mate?

- f) Could you describe what drew you into the relationship or what you admired about your mate?
- g) Now, may I ask what role your mate/name played in the relationship prior to his going to prison (i.e. father, part of household, boyfriend, significant other)?

### **Main Interview Questions**

1. IQ01: If you feel comfortable, could you share what separation, and loss, from your mate means to you (cross reference: SQ01)? Please provide this in detail.
2. IQ02: Sometimes events in our lives are *symbolic* representations. At times we may or may not place value on them, but these representations may hold symbolic meaning (cross reference: SQ03). To understand this symbolism as it relates to separation and loss from your mate, during the telephone scheduling of this interview, I invited you to select an item(s) that you would like to talk about (including photos, cards, or any item) that represented your relationship with your incarcerated loved one-- that you wanted to share. Did you bring an item that you would like to tell me about a symbolic item? If by phone, could you tell me about the item, and what it means to you?

### **Intermediate Questions**

3. IQ03: It is possible that life may or may not change for the woman who is physically apart from their incarcerated loved one. Sometimes separation and loss

is for the good—sometimes for the bad. I am interested in knowing about each of these experiences that you feel okay sharing (cross reference: SQ06).

3a. Could you describe what it means to be physically separated from your loved one?

3b. Some individuals experience stress when doing something for the first time. Could you tell me if you have visited the prison and if so, how it felt going the first time?

3c. Have any thoughts about prison changed?

3d. What, if anything was the most important change?

3e. How, if at all, have you changed since the incarceration of your loved one?

3f. Please, tell me how, if at all, your life may be different, if your loved was not in prison?

4. IQ04: Now please tell me how, if at all, your experiences of having your loved one incarcerated, affected you *socially* (i.e. friendships, family, church, job) (cross reference: SQ05)?

5. IQ05: The next question is related to your personal feelings separation and loss. As you think about your feelings about loss and what it means to you, if you feel comfortable sharing, how has this separation and loss affected your state of mind (*psychological*) or your thoughts, in general (cross reference: SQ04)?

5a. Try to recall when, if at all, did you first notice these feelings of loss.

5b. Could you also describe when and if things changed?

5c. During that time, were any thoughts, recurring?

5d. What do you think caused these thoughts?

6. IQ06: Finally, in your own words, could you describe, what, if any feelings of *grief*, you may have felt from this experience of separation and loss from your mate/his name (cross reference: SQ02)?

7. IQ07: Could you tell me how you cope with separation and loss from your mate/name (cross reference: SQ07)?

### **Closing Questions**

1. Please tell me how, if at all do you think your life would be different if your mate was never incarcerated?

2. Could you describe some of the fonder moments and happy times with your mate? (This question was added based on Charmaz's [2006] recommendation to close the interview with a happy reflection).

3. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

4. Are there any questions that you wish that I had asked you?

### **Closing out the Interview/Debrief (Script):**

Discuss next steps (e.g the data will be transcribed, and participant will be contacted if she chooses to answer follow-up questions if needed).

Explain Confidentiality

- Read and clarify referral list provided at the beginning of the interview to ensure understanding
- Point out contact information on the informed consent form for the researcher and University in case follow up is needed
- Discuss what happens to the research report
- Thank the participant, if appropriate receive follow-up information, and release her
- Check the recorders immediately. Mark/label the tapes
- Write down any follow-up notes

## Appendix B: Demographic Screening Questionnaire

Experiences of Separation and Loss: African American Women with an Incarcerated  
Mate

Interview Identifier/Code: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

The purpose of this form is to screen potential participants to ensure that they meet the criteria for the study.

This research is designed with the intent to minimize the risk to **human subjects**. My research is designed to focus specifically on the individuals who are ideally suited to answer this study's research question, without burdening others unnecessarily. Now, I would like for you to answer a few questions to determine if you are the best fit to participate in helping to answer this study's research questions through the interview process.

**Part to be read to the Participant:**

1. Participant must be a self-identified, English speaking, African American woman age of 18 or older; who lives in the Washington, D.C. area.
2. To participate, you must be in a relationship with an incarcerated mate or previously incarcerated mate (examples of relationships may include marriage, previous cohabitation, boyfriend, partner, or significant other).
3. Your mate has served (or is currently serving) a prison sentence of greater than one year in a state, federal, or privately operated prison facility.

**You cannot participate if (exclusion criteria):** You are a student, client, or employee of the researcher.

If you qualify to take part in this study and would like to participate in a private interview, I will schedule our interview at this time. On the day of the interview, I will further inform you of the study's detail by reading a form known as informed consent.

## Appendix C: Recruitment Flier

## Side 1

**Doctoral Research Study  
African American Women  
With an Incarcerated  
Mate**



Are you or is someone that you know an African American woman with a current or previously incarcerated mate? If so, please consider a interview with me to share your experiences- in a private, confidential manner.

This study will involve understanding African American women's experiences of loss and separation from their mate who is or was in prison. Focus is placed on psychological/emotional, physical, symbolic feelings of loss and any coping methods.

**Participants are asked to:**

- Pre-screening - (short)
- Provide informed consent (permission granted acknowledging any risks and benefits);Audio taped interviews
- Confidential 30 - 60 min. in-person or toll-free telephone interview (optional; 5 to 15 min. Q&A).
- Meet at an agreed upon place or by private telephone interview
- Share your experiences about separation and loss
- Optional; bring or discuss pictures, cards, or other artifacts that represents your loss and separation/relationship.
- Note: Voluntary Participation  
No compensation

**CONTACT THE RESEARCHER**

**Name: Avon Hart-Johnson,  
Walden University  
Email: [avon.hart-johnson@waldenu.edu](mailto:avon.hart-johnson@waldenu.edu)**



**VOLUNTEER  
PARTICIPANTS  
NEEDED  
FOR  
INTERVIEW**

**Study: Experiences of  
Separation & Loss: African  
American Women with an  
Incarcerated Mate**  
**IRB#nnnn**

## Side 2

**Are you a good fit for this study?**

- Are you an English speaking, African American woman over the age of 18?
- Do you live in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan area?
- To participate you must be in a relationship with an inmate (married to, previous cohabitation, girlfriend, or partner).
- Your mate must be currently or previously incarcerated in a state, federal, or privately operated penitentiary/prison.
- Your mate must be serving greater than a 1 year sentence
- For clarification and detail, contact the researcher - listed on this flier.

*What are the experiences of Loss & Separation for African American women, when they have an Incarcerated Mate?*

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**--A study about Loss & Separation – when a loved one is incarcerated**

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The location where this flyer has been placed is \*not\* affiliated with this study

If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 612-312-1210.



I am the only one who will access the raw data. However, you may request to review your research transcripts and you may request to review the finalized summarized research study as well.

No names or identities will be placed in the final research report. All data will be stored in a confidential manner.

**Contact the Researcher:**

**Researcher:**  
**Avon Hart-Johnson**  
[avon.hart-johnson@waldenu.edu](mailto:avon.hart-johnson@waldenu.edu)  
 Call: xxx.xxx.xxxx



## Appendix D: (NIH Training Certificate)



## Appendix E: Informed Consent Form

Researcher: Avon Hart-Johnson

The form that I am reading is called "informed consent." This form is used to obtain your consent or permission to take part in this study. You are being asked to take part in a research study. My study is about African American women who have been separated from their boyfriend, spouse, or significant other because he was sent to prison. Even if you agree to be in the study now, you can change your mind later. As a participant of the study, I will ask questions about your emotional or social experiences (such as how your mate being in prison has affected your experience with friends, family, work, etc.). I will also ask about what it is like to be physically apart from your loved one. I will ask about symbols of loss and being apart. For instance, if you bring a card or picture, I will ask if you would like to tell me about those items. I will also ask about how you cope with loss. If you agree to take part, you will be asked to answer questions that you feel at ease, answering. We can skip any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering.

- There is no penalty for not taking part in this study.
- Payment: There will be no money or payment for taking part in this study.
- The Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research study is to better understand African American women's psychological or emotional reactions to separation and loss from their incarcerated mate and to learn how this separation and loss affects other areas of their lives. This information may contribute to raising awareness of researchers about how experiences of separation and loss

affect a woman's well-being or how they cope. This information may help human services professionals, researchers, and others to better understand the nature of this type of separation –in hopes of developing programs that support women in similar circumstances.

#### Taking Part in the Study:

- Participant must be a self-identified, English speaking, African American woman age of 18 or older; who lives in the Washington, D.C. area.
- To participate, you must be in a relationship with an incarcerated mate or previously incarcerated mate (examples of relationships may include marriage, previous cohabitation, boyfriend, partner, or significant other).
- Your mate has served (or is currently serving) a prison sentence of greater than one year in a state, federal, or privately operated prison facility.

The exclusion criteria are indicated below:

- Participant is not a student, client, or employee of the researcher.

If you qualify, I would like to tell you more about this study to help you decide if you still wish to take part.

What happens during the interview?

- As indicated, I have provided you with a resource listing of mental health and community health services so that you may call, should you feel any discomfort today, or in the future, as a result from this interview.
- The session will last 30 to 60 minutes.

- The session will be audio taped
- We can also have a 10 to 15 minute period for questions and answers
- I will check with you often, to make sure that you are doing okay
- I will find out if you need to skip a question, or stop the interview
- Also, you were invited to bring pictures, cards, or anything that reminds you of your loved one. I will ask you questions about it. I will not keep these materials.
- A copy of this consent form will be provided to you

Also to help you decide if you still want to take part, here is a sample questions:

Life may or may not change for a woman who has an incarcerated loved one. Sometimes life can change for the good—sometimes for the bad, or not at all. I am interested in knowing about each of these experiences.

1. Please tell me about what, if any good experiences you may have had resulting from your incarcerated loved one? Please use as much detail as possible.
2. Could you also tell me about your bad experiences of having your loved one in prison?

Risks and Benefits:

- Some questions may spark memories. These memories could be unpleasant. Your thoughts may make you emotional, or you may feel stressed. If this discomfort takes place, we can stop the interview at any time. Risks may include some feelings of discomfort or unpleasant memories. I don't think it would be greater what is experienced than daily life. But, if you do feel more stress, I have

provided you with a resource list of mental health and community health services organizations. You may call speak with someone who can help. These services are free. I am providing this list to all individuals who participate in this study.

- Also, if, during the interview, you feel any distress, we can stop.
- The benefits of this research may include sharing your understanding about the effects of separation and loss from your incarcerated loved one. This information may help to raise awareness about the possible psychological and emotional effects of separation and loss on women with incarcerated mates. Your insights may also provide an understanding of how to cope with this loss. Each of these insights gained from this study may provide helping professionals and other researchers with an understanding of what is needed to develop better programs and services to support women who face similar experiences of separation and loss.

#### Privacy

- During this study, I am the only person who will ask you questions. I will make sure that it is done so in a private meeting room. I will not use your name in any report. Your signed form and any paper with your name on it will be safely stored. I will keep it that way until it is time to destroy it. Destruction usually takes place after 5 years. Your name will only be placed on a follow-up email list and your informed consent form. I will get rid of both documents, if you choose not to take part in the study.

- I will not include your name on any publicly used reports. I am the only one who will have access to all of the study data, except by my research supervisors. I will store all data under lock and key. I will keep computer files under password. I will destroy the data after 5 years.

Member Checking and Reviewing A Copy of the Results:

- I can provide you with a written copy of the typed results of the recorded interview if you would like to review it for correctness and completeness. If changes are needed, you may tell me at that time. This step is called member checking.
- You may also request to see a copy of the final study summary, once it is complete. I can provide you with these results by email or regular mail. If you would like to see either document, I will need your address or email to notify you.

Contacts and Questions:

- If you have concerns, you may ask any questions you have now - or later, you may contact the researcher via 555-555-5555 or [avon.hart-johnson@waldenu.edu](mailto:avon.hart-johnson@waldenu.edu).
- If you want to talk privately about your rights and concerns as a volunteer, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 612-312-1210.
- Walden University's approval number for this study is (IRB Approval No. 09-03-14-0178552). The date it expires: 09-04-2015.

**Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information. I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing/or replying with an e-mail that indicates: "I consent to this study," I understand that I agree to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Participant \_\_\_\_\_

Date of consent \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

## Letter of Invitation

Researcher: Avon Hart-Johnson, Walden University

Project Name: “Separation & Loss: African American Women with an Incarcerated Mate”

IRB Approval Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

You are being asked to take part in a research study on African American women with a mate/spouses/boyfriend who is or was in prison. I would like to learn about what it means to be apart from your incarcerated mate. You have been given this letter of invitation as a means of “snow-ball sampling.” I am sending this letter to you because you may have a mate who is or was in prison. If you do not, please disregard this letter. If you are interested in taking part, I will provide you with more details about this study and what is involved.

- **The Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research study is to better understand African American women’s psychological or emotional reactions to separation and loss from their incarcerated mate and to learn how this separation and loss affects other areas of their lives. This information may contribute to raising awareness about how experiences of separation and loss affect a woman’s well-being or how they cope. This information may help human services professionals, researchers, and others to better understand the nature of this type of separation –in hopes of developing programs that support women in similar circumstances.

Each person who takes part in the study will be told about the study in detail. To participate in a private interview, you will be asked to provide permission to take part (informed consent), and to take part in a 30 to 60 minute audio recorded interview.

**Taking Part in the Study:**

- Participant must be a self-identified, English speaking, African American woman age of 18 or older; who lives in the Washington, D.C. area.
- To participate, you must be in a relationship with an incarcerated mate or previously incarcerated mate (examples of relationships may include marriage, previous cohabitation, boyfriend, partner, or significant other).
- Your mate has served (or is currently serving) a prison sentence of greater than one year in a state, federal, or privately operated prison facility.

The exclusion criteria are indicated below:

- Participant is not a student, client, or employee of the researcher.

If you qualify, I would like to tell you more about this study to help you decide if you still wish to take part.

If you feel you are a good fit for this study, please call me the researcher, and I will provide you more detail about the study so that you can decide.

**Note on Privacy:**

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. I will not report your identity in any report. The only person who will have access to this study's information is my committee and I. Data will be kept secure and password protected. Hard copies (of the study materials) will be placed in a safe, along with any tapes from audio recording of interviews. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, and then, destroyed, as required by the university.

## Appendix F: Resource Listing

1	Washington DC VA Medical Center Mental Hygiene (116A)	50 Irving Street NW Washington, DC 20422	(202) 745-8156 (202) 755-6266
2	Washington Hospital Center Trinity Square	216 Michigan Avenue NE Washington, DC 20017-1095	(202) 877-6333
3	Providence Hospital Behavioral Health	1150 Varnum Street NE Washington, DC 20017-2104	(202) 269-7000
4	Andromeda Transcultural Health	1400 Decatur Street NW Washington, DC 20011-4343	(202) 291-4707
5	Deaf/Reach	3521 12th St NE Washington, DC 20017	(202) 832-6681
6	Hillcrest Children and Family Center	2570 Sherman Avenue NW	(202) 232-6100

### Appendix G: Example Memos and Jotting

I identified memos in Chapter 3 as having multiple purposes and forms for this study. Specifically, I used memos as analytic notes to capture theoretical propositions, and as field notes. I also created reflective memos to capture my thoughts and as a means of managing my biases (Charmaz, 2006). I captured my thoughts about the model and process flow, as well. The memo below is an *unedited* version that refers to the research gap discussed in the previous section. This memo was captured in NVivo software.

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#### Theoretical memo: Symbolic Loss

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I have been thinking about how many of the women discussed having photographs of their mate in prominent places at their homes or jobs. They also carried mementos and handy crafts from their mate around with them. One woman indicated that she *talked* to the objects. Other women indicated that although they have a picture of their mate up on the wall in their houses or other visible places, they often lie about his picture—about who he is. The reverence that these pictures hold reminded me of shrines that I see set up in beauty salons—where the iconic Buddha is sacrosanct. These icons hold a space of reverence in the salons, but no one speaks about them or goes near it as the incense is left quietly burning. One woman shared:

I just had a picture in my house. I don't have any courage.

Um, to a couple of people. Um, I was a cosmetologist at the time so it would get to the point where a lot of my customers just kind of knew the situation and I just would, you know, I had his picture up in there too. So it was just kind of you know, awkward, this picture of this man that no one ever sees, so it was explained.

It was – I just took it as, um, as long as they're up, my home is my home and that just reassured me that I had someone who loved me and you know, I didn't have to be out here still looking for love. I had someone who was thinking about me all the time.

This symbolism also reminds me of an article that I came across during my literature review (I think by Walter C. Long, JD) *Trauma Therapy for Death Row Families*. This author posits that families of death- row inmates not only contend with the trauma of the

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inmate's crime, that they have a shameful family secret that is metaphorically referred to as a family ghost. Although they have immense love for the inmate, they have equal if not greater shame because of the crime committed. They also take on the inmate's emotional states. When the inmate becomes anxious because the execution date draws near, the family feels that as well. However, shame associated with the crime is too heinous, too stressful to speak about; therefore, it is best to let him go unnamed or not discussed. This helps to explain the deep love the women have for their mate, but also the shame they feel. How do you describe loving a criminal? How do you rationalize and justify what they have done to friends and family? It becomes the family secret – the family ghost.

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## Appendix H: Summary of Participant Responses

Table A.1

Research Subquestions	Coded Responses	<i>n</i>
SQ01: What is the process and theory that explains how African American women perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate?	Symbolic Imprisonment, grief, and coping theory (SIG-C)	20
SQ02: How if at all do African American women Perceive their experiences of separation and loss from their incarcerated mate as symbolic loss?	VICARIOUS IMPRISONMENT  Experiencing Physical Isolation/locked up	18
SQ03: How if at all do African American women Perceive their experiences of separation and Loss from their incarcerated mate as physical loss?	Being Labeled as Incarcerated Feeling Psychologically imprisoned Confined  Feeling criminalized and held hostage Vicarious Imprisonment	6
SQ03: How if at all do African American women Perceive their experiences of separation and Loss from their incarcerated mate as physical loss?	Social Isolation Emulating the Mate's physical and mental state	
SQ05: How if at all do African American women Perceive their experiences of separation and Loss from their incarcerated mate as psychological loss?	PSYCHOSOCIAL (PS) IMPACTS  Negative Psychological impacts: Stressed Feeling depressive symptoms Feeling Shamed Feeling shunned Worn down from multiple incarcerations Recognizing deception	19  17 5
	Angered	16
	Negative Social: Guilt by Association Hiding relationship	15
	No PS Impact: Meaningless-just a hook-up	2
	Positive: Enhanced self-worth Redefined relationship Receiving support	14

Table A.1continues		
SQ06: How if at all do African American women Perceive their experiences of separation and Loss from their incarcerated mate as resultant grief?	TO EXPERIENCING THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE	16
	Feeling like somebody died	12
	Experiencing Depression	5
	Feeling Shame	18
	Feeling Shocked	5
	Denying that it was happening	12
	Bargaining, denial, God can fix this	13
	Feeling stressed	9
	Feeling guilty	15
	Feeling lost	8
	Angered	15
SQ07: What, if any, are the coping strategies used by African American women with an incarcerated mate?	USING METAPHORIC RITUALS AND OTHER COPING STRATEGIES	16
	Engaging in rituals	16
	Drugs/Alcohol/Sex With others	12
	Maintaining strict order and Control	6
	God/Faith	9
	Familial support	9
EQ01: What is the process that initiates/triggers symbolic Imprisonment?	SEPARATION/LOSS/GUILT/SHAME/and STIGMA	16
EQ02: What is the process that maintains symbolic Imprisonment?	CHARISMATIC/CONTROLLING- MATE ENCOUNTERS	16
	Romance & Charm	11
	A Way with words	11
	Manipulating, brainwashing,	9
	Controlling	9
	Brainwashing, Lying & Cheating	9
	Depends on Me	12
	Idealized Mate	8

Note: Select responses were provided to illustrate the magnitude of supporting evidence found.

Appendix I: Theoretical Model Detail

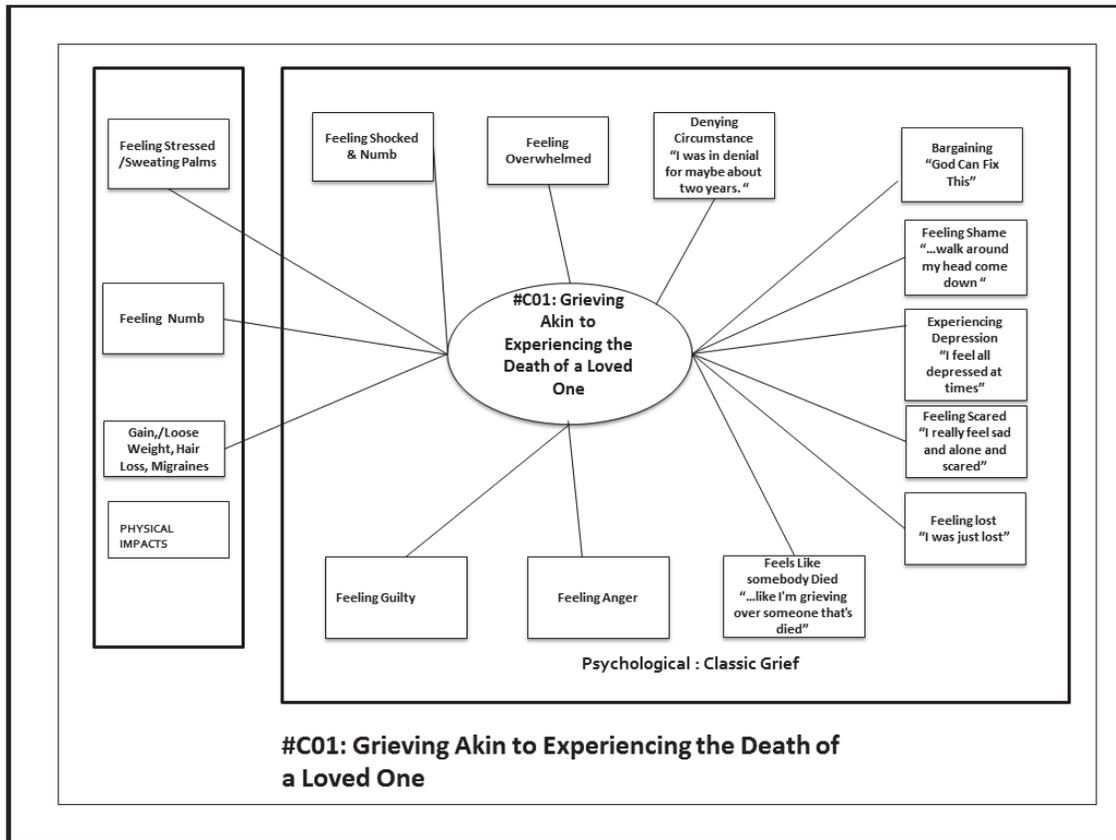


Figure 2 I.1 Grief, akin to experiencing the death of a loved one

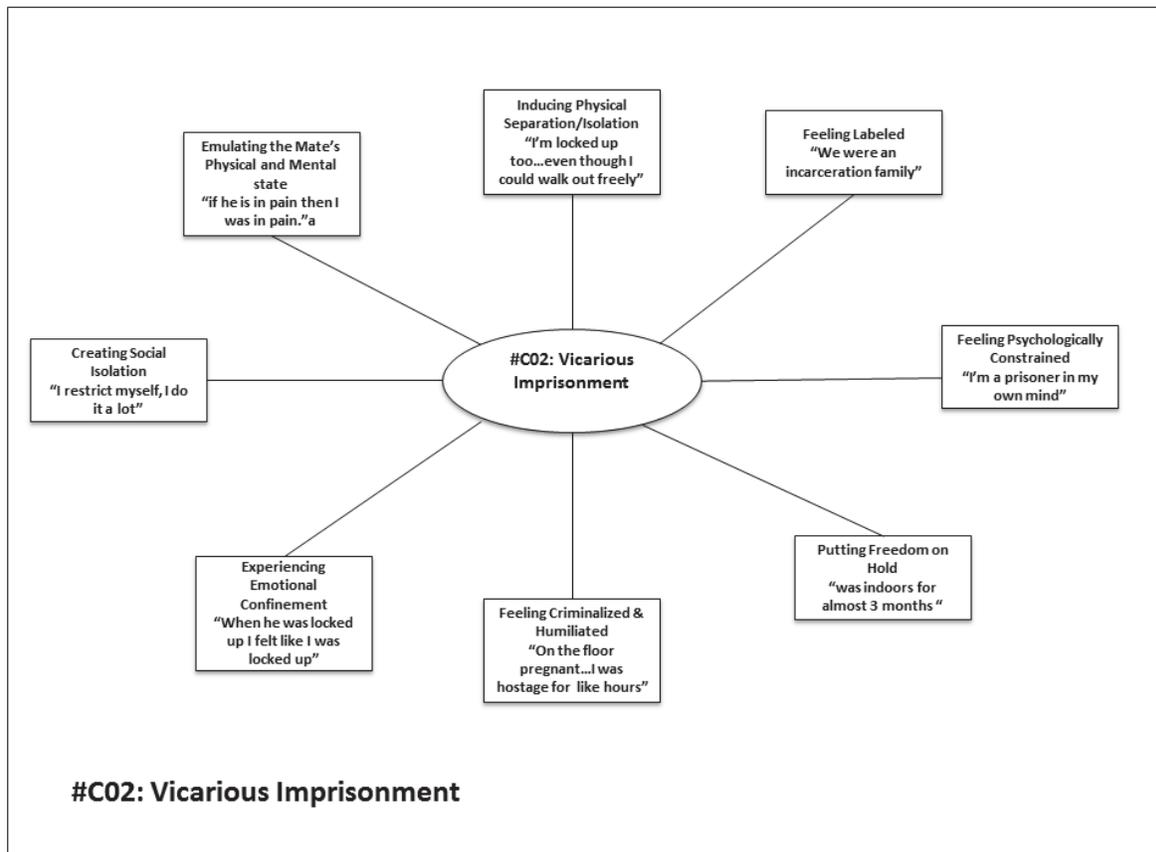


Figure 3 Vicarious Imprisonment

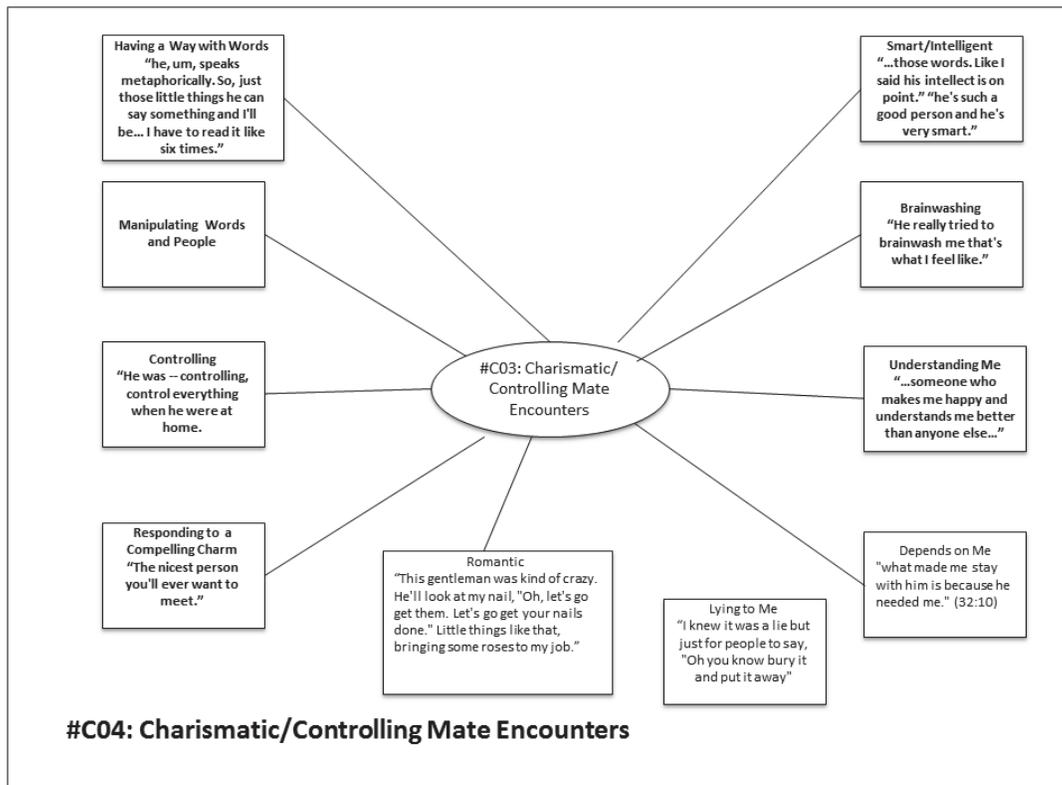


Figure 4 Charismatic and controlling mate encounters

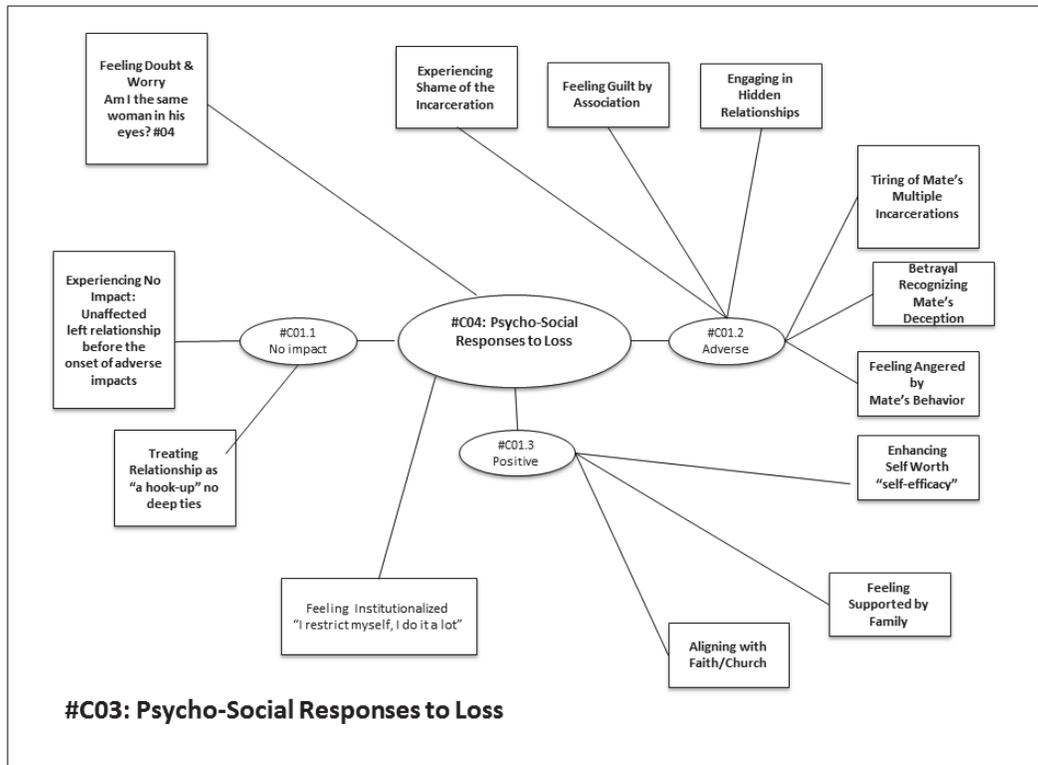


Figure 5 Psychosocial impacts

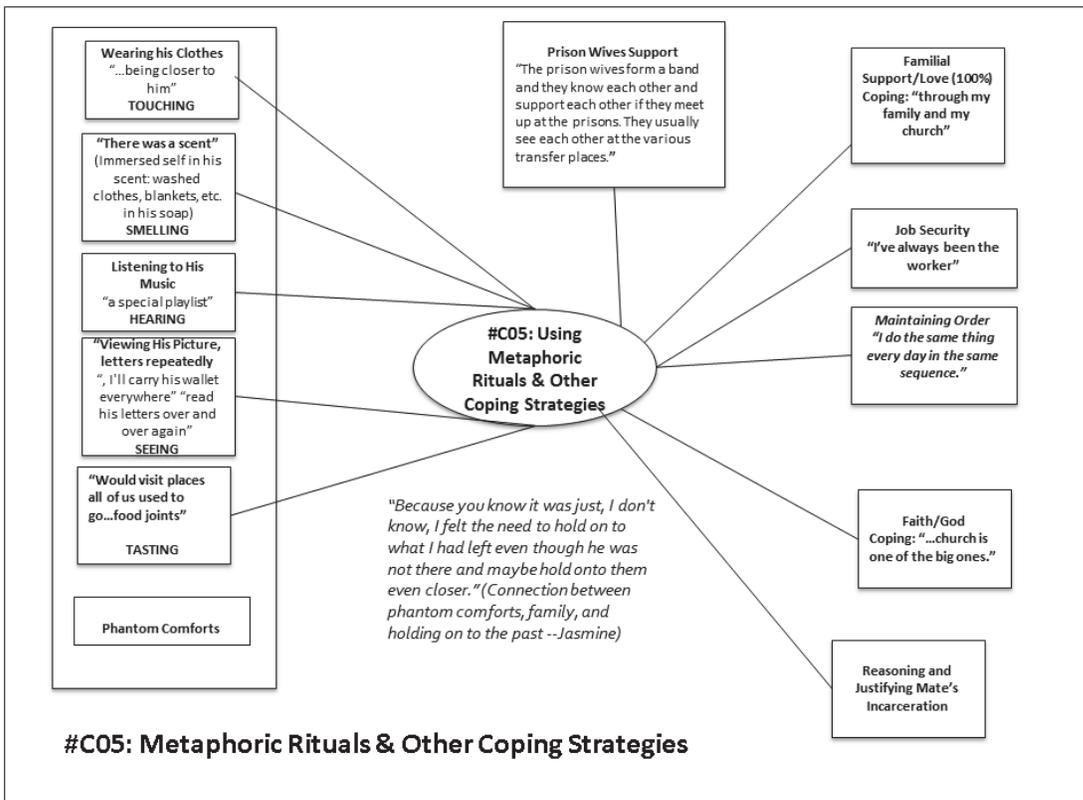


Figure 6 Metaphoric rituals and other coping strategies

## Appendix J: Code Book

Table A.2 Code book detail

*#C01: Grieving akin, to experiencing the death of a loved one*

Participant response (in vivo text)	Code (gerunds)
“On the day that I found out about him going to prison, I was in shock.”	Feeling in shock & numb
“We were shocked for a while, but that is the kind of stuff that that ole’ family would do”	
It was pandemonium. I froze. I was totally upset, numb.”	Denying that it was happening
“...I was in denial for maybe about two years. “He's looking at doing some serious time and my mind was just battling with my heart telling my heart like no this is not true....“I was telling to myself, [Mate Name], is going to find some way to get his self out of this mess.”	Bargaining, God can Fix this Feeling Physically Stressed
“God Almighty was the only one who could fix this”	Feeling Guilty (trigger)
“I've been stressing. I can show you my hair. I have bald spots everywhere because right now I am physically stressed”	Feeling Anger
“Because I felt guilty that we were still living and he's locked up.”	Feeling lost
“Yeah. Well, I—I still feel anger. I still feel a lot of anger. Umm. I got lots of it”	Feeling alone
“...it really made me feel like I was just lost and alone with my thoughts.”	Feels Like somebody Died
“I really feel sad and alone”	Experiencing Depression
“...like I'm grieving over someone that's died. You	

Participant response (in vivo text)	Code (gerunds)
<p>know, he's right there, he is alive. But that's how I feel sometimes. I do feel like in essence he is gone.”</p>	<p>Feeling Shame (trigger to VI)</p>
<p>“Grief being um, you know the feeling of depression, I feel all depressed at times.”</p>	<p>Feeling Scared Stressed; seating palms, Numbness</p>
<p>“Of course I feel it, when it first happen I wouldn't talk about I wouldn't tell nobody and you know like there and like the, say how you say, it's a <i>walk around my head come [hanging] down</i> and then now I came to my senses and say, "Okay why I'm doing this?</p>	
<p>”I really feel sad and alone and scared and just by myself a lot. I feel all by myself a lot and, um, it's not a comfortable place at all.”</p>	

Table A.2 continues

#CO2: *Vicarious imprisonment*

Participant Response (In Vivo Text)	Code (gerunds)
<i>"I'm locked up too...even though I could walk out freely"</i>	Inducing Physical Separation/Isolation
"We were an incarceration family"	Feeling Labeled as Incarcerated
"I'm a prisoner in my own mind"	Feeling Psychologically Constrained
"...was indoors for 3 months"	Putting Freedom on Hold
"...lasers [from SWAT teams' guns] pointing through the window... I'm lying on the floor pregnant...I was hostage for like hours"	Feeling criminalized and Humiliated
"When he was locked up I felt like I was locked up"	Experiencing Emotional Constraints: Vicarious Incarceration
"we were in prison, and we should have broke [free]" "I restrict myself, I do it a lot" "I experienced being disassociated from everyone else as far as I've been"	Creating Social Isolation
"If he was in pain then I was in pain"	Emulating the Mate's physical and mental state

*Table A.2 continues**#CO3: Responding to charismatic and controlling mate encounters*

Participant Response (In Vivo Text)	Code (gerunds)
“This gentleman was kind of crazy. He'll look at my nail, "Oh, let's go get them. Let's go get your nails done." Little things like that, bringing some roses to my job.”	Romance
“It, it just sometimes it's just the little things because he, um, speaks metaphorically. So, just those little things he can say something and I'll be... I have to read it [letter] like six times.”	Having a Way with Words
“Or whether he's on the street because he . . .and he can manipulate words, he can manipulate words and he can manipulate people.”	Manipulating Words and People
“He was -- controlling, control everything when he were at home.	Controlling
“The nicest person you'll ever want to meet.”	Responding to a Compelling Charm
“he's such a good person and he's very smart.”	Smart/Intelligent
“He really tried to brainwash me that's what I feel like.”	Brainwashing
“...someone who makes me happy and understands me better than anyone else...”	Understanding Me
“I knew it was a lie but just for people to say, ‘Oh you know bury it and put it away’ I buried it. I put it away. I forgave him.”	Lying to me

*Table A.2 continues*

*#C04: Psycho responses to loss*

Participant Response (In Vivo Text)	Code (gerunds)
<p>“I went through the, uh, depression. I lost weight. I gained weight. I was sick”</p>	<p>Feeling Depressive symptoms</p>
<p>“I’d be at home. I don’t be out in streets”            “I restrict myself, I do it a lot” “because why should I be comfortable if he's uncomfortable?”</p>	<p>Feeling institutionalization, (shaped and transformed by the self-inflicted confinement)</p>
<p>“That first Christmas that he was gone, I mean I have two small children at that point. And we didn't do Christmas because I felt guilty because he wasn't able to do Christmas. I mean, it get to the point to where I won't to sleep in our bed until he got out. I sleep on the couch because why should I be comfortable if he's uncomfortable? Because he always said that he was doing this stuff for his family. And so, I just feel like not that I didn't deserve to be happy but if he is in pain then I was in pain.”</p>	
<p>Like I know jail... the jail can definitely change a person. It can change him a lot. So, I was scared like, "Oh! Man. Is this guy going to be the same guy I fell in love with?"</p>	<p>Feeling doubt and Worry- Will we/I/he be the same?</p>
<p>“We were an incarceration family”</p>	<p>Feeling Guilt by Association</p>

Participant Response (In Vivo Text)	Code (gerunds)
<p>“I wouldn't go into detail where he was. I just had a picture in my house.”</p> <p>“Of course I feel it, when it first happen I wouldn't talk about I wouldn't tell nobody and you know like there and like the, say how you say, it's a <i>walk around my head come down</i> and then now I came to my senses and say, "Okay why I'm doing this?”</p>	<p>Experiencing the shame of the relationship; Feeling a need to hide the relationship from social circles</p>
<p>“I mean, he has been arrested a few times. We didn't know that.”</p>	<p>Tiring of mate's multiple incarcerations and mate's criminal behavior</p>
<p>“But at the end of the day, it still was a limitation when it came to me because I have certain boundaries. Now that I know what boundaries are, I didn't know that meant when I was younger. But my thing is that because he went to prison, he decided that he wanted to sell drugs”</p>	
<p>“I just blanked out the boyfriend being locked up and was solely concentrated on my son's situation.”</p>	
<p>When I finally had intercourse I felt empty and guilty afterwards, like I had a void and no matter how much sex I had it wasn't being filled. I later realized I didn't want to "date", I didn't want a "sex buddy" or boyfriend, I just wanted to be held and to have a shoulder to lean on.</p>	<p>Feeling Empty: Engaging in hidden relationships (tie to coping)</p>

Participant Response (In Vivo Text)	Code (gerunds)
<p>“I knew it was a lie but just for people to say, "Oh you know bury it and put it away" I buried it. I put it away. I forgave him.”</p>	<p>Recognizing mate’s deception (betrayal)</p>
<p>“I still feel anger. I still feel a lot of anger. I have a personal vendetta against [Incarcerated Mate], I feel some type a way towards him. “</p>	<p>Feeling angered by Mate’s behavior</p>
<p>“It’s changed quite a bit. I—you know, when he got incarcerated I went and I started a new career”</p>	<p>Enhancing Self-worth/Self-efficacy and change</p>
<p>“I’ve always been the worker. That’s why I always had the job”</p>	
<p>“I’m very into working out and fitness and that’s actually helped me get through this.”</p>	
<p>“...the family were really supportive until he got out and did the same thing again”</p>	<p>Feeling Supported by friends and family (also linked to coping)</p>
<p>“And um, eventually there were about 3 of them—family members—that I could speak with. And you know it’s almost like the rest kind of shunned you.”</p>	
<p>“Unaffected, left the relationship before any impacts”</p>	<p>Treating Relationship as just a hook-up – no</p>

Table A.2 continues

## #C05: USING METAPHORIC RITUALS AND OTHER COPING STRATEGIES

Participant Response (In Vivo Text)	Code (gerunds)
Phantom –Comfort from the Mate that Appease the Senses	
Wearing his Clothes: “...being closer to him”	Wearing his clothing (Touching)
“[I]had a little friend. I mean, you know, a vibrator.”	
“There was a scent... I wash my clothes in it. And I wash my pillowcases and my bedspreads with it”	There was a scent (Smelling)
“A special playlist...special songs that he liked”	I listen to his playlist (Hearing)
“, I'll carry his wallet everywhere I go with his ID[picture]”	Carrying his photo wherever I go (Seeing)
I winded up getting into some trouble selling drugs just trying to you know be cool, I guess if that's what you'd say (02)”	Indulging in Alcohol/Drugs/Food (Tasting)
I don't know, I just -- maybe sometimes [inaudible] alcohol (15)	
“to cope, we used to visit the places that all of us used to go - that would make us feel better. -like food joints, etc.”	

Participant Response (In Vivo Text)	Code (gerunds)
<i>Other Coping</i>	
“My family is my -- actually the family were really supportive until he got out and did the same thing again.”	Familial Support
Coping: “...church is one of the big ones.”	Faith/God
“I’ve always been the worker”	Job Security
“I do the same thing every day in the same sequence.”	Maintaining Order/The one thing that I have control over – automatic mode
“Felt that I was in robotic mode – in a fog, you got to do it. A child is depending on you – you’ve got all the things to take care of on the outside- you don’t want to do it, <i>you have to do it!</i> <i>That is the one thing I have control over.</i> ”	
“The prison wives form a band and they know each other and support each other if they meet up at the prisons. They usually see each other at the various transfer places.”	Having Affairs Prison Wives Support

## Appendix K: Newspaper Ad

**Sample Research Flier – News Paper (optional)**

**Note: This size add costs \$3,000.00 for 30 days. If the IRB does not accept this format, then I will not use this add. Add placed in the Washington DC area paper.**

**Doctoral Research Study**

On: African American Women with an Incarcerated mate.

***Do you or someone you know have a mate, boyfriend, or spouse in prison or has served greater than one year in prison?***

**Recruitment Criteria for a confidential interview:** English speaking African American Women age 18 yrs or older. Able to provide permission to take part in study (informed consent) take part in a 30 – 60 min interview and a questions and answer period. There is no payment for this study.

**Benefits/Risks:** Benefits include sharing your story and informing researchers of your experiences with separation and loss. Risks could include minor discomfort recalling memories of the past.

**Interview type: Private meeting/ or by telephone**

## Appendix L: Curriculum Vitae

# AVON HART-JOHNSON

✦ **PH.D. [2014](HUMAN SERVICES COUNSELING)** ✦ **M.A.(INFORMATION SYSTEMS**

**MANAGEMENT)** ✦ **M.A.(FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY)** *Professor* ✦ *Consultant* ✦

*Presenter* ✦ *Project Manager*

Dedicated, dynamic, and driven, leader; combining research experience as a Ph.D. in Human Services Counseling candidate, with demonstrated excellence in Information Technology Management, and a passion for Forensic Psychology. Seasoned project manager with proven track record of complex project implementations. Dynamic instructor, facilitator, and presenter, with several years of serving as mentor, board member, presidential inauguration teams, community volunteer, and in leadership roles.

## SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS

- Presenter and workshop facilitator;
- Experience with television and radio interviews;
- Community outreach representative (trained to convey difficult information to disgruntle constituents);
- Versatile leadership style with proven ability to apply skills across multiple domains;
- Project scheduler for presidential inaugural entertainment committee and technology team member for multiple inaugurations;
- Current adjunct professor who provides instruction from an approved curriculum; develops lessons associated with the lecture materials, handouts, and visual aids (online and face to face);
- University evaluator for undergraduate experiential learning portfolios; assessing for college credit;
- Life skills curriculum developer and training facilitator for a half-way house for female offenders;
- Project manager for the successful implementation of multi-year geospatial information system technology for multiple regions; with a project team of 115 members;
- Excellent interpersonal skills, ability to communicate complex information to multi-domain audiences.

## CORE COMPETENCIES & SKILLS

- Project Management
- Strategic Planning
- Training Design & Development
- Business Process Redesign
- Life Skills Coach
- Skilled Presenter
- Change Management Specialist
- Qualitative Analysis
- Feasibility Studies
- Policy & Procedures Development

#### SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS OF COURSES TAUGHT

#### **Ethics, Compliance, & Civil Treatment Training for Human Resource Managers**

Curriculum focuses how to train organizational managers to prevention: work place bullying, harassment, while increasing cultural sensitivity and diversity. This course teaches managers how to build trust and collaboration in the workplace.

#### **Cultural Awareness & Diversity**

This class focused on development of cultural sensitivity, knowledge and skills that contribute to effective organizational goals.

#### **Life Skills 101**

Designed, developed, and administered proprietary life skills training curriculum for forensic populations. Particular attention was paid to readability and ease of use for the diverse population of ex-offenders and returning citizens. Workshops included role-play, group discussion, and a variety hands-on activity that focused on communication, problem management, self-esteem building, financial management, and enhancing interpersonal skills.

#### **Advanced Microsoft Applications (CMST 303)**

Provided instruction, theory, and application of advanced office application features to produce documents, applying best practices and principles for professional and personal communication

#### **Fundamentals of Digital Media (CMST 295)**

Teach students to effectively apply relevant theories, practices, and principles when designing and developing works of digital media. Students learn to examine the different processes, career paths, and technologies in the digital media industry. Additionally, facilitates the discussion of how ethical principles and legal guidelines apply in the digital media industry.

**SharePoint 2010 – Fundamentals and System Administration**

Designed, developed, and administered course curriculum for basic and system administrator training. This class design included the use of multi-media, audio-visual training modules--with portability for virtual classroom access.

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**TEACHING EXPERIENCE**


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**University of Maryland University College ✦ Online ✦ 2011 - Present**

**Adjunct Professor**

- **Align teaching and facilitation to the appropriate level**—The application of Bloom's taxonomy ensures that the course is taught at the appropriate cognitive level. This ensures that I am not teaching an introductory course at a level beyond your students' abilities or, conversely, teaching an advanced course at too low a level.
- **Monitor student progress**—Assignments are split up or staged in the syllabus. I create the course shell, syllabus, assignments, exams and special projects. Deadlines are spaced at optimal dates to challenge students without sacrificing their quality time to read and digest the information. Each topic builds upon foundational information.
- **Evaluate Undergraduate Experiential Learning Portfolios:** Assess student professional and life skills as they equate to college credits. Essentially, I determine how students may earn an advanced standing towards furthering their degree.
- **Develop topics for class discussions**— Based on desired objectives, I establish Learning Activities for virtual discussions. On-line and hybrid courses are largely dependent upon stimulating and intriguing topics to maintain a virtual learning environment that is collaborative and meaningful. These discussions reinforce the course objectives, concepts, skills, and competencies desired for mastery.

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**INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY CONSULTING**


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**NTT Data Federal ✦ Washington, D.C. ✦ 2011 - Present**

**Senior Systems Engineer/Consultant, Pension Benefits Guaranty Cooperation**

- Project Management responsibilities include risk assessment, feasibility studies, focus group research, requirements analysis, and system design/configuration consultation.
- Designs, develops, and administrates technology training for broad range of professionals, including auditors, actuaries, auditors, attorneys, and other professionals.
- Maintains SharePoint as system administrator and knowledge management support specialist.
- Develops reports, lessons learned, strategic and technology implementation plans, statement of work, requirements specification documents, and other technical documentation.

**NTT Data Federal ✦ Washington, D.C. ✦ 2013-2014 – Contract based**

**Transition Project Manager, Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC)**

- Project Management responsibilities, status reporting, document management, transition close-out activities and knowledge transfer responsibilities
- Utilized business process analysis to map as-is and to-be processes and conducted gap assessment with recommendations.
- Established training requirements, metrics, and managed resources for successful transition from previous contracting staff to incoming staff

**PROFESSIONAL CHRONOLOGY**

**Manager, Geospatial Information Systems (GIS) ✦ Washington, D.C. ✦ 2005- 2010**

**Project Manager/Systems Integrator**

- **Leadership:** Managed staff of over 10 individuals, virtual project team, and overseas management and project teams;
- **Reporting:** Advised senior and executive management on project status, risks, and recommendations.
- **Strategic Planning:** Devised GIS enterprise strategic plan including assessing the organization's business needs mapping future vision to GIS enterprise deployment strategy.
- **Communication:** Attended public service commission meetings, provided mandated regulatory based progress reports and provided expert advice to legal counsel. Communications representative for constituency community forums.
- **Business Process Redesign:** Examined Operations and Engineering current state and designed future state to enhance productivity, reduce new construction design cycle time, and streamline business processes to increase utilization of GIS as a intrinsic business tool for a plethora of business uses beyond Operations and Engineering, including Emergency Preparedness, Environment, Forestry, Corporate Communications, and Transmission business units.
- **Project Management:** Over 15 years of project management experience. Highly proficient in complex problem solving, technical writing, leading project teams, and managing multi-million dollar, highly visible projects. Extensive experience managing multiple simultaneous projects for internal clients, while serving as GIS consultant across the organization.
- **Business Applications Integration:** Telecommunications, Network Operating Center, SAP, Smartgrid, WMIS, Customer Information Systems, and Energy Management System.

**Manager Design Services ✦ Washington, D.C. ✦ 2003 - 2005**

**Quality Assurance Specialist**

- **Document Management System Implementation:** Project manager for engineering based document management and imaging system. Developed requirements specifications, gap assessment, and system implementation strategy. Directed project team in the development of hardware requirements, including plotters, printers, scanners, and integration with CADD systems.
- **Workflow Applications:** Designed, developed and deployed Lotus Notes Accident Reporting System to support OSHA reporting of near-miss and job related accidents. Developed workflow application to manage configuration changes and software versions.
- **ROI/Business Case:** Prepared ROI, identified business opportunities, prioritized needs, constructed GIS program, defined project control, developed project budget, estimated business benefits, created benefits

## Manager Human Resources Information System ✦ Washington, D.C. ✦ 2000 - 2003

### Technology Expert and Business Leader

- **Human Resource Information System Implementation:** Project Manager for PeopleSoft HR and Payroll implementation.
- **Project Leader:** Successfully led project team in conversion of a legacy system and interfaces to PeopleSoft platform. Oversaw project team work specific to fit/gap assessment, business process analysis, infrastructure design, application development, data conversion and validation, test case development and testing, production implementation, and post implementation support. Implemented help desk and issues management system. Interface design included successfully developing a strategy and establishing a T1 private-line circuit for site to site communications Pepco Holdings, Inc., Washington DC and AON Benefits, Finley Ohio.
- **Oversee Special Executive Projects:** Worked on special human research projects; managed staffing center, payroll and benefits information systems, training, labor relations systems, worked with legal and the unions to ensure disciplinary systems were properly managed and instituted. Developed systems to manage employee displacement and severance.

### SELECTED PRESENTATIONS

- **Conserving Energy.** *Ward Five Community, Washington, D.C.*
- **PHI Mentoring.** *University of Maryland, College Park, MD*
- **Dynamic Outage Maps.** *U. S. Department of Energy, Washington, D.C.*
- **Life Skills.** *Central Union Mission – Life Skills, Washington, D.C.*
- **Automated Sectionalizing and Restoration System.** *DOE, Capitol Hill, Washington, D.C.*
- **GIS Strategy.** *Public Service Commission, Washington, D.C.*

### PUBLICATIONS

- ❖ **Hart-Johnson, A.** (2014). *Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Human Services: People, Space, and Location.* (Monograph, confirmed for December 2014)

publication)

- ❖ **Hart-Johnson, A.** (2014). *Going the Distance*. "Carrying the Dissertation Torch" (confirmed for December 2014 publication)

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#### PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

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- ❖ National Human Services Honor Society, Tau Epsilon Alpha – Alpha Chi, President elect (2015) and member
- ❖ Golden Key International Honor Society, Director of Social Media