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Cultivating communities of care: A qualitative investigation of the communication of support among incarcerated women

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ABSTRACT

In 2014, a female-only detention and re-entry facility was restructured to implement new rehabilitative philosophies rooted in strategies to prepare incarcerated women for successful transition into society. A specialized housing unit called incentive-based housing (IBH) was created within this facility to promote an environment of accountability and responsibility. Here, women are expected to be proactive in seeking and achieving successes through programming, all while offering support to one another. In this study, participant observations and interviews were used to understand how 12 incarcerated women living in IBH communicate support. This qualitative study revealed three forms of support being communicated: (a) accountability, (b) validation, and (c) compassion. This study also revealed forms of communication that complicate support, including (a) drama and (b) rivalry. Communication of support is important to consider as we devise new approaches to rehabilitation within America's criminal justice system.

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The United States incarcerates more people than any other nation in the world, with 2.3 million currently imprisoned across 3,163 local jails, 1,719 state prisons, and various other incarceration facilities.¹ The current state of our “incarceration nation”² has sparked a national debate as to how the criminal justice system should function as an institution of justice. More importantly, “a bipartisan consensus has begun to emerge around the painful truth that the US criminal justice system is broken.”³ In 2005, a community of communication scholars united to form a collective known as Prison Communication Activism Research and Education (PCARE) with the shared goal of investigating the crises of criminal justice in America.⁴ The coalition has worked to support imprisoned populations in their efforts to rebuild their lives, to become citizens who exercise agency, and to make a difference in their communities.⁵ This research is inspired by PCARE's call to put democracy into practice through artistic, educational initiatives with prisoners. We join activists, scholars, and educators in exploring how rehabilitation can function within incarceration settings as a site for change.

In this study, we explore how incarcerated women living together in jail function as a community, specifically through the communication of support. In order to understand incarceration through the eyes of those experiencing it, we listened to the voices of incarcerated women to better understand their communicative processes in a newly instituted rehabilitation program. Specifically, this qualitative research focuses on how incarcerated women currently living in an incentive-based housing (IBH) unit communicate in ways to offer, undermine, and complicate the social support they offer one another, and what implications this communication might have in terms of their rehabilitation.

Understanding rehabilitation behind bars: a rationale

Research reveals that, vital to the success of rehabilitation, is the degree to which individuals participate and support one another in the process. In the most recent report published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) in 2005, 52 percent of prisoners have access to vocational training, 77 percent of incarcerated people can earn a General Education Diploma behind bars, and 35 percent of institutions offer college courses.⁶ It is evident that progress has been made when comparing these statistics to a report by BJS in 1984, where only 23 percent of prisoners were enrolled in academic programming and a mere 10 percent received vocational training.⁷ Regardless, 1.1 million incarcerated people remain without access to vocational training and over a half a million prisoners have no access to education. These numbers are difficult to accept when evidence proves the effectiveness of rehabilitation programming for reducing recidivism. In the most comprehensive meta-analysis of correctional education programming to date, a 2013 report revealed that educational programming plays a critical role in reducing recidivism; researchers discovered prisoners who participate in education programs were 43 percent less likely to recidivate over those who did not.⁸ It is clear that we must focus on the most efficient methods for programming intervention to help prepare incarcerated people for re-entry into society. In other words, we must first define what rehabilitation is.

Rehabilitation is defined as “any discourse or practices that speak to transforming or normalizing the criminal into a socially defined non-deviant citizen.”⁹ Rehabilitation is often viewed as a positive transformation that informs individuals of their capabilities beyond crime and encourages change prior to reentering society. Programming offers individuals opportunities to reconstruct their identities and provides them agency to imagine and live a better life than the one they lived prior to incarceration.¹⁰ Before earning the chance at rehabilitation opportunities, individuals must often prove to jail staff that they feel remorse for the crime(s) committed, that they will not continue to break the law, and that they deserve to spend their sentence more productively.¹¹ If successful, individuals in some institutions are offered rehabilitation opportunities that are intended to foster transformation through various types of programs.

Correctional rehabilitation programs are vocational, educational, or psychosocial in nature. Educational prison programs have yielded positive results, with incarcerated students being less likely to recidivate and more likely to have a fluid transition back into society.¹² Vocational programs often mimic professions on the “outside” (e.g., gardeners, cooks, and seamstresses), offering individuals opportunities to learn and re-learn practical, real-world skills that can help them find a career upon release. In addition to educational and vocational courses, individuals have opportunities to participate in psychosocial

courses. These programs focus on personal growth and social support (e.g., codependency classes, alcoholics anonymous, and other groups). In more resourced facilities, programs are plentiful enough to provide individuals focused attention towards addressing their specific needs for personal growth.¹³

Rehabilitative programs help individuals reclaim their lives and offer opportunities to grow alongside others in a supportive network, surrounded by others who are also seeking rehabilitation. For instance, prisoners who participate in group activities such as singing in a choir or participating in team sports learn vital social skills such as sportsmanship, leadership, and comradery.¹⁴ Additionally, communication courses have been proven to foster a space for incarcerated students to share, learn, and grow, while developing critical communication skills.¹⁵ Given the chance to write their first poem or give their first speech, incarcerated students have said that this work “has left them glowing with a new sense of purpose and possibility.”¹⁶ Further, in her study following a prison newspaper, Novek explains that “the recognition of their shared fate binds them together in understanding and solidarity.”¹⁷ Ultimately, there is a need for constructing stronger *communities of care* to function as support systems for incarcerated populations.¹⁸

Individuals living in reformatories offer unique insights through their communication with one another, as they may or may not be responsive to the goals of rehabilitation in preparing for successful re-entry into society; engagement in rehabilitation programs is not a guarantee. Costs and rewards of behaviors learned outside of incarceration can impact willingness to participate. For example, individuals’ feelings of pride or shame, as well as interactions with other prisoners, partners, family members, and friends can facilitate or restrict their engagement.¹⁹ Individuals’ participation may also be hindered by experiences of trauma and the challenging situations they have faced before incarceration.²⁰ The degree to which individuals participate and support one another is therefore vital to the rehabilitation process, and the forms of support that individuals communicate with one another is worth exploration.

Understanding social support behind bars

Social support was first conceptualized in the 1970s after linguistic and psychology scholars discovered a connection between social support, stress, and well-being.²¹ During this time, social support was defined as information that leads people to believe that they are “cared for and loved, esteemed, and a member of a network of mutual obligations.”²² Since then, scholars have expanded this conceptualization of social support to study a range of contexts with the goal of understanding how social relationships moderate physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Communication scholars have made great strides in understanding how social support is enacted through social interactions. Burleson established the importance of taking a communicative lens to social support, arguing that supportive messages are fundamentally rooted in human interaction.²³ Since initial conceptualizations of social support, communication scholars have expanded the definition to include “verbal and nonverbal behavior that influences how providers and recipients view themselves, their situations, the other, and their relationship.”²⁴ Ultimately, seeking, receiving, and providing support have been well established as significant communicative processes.

Communication scholars have been called upon to consider the various complexities that might impact the way social support is conceptualized.²⁵ As of now, only one study exists that explores the intersectionality of prison populations and social support through a communicative lens.²⁶ This comprehensive study discovered inconsistencies between current social support literature and how individuals sentenced to life in prison communicate support, ultimately finding that current social support research is ungeneralizable to prison populations. While prior scholarship can shed light on how support might be constructed or manipulated by individuals, no communication study considers how support is communicated and complicated among incarcerated individuals living within a rehabilitative housing unit. Incarceration is certainly a life event that most would deem stress-inducing, providing a significant context for understanding how social support is communicated.

A critical organizational communication lens

PCARE scholars have urged colleagues to conduct critical examinations of the state of our nation's criminal justice system through focused communication research efforts.²⁷ Communication scholars offer a valuable perspective in understanding of incarceration, specifically through a constitutive approach that indicates the ways individuals make sense of their sentence in and through communication. Individuals interact in ways that their social realities are sustained (or not) depending on the quality, context, and consistency of those interactions.²⁸ By utilizing communication theory as a lens for investigating the ways that incarcerated individuals communicate support, we can better assess their perspectives on rehabilitative programming. Further, by inquiring about specific communicative moments in community contexts, we gain insight into forms of supportive communication that foster transformation within an incarcerated population.

At the same time, we know that members of organizations generally, and individuals within a rehabilitative program such as the one that is the focus of this research, do not communicate freely without being controlled by organizational systems. A critical organizational communication lens offers an opportunity to understand the complexities of communicating support. Most critical organizational scholars focus on the dynamics of power and the interpretive sense-making processes of organizational members.²⁹ In reviewing the history of critical organizational scholarship, Mumby indicates that investigating these dynamics of control may reveal how individuals strategically misbehave in the face of control efforts, or in some cases to maintain dignity and autonomy.³⁰ Critical organizational studies often investigate the dialectics of control and resistance, and place emphasis on contextual analysis of the control-resistance dynamic.³¹ The turn to poststructuralist theory has led us to examine the discursive ways that communities are formed in this dialectic of control, which "has been particularly fruitful given the centrality of discourse and communication to organizing processes."³²

Individuals' discourse in this sense focuses on their identities and knowledge, and the ways both are negotiated in a dialectic of power and control within the organization's hierarchy. Mumby describes three areas of research that have developed over the past 20 years, including deconstruction, processes of subjectification, and identity regulation and resistance.³³ As Foucault points out with his notion of governmentality, individuals are "rendered amenable to intervention and regulation by being formulated in a particular

conceptual way.”³⁴ Of the three areas, identity regulation and resistance more adequately accounts for “the role of complex subjectivities in the dialectics of control and resistance.”³⁵ It becomes fascinating therefore to consider the organization’s efforts to regulate the communication of social support and the contested process whereby organizational members work to establish a coherent narrative of self-identity in the face of these control efforts, including the macro discourses of control and the local discourses where struggles over meaning and identity occur.³⁶

Literature surrounding rehabilitation in jail is conducted primarily by criminologists and sociologists; communication activists are calling us to prison activism for good reason.³⁷ While communication scholars have explored various topics within incarceration settings, such as how individuals perform identity,³⁸ what role mentoring plays in postrelease environments,³⁹ and the connection between narrative and personal agency,⁴⁰ no communication research yet exists that explores the complex ways incarcerated women communicate support as they adapt to and sustain their lives while serving their sentence. As such, this investigation relies on the following question:

RQ: In what ways do incarcerated women communicatively construct support behind bars?

Methodology

In 2014, a multimillion-dollar jail was reimagined and rebuilt with brand new courtyards, housing units, and philosophies after serving as a juvenile institution since 1967 and becoming a women’s facility in 1979. In 2013, the soon-to-be captain sent a team of criminologists and members of the sheriff’s department around the nation to observe the most efficient (and inefficient) incarceration facilities; IBH was one of many ideas that came from this nation-wide search. Initially, the captain implemented IBH at the all-male facility where she was assigned, and found critical components of the initial philosophy being implemented incorrectly. Once the captain transitioned to supervise the newly rebuilt facility in 2016, she reestablished her idea of IBH and made major changes, including creating an open dorm setting instead of cell house living. With the missing components addressed, the housing unit was established to introduce incarcerated women to a healthy community by allowing a space for women to invest in themselves and support one another, all while serving their sentence.

IBH thrives on creating a normative environment, which includes practices where women are rarely put in handcuffs, do not require escorts, and are provided with agency to control their own schedule and programs. To be considered for a spot in IBH, women cannot have any in-jail violations for 30 days and must interview with a correctional counselor to ensure motivation and willingness to change. Once assigned to the new facility, each woman moves into her own cubical-style bedroom separated by half walls, which includes a twin bed, two mattresses, a pillow, a dresser, a desk, and a chair. Women in IBH also have access to unique privileges, such as a microwave, a salad bar, hair straighteners, and Velcro converse shoes. Most recently, the women earned an ice cream machine after four IBH members earned their General Education Diploma. These normative values, rewards, incentives, and behavior-based privileges are strategies used by the facility to promote growth and prepare women for release. This specialized housing unit, and the women who inhabit it, serves as the site where this research is situated.

Data collection

Data were collected and analyzed by the first author and the following sections are written from this perspective. I established rapport with the professional staff at the facility and was offered access into the women's lives after volunteering for over a year as an instructor of weekly communication courses. I collected data within three distinct roles: (a) communication instructor, (b) observer of communication workshops, and (c) interviewer. My role at the facility began as an instructor of communication courses. We offered weekly workshops, with each class lasting 1.5 hours, spanning across eight weeks, focusing on interviewing, conflict management, and public speaking. I received approval from IRB and the sheriff's department to observe classes and interview women after two meetings with IRB representatives, two rounds of full-board committee reviews, and 16 email exchanges with the facility's supervising correctional officer. In my role as a participant observer, I interacted with the women weekly as I taught and participated in class activities for a total of 32 hours, writing 40 pages of typed, double-spaced field notes.⁴¹ Incarcerated women were recruited to participate in interviews during a weekly community meeting, where a correctional counselor introduced the project and passed around a sign-up sheet. IBH can hold up to 45 women, but housed 32 women at the time of the meeting. Twelve women signed up to participate in interviews (see [Table 1](#) for demographics). Pseudonyms were given to participants to preserve confidentiality.

The semistructured interviews ranged from 20 to 90 minutes, and resulted in 376 minutes of recordings and 143 pages of typed double-spaced transcriptions. Interviews were deemed as professional visits by the Sheriff's department, which are typically reserved for lawyers and probation officers to discuss the nature of a woman's legal case. This classification allowed for more freedom in scheduling as well as permission to use an audio-recording device.

Data analysis

After verifying the accuracy of transcripts with the audio recordings, I read through all of the transcriptions and field notes to identify preliminary patterns that emerged through first-level coding.⁴² During this first phase of analysis, I developed an open-coding document where I identified communicative moments of support as witnessed or described by the women. In the second phase, I read through moments several times to understand how

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Name	Age	Race	Offense	Time in IBH during interviews
Erin	46	Hispanic	Drug possession	Seven months
Gina	40	Asian	Identity theft	Four months
Holly	32	Caucasian	–	Three weeks
Kelly	28	Caucasian	Transporting a controlled substance	Seven months
Kendall	26	Caucasian	Drug possession	Six months
Kristina	29	Hispanic	Identity theft	One month
Lauren	23	Caucasian	Transporting/selling narcotics	Two months
Maria	23	Hispanic	Transporting a controlled substance	Six months
Megan	38	Caucasian	False worker's comp claim, perjury	Eight months
Nicole	32	Caucasian	Vehicular theft	Six months
Norma	44	Caucasian	–	Two months
Rosie	33	Caucasian	Stolen property	Two months

support was being communicated, identifying three forms of support communicated among incarcerated women: (a) accountability, (b) validation, and (c) compassion. This phase also revealed two forms of resisting or undermining support, including: (a) drama and (b) rivalry.

Facilitating or restricting “Communities of Care” for incarcerated women

Upon joining IBH, women sign a contract clarifying that IBH “promotes an environment of responsibility and accountability ... participants may be removed as sanctions for non-compliance with program expectations.” The contract also provides a list of expectations for IBH members that includes: (a) respecting confidentiality, (b) participating in all scheduled activities, (c) facilitating member-led groups, (d) avoiding contact with incarcerated women living in other housing units, (e) actively listening to others, and (f) refraining from violence and foul language, which “do not belong in this community as we are striving toward a positive, life changing mentality.” Results of this investigation revealed a community of care that encourages incarcerated women to support one another through accountability, validation, and compassion.

Accountability

Accountability, or the communicative process wherein individuals are held responsible for behaving in ways that fit with specific expectations, is a way for members of IBH to offer support to one another. When women communicated accountability, they did so to protect, encourage, motivate, and mentor one another. Living in a community like IBH, the women spend every waking hour alongside one another. Holly explains, “we go to class together. We go to bed together. We watch movies together. We watch TV together. We shower together. We go eat together. It’s like 24/7 we’re always together.” Nicole described IBH in this way: “it’s kind of like a sleepover every night.” Lauren indicated, “I literally call it my home. The girls are, they are my family.” Within this community, incarcerated women hold each other accountable for at least three reasons: (a) to help someone stay on track in her rehabilitation, (b) to protect someone from being sanctioned, and (c) to avoid bearing the consequences that could potentially impact everyone in the housing unit.

Women in IBH hold one another accountable, particularly with rules like cursing. Kendall explains, “we pull each other up. If we’re playing games and somebody drops the F-bomb, we’re like shhhh.” These women discuss IBH as a community of encouragement through the communication of accountability so together they can stay on track in their progress. Gina tells us “when we say the F-word, the S-word, oh, yeah, you’re cleaning the shower and the bathroom and the toilets. We get sanctioned We’re accountable for what we do in there.” When women do not follow the rules of IBH (e.g., arriving to class late, cursing, or not following the cleaning schedule), another woman may remind them of what they must be held accountable for in order to remain in IBH. Like Kelly shares, “We depend on one another as a family. It’s like you’re my friend and if you’re doing something wrong, I need to tell you what you’re doing wrong because I don’t want you to fail.” The communication of accountability is a critical form of support, encouraging women to unite in maintaining a community environment that is deeply rooted in the values of IBH.

One example of accountability occurred as the first author interacted with the women during a class she was teaching:

After teaching one of my first workshops at the jail and being approved to pursue this project, I decided to share my research ideas with my students to hear their initial reactions. A student became so excited about the prospect of being involved in my project, she stood up out of her chair and asked when she could participate. Still standing, she shared her vision with me, which involved creating a presentation to give to women living in other housing units to inform them of IBH as a place they should be striving to live while serving their sentence. My student shared “we [IBH] should be their goal for where to end up.”

This student’s ideas to hold others accountable extended beyond the walls of IBH, as seen by her hope to share the benefits of living in IBH with others. Her determination to reach out to other incarcerated women is a testament to how strongly members of IBH feel about the benefits of living in a strong community of support.

Validation

Validation is the communicative process of recognizing and accepting others’ feelings, thoughts, or actions as legitimate and appropriate. By communicating validation, the women affirm, reassure, encourage, and recognize one another. Since IBH is a space where women are encouraged to speak openly about their personal stories, opportunities exist for the women to affirm one another. These moments often occur within scheduled meetings, when women are encouraged to share vulnerabilities. While teaching class one day, I listened as Kristina revealed that she had been diagnosed with stage 2 breast cancer by the facility’s physician. The woman sitting next to Kristina immediately reached over and gave her a hug, while Gina validated her in saying “You can be my workout partner in IBH! Look at these buns of steel!” These women came together in meeting Kristina with various forms of support through validation. Lauren, who suffers from Lupus, experienced a similar form of support. She describes being validated during a grief group by saying,

I had to talk about a grief, and I was talking about my medical condition, how it changed my life and took away a lot of my dreams. ... Everybody tells me “You’re really strong. We admire you.”

In the midst of their pain and suffering, Kristina and Lauren experienced a feeling of validation as the women communicated their support.

While validation is encouraged during scheduled groups like Narcotics Anonymous and Codependency classes, there are times when this support is offered spontaneously, particularly when someone notices another woman’s need for affirmation. Over 90 percent of women who enter this institution have experienced some form of abuse or trauma, often within their relationship with a romantic partner. Kelly told us that “every girl goes through life getting raped, getting molested, getting abused by husbands, mothers, dad, uncles.” Holly, a victim of harassment, describes the support she received in IBH:

I was working out and I was stomping ... just to get my anger out. Some girl goes, “Come here,” and I just walked out. I started crying. She’s like, “What’s wrong? I know there was something wrong watching you just stomping and stomping and stomping and your face looks so mad.” I was like, “Because this stupid boy.” “It’s okay. If he really loved you, he’d be there for you.” They’re just so supportive. Their words, the words that they tell you, it’s just like—“Good thing you found out now the way he is. He let you down.”

Without realizing her outward display of emotions, Holly was approached and validated in her anger about a prior abusive relationship. This spontaneous moment of supportive communication demonstrates the women's validation of one another in times of need.

Compassion

Compassion is conceptualized as communicating care and empathy for those going through a difficult experience. When women communicated compassion, they displayed kindness, care, respect, and trust for one another. Kristina told me, "I'm not the same person I was before. I understand where people are coming from. I'm more caring towards other people's needs. I have more compassion towards others." When the first author spoke with Norma, a woman who has suffered two strokes while serving her sentence, about a time she felt particularly supported, she shared the following:

When I wake up, they're always there for me. Every morning that I drink coffee, this lady named Rocky, she's always there for me. Every time I got through my diabetic check, they ask me. That's the first thing they ask me—"What's your sugar?" It feels like a family. They all support me all the time. Especially when I get my blood checked—they all make sure I'm okay. Last night, I felt dizzy. Last night, they made me beans and rice and tortillas. It was cute. They were all there for me.

The small gesture of women checking in with Norma about her blood sugar levels represents an important pattern of compassionate communication that occurs on a daily basis in IBH. Kendall recalls walking into IBH on her first day and noticing rules written on the whiteboard, including one that read *You will help all new inmates feel welcomed*. Nicole shared that on her first day "they were all so nice and welcoming. They offered to give me a tour and everything." From the moment women enter the housing unit, they experience the compassion by feeling welcomed by members of IBH.

We discovered that incarcerated women living in IBH communicate support through accountability, validation, and compassion. While, in most cases, the stories women tell reveal that these forms of communicating support are genuine and sincere, it is possible that in some cases the communication occurs as a result of regulation and control. The following describes ways in which this supportive communication was resisted and undermined by the women living in IBH.

Complications of support communicated among incarcerated women

Prisons and jails are sites where power and control are negotiated by the women who are incarcerated. In the midst of these negotiations, forms of support may be undermined, resisted, or questioned. Interactions with the women during classes and interviews reveal that support is not a straightforward communicative phenomenon, but is complicated by what our participants refer to as *drama*, which involves gossip, physical altercations, or disagreements. Support is also complicated by *rivalries* that arise between housing units. Patterns of drama and rivalries reveal how supportive communication can be changed, distorted, or undermined as IBH members engage in efforts to control situations they face in the midst of institutional powers. The following section explores how supportive communication can be complicated by (a) drama and (b) rivalry.

Drama

Drama is a word that the women used to describe physical fights, verbal altercations, and gossip. While we are aware that the word “drama” is too often used offhandedly, it was invoked often by the women in this study to describe how raising concerns, complaining, or resisting something can escalate in unproductive ways. The women also used this word to describe interactions that got out of hand when people did not get along, when women felt like they spent too much time in close quarters, or when they behaved in ways that broke the rules of IBH.

There are inevitable tensions that arise when 30 women live, eat, sleep, and attend programs alongside one another 24/7. Kendall explains “every day there is going to be that moment where you just want to slap somebody.” Maria elaborates:

I guess being surrounded by women all the time, it’s kind of drama. ... It’s too much gossip. And I think some girls don’t like some other girls so depends who you hang out with. Everybody talks about everybody. I guess we don’t have a life so that’s all they do.

Maria shared in class that she was requesting to move out of IBH and into a lower level unit because she could no longer deal with the drama. Megan explains, “I’m very talkative, I usually have the most to say, very opinionated about my core beliefs. ... Sometimes they roll their eyes.” Instances of nonverbal passive aggression like eye-rolling can weaken the sincerity of validation expressed during groups and workshops. Furthermore, it is difficult for compassionate communication to be taken seriously if it comes from someone who is known to gossip. These moments illuminate the complexity of how support is communicated and received in IBH.

The first author witnessed an interaction of drama at the beginning of class one day:

I walked in and noticed the group looked smaller. When I asked about it, a woman in the front row told me that two students got “rolled out” of IBH. When I asked why, Gina responded with one word: “drama.” I found out later that day that two of my students, including the student who was so eager to participate in my study, were involved in a verbal altercation that escalated into a fist fight. This dispute resulted in both women being immediately moved out of IBH and into maximum-security.

Gina explained “we’re all women so we’re going to bicker, we’re going to gossip and we’re going to always, you know. But at the end of the day, we have to live together.” Kristina elaborates: “Sometimes we might not get along with each other, but we’re like a family in there. Some of the girls, we fight like if we’re sisters and we also make up like we’re sisters.” Although Kristina invokes support in response to group conflict, not all the women “make up like ... sisters,” as revealed by those relocated out of IBH. Accountability diminishes when women ignore the rules and solve a problem physically. When conflicts occur and disturb the peace that IBH sets out to create, the women involved in that conflict overlook the support systems and ultimately undermine the mission of IBH.

Rivalry

Part of the mission of IBH is to build comradery among members to form a community of care. However, incarcerated women living in other housing units only know what prior IBH members, who have often been kicked out or who have requested to leave, have told them about IBH. These perspectives can lead outsiders to develop negative

perceptions about the housing unit. Prospective members like Kristina are often warned by cellmates:

I had my friends [in cell living] who were like, “No, don’t go over there.” They say, “You’re not going to like it over there.” They say, “You got to watch movies. You got to do book reports. You got to journal.”

Holly also recalled hearing negative perceptions of IBH prior to moving units, explaining “I heard about [IBH], and the girls are like, ‘Oh, you don’t want to go there.’ There’s a lot of negative talk about it.” Living in IBH can be a double-edged sword for members of the privilege-based housing unit, where women from other units feel the need to warn those interested in becoming a member to rethink their decision. Additionally, during class one day, I overheard a member of IBH talking with a woman living in another housing unit who was considering moving into IBH, who said:

Rumors start about our dorm, but the people who left just weren’t ready. People don’t want to be up at 7 a.m., so they try to make our dorm sound bad. It’s okay if people want to leave, they really need to want to change to make it here. IBH is an opportunity to change around people who are going through the same thing.

Her comment addresses both the rivalry that exists as well as the validation that is possible within IBH.

Members of IBH receive privileges that women from other housing units do not have, including the opportunity to have a pillow and sleep on two mattresses. Throughout interviews, metaphors of IBH members as “princesses” revealed evidence of rivalry and animosity between housing units. Maria knew of this nickname for IBH: “I heard that there was a Princess Dorm ... the Princess all this, the Princess all that. They talked about it and they made it seem like, ‘Oh, little miss thing, miss perfect.’” Animosity between women in IBH and women living in other housing units complicates the communication of support, particularly between IBH members and trustees. Trustees are incarcerated women who are employed by the facility to work within the jail as seamstresses, gardeners, and kitchen workers. They are granted the most freedom with the least amount of supervision. However, these women are not provided with the incentives given to members of IBH, like pillows or a microwave. The paradox between having physical freedom (e.g., walking throughout the facility without an escort) or tangible incentives (e.g., ice cream machines and hair straighteners) creates rivalry and tension across housing units, as Erin points out: “All the trustees are like ‘oh, you guys don’t deserve the salad bar. You don’t deserve this or that. You guys are fairies.’ They’re like ‘Oh, there’s a princess.’ The trustees are rude.” Rosie also describes an interaction with a group of trustees one day, sharing “They said, ‘Oh, it’s just a bunch of princesses. ... They get everything they want.’” Animosity between the housing units potentially undermines the compassion that women living in IBH are encouraged to communicate. Rivalries diminish the hope communicated to the women of IBH, who are being taught that it is essential to foster supportive communities behind bars.

The communication of support by women in IBH is complex and has the potential to be undermined as women negotiate being regulated under institutional control. Participant observations and interviews revealed that while women hold one another accountable, validate each other, and communicate compassion, IBH is also a site of

communication in the form of drama and rivalries between housing units. Clearly, these findings reveal insights about rehabilitation, communication, and the complexities of support among those who live in IBH, as the next section reveals.

What constitutes a community of care? A discussion

When the Captain stepped into her role in 2014, shortly after the facility was rebuilt from the ground up, she implemented the mission of rehabilitating incarcerated women through focused rehabilitative efforts. Over the past three years, this philosophy has manifested into the way the jail functions as an institution of rehabilitation, including the creation of IBH. After spending over a year with the women of IBH at the facility, the first author witnessed the complexity of support being communicated among incarcerated women. In the sections that follow, we discuss conclusions that can be drawn from these findings, theoretical and practical implications of this study, and the limitations and directions for future research.

Conclusions

The results of this study revealed at least three conclusions in how support is communicated and complicated among incarcerated women. First, utilizing a poststructuralist perspective to examine the forms of communication that play out among the women in IBH, we see power plays wherein the discourse of support is a form of control that can become complicated.⁴³ Weedon suggests that this critical lens demands a focus on discourse, subject position, and experience, which this study begins to accomplish.⁴⁴ For instance, when Holly reminded Jane to watch her language, her behavior, though viewed by some as a discourse of support, could also be considered a moment of competing subject positions. Holly's discursive surveillance of Jane's behavior could be interpreted by Jane and others as the type of control that typically is exercised by staff members, thus competing with Holly's subject position and standpoint as a peer in IBH.

Generally, there seems to be an ongoing tension in the experiences of incarcerated women where the support communicated through accountability, validation, and compassion can become a double-edged sword. For instance, Nicole's sleepover metaphor becomes complicated by gossip, bickering, and drama. This may lead to a resistance from the "forced" community of responsibility that IBH demands. We see irony in how incoming women experience compassion on their first day, where a rule is posted on the wall that reads *You will help all new inmates feel welcomed*. The requirement of showing compassion can potentially undermine the sincerity of this interaction, since it is rooted in institutional control.

A second conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that the stories the women tell reveal moments of epiphany, catharsis, healing, or transformation. The primary goal of IBH is to assist women in transforming from their lives before they were incarcerated to their lives upon release. Clearly, this is a delicate process of shifting their identities from what was to what could be, which can be facilitated by supporting one another. The *metaphor of family* becomes the foundation upon which this support is built, especially because so many of the women come into the facility having experienced abuse, trauma, and minimal family support. A community of care is revealed by Kelly's sentiment:

“The girls are, they are my family” as well ask Kristina’s: “Sometimes we might not get along with each other, but we’re like a family in there. Some of the girls—we fight like if we’re sisters and we also make up like we’re sisters.” While a jail is typically considered an unfamily-like setting, the women’s discourse reveals that transformation is occurring in how they come to see each other as supportive family members.

Finally, a third conclusion that can be drawn from this research reveals broader implications of how words shape institutional expectations of incarcerated women. Holly offers a powerful quote: “They’re just so supportive. Their words, the words that they tell you.” We see a focus on the importance of words and how they shape women’s experiences and identities that ultimately may contribute to the process of transformation. At the same time, by regulating the words that the women can and cannot use, IBH inculcates institutional expectations that restrict, rather than facilitate, a freedom of expression. By forbidding women to curse, institutional pressures are placed on women’s language. Furthermore, by institutionalizing the requirement for the women to refer to staff members as “Corporal Smith” or “Corporal Alvarez,” a power distance is reinforced in ways that may limit the women’s sense of community or capability of being open with staff about their needs. During interviews and a tour of the facility, the first author noticed that corporals address women using just their last names. These naming routines complicate how support is communicated. Even if corporals sit down informally to play a board game with the women, the words they use to address each other are formal and official, reinforcing a distinct power dynamic. In addition to these three conclusions, the results of this investigation provide a number of theoretical implications.

Theoretical implications

IBH is a program that attempts to build a community of care, offering theoretical implications to consider. First, how do we conceptualize and theorize about the formation of community behind bars? The word *community* often conveys a positive meaning as a place of comfort where individuals feel understood by one another.⁴⁵ This is theoretically complicated when placing the word *community* alongside *incarceration*, where depictions of prison starkly opposes what the definition of community reveals. IBH was implemented based on a therapeutic community model (TCM), which De Leon defines as “the purposive use of the peer community to facilitate social and psychological change in individuals.”⁴⁶ Our research theoretically extends concepts of community to reveal how TCM can become a catalyst and complication for supportive communication, since our results reveal that incarcerated women communicate in ways that put into question the authenticity of their support. Further, researchers theorize that a “therapeutic community, with its commitment to a radically ‘different’ penal culture and mode of rehabilitation, socially enables, produces and reinforces the emergence of someone ‘different.’”⁴⁷ This is interesting to consider in light of our second theoretical implication.

A second theoretical implication of this research is tied the debate surrounding the legitimacy of the term “rehabilitation.” Since most men and women behind bars in the United States have never been participants in higher education, the middle-class economy, or neighborhoods of safety, it may not be possible to “RE”-habilitate into cultural norms that were never established in the first place.⁴⁸ In other words, incarcerated individuals do not necessarily *achieve* rehabilitation so much as strive for a lifestyle free

from drugs, violence, and abuse.⁴⁹ Members of IBH, however, still share experiences of seeking and achieving transformation behind bars. The stories the women tell of the delicate identity shifts occurring for them within IBH, where the support they offer and receive reveal a newfound sense of empowerment. Rehabilitation in its very definition is centered on restoration, which these women are experiencing through the communication of support, which leads us to practical implications.

Practical implications

Since IBH is so new, only a handful of women have gone through the program and can speak to its merit. Through conversations with the women, however, the program seems to be achieving its mission statement, as seen by three sentences that members of IBH say in unison every morning:

We give and receive the tools to change the direction of our lives and of those around us. As a community we will come together to offer each other wisdom, strength and understanding.
We live our words and create our future.

One practical implication is that staff members of incarceration facilities should be encouraged to create a space that reflects the supportive philosophies of IBH. While power inevitably is enacted in these settings, supportive communication can help negate the tensions that can arise from these power struggles by humanizing all interactions, including those with staff members. The environment of IBH reflects Gamo's urge toward building mechanisms for current and former prisoners, calling for more communities of care within incarceration settings to function as a system of support.⁵⁰ A second practical implication is for communication scholars to be encouraged by this work and the implications it has for our field. Our nation is putting more people behind bars than any other country in the world, and we have been called as scholars, educators, and advocates to assist in the rehabilitation of offenders. Until researchers immerse themselves into the lives of those who are incarcerated, it is possible only to speculate how communication is practiced behind bars.

Limitations and directions for future research

Researchers interested in pursuing qualitative investigations of incarcerated women should not disregard the power of the individual story that each woman tells. In order to understand the socialization processes in communities behind bars, it would be beneficial to conduct longitudinal studies of the women's narratives from the moment of incarceration, throughout their sentences, and upon release. By following women through their time through incarceration, we might discover how the introduction of courses and programs and communication within these units and programs may have an impact on the way support is communicated and complicated. This study tells the story of IBH primarily from the perspective of incarcerated women. Future research should incorporate the voices of staff members at a facility; gaining their stories would provide a more well-rounded perspective of how support is communicated and complicated.

This research is situated in what most would deem a rare facility. Resistances exist across the nation towards reformatory programs like IBH, which offer incentives and opportunities for incarcerated populations. The dialectical tensions that exist among the

general public complicate the way in which our nation believes incarceration institutions should function. However, if new facilities imitate the philosophies and structures of IBH, there will soon be more evidence to show the feasibility and success of approaching incarceration from a rehabilitative, community-driven perspective. It is difficult to quantify the success of IBH at this point, since the housing unit (and facility) are still too new to calculate recidivism data. Yet, as this study reveals, the women offer their stories as testament to the strength and value of the support they have experienced in IBH, even when it is complicated by drama and rivalry.

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