

Women Attracted to Incarcerated Men: A Case Study

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Abstract

This is a case study of a woman with a psychiatric diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder who, when widowed, started a pen pal correspondence with a man in prison. She subsequently invited him to live with her upon his release. The situation ended badly.

Keywords: Prison pen pals; Psychopathy; Hybristophilia

Introduction

Many years ago, one of my patients (pseudonym Chloe) who had a longstanding diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder told me that she had impulsively began writing pen pal letters to a man in prison (pseudonym Todd). She was 40 years old at the time and had a past history of repeated suicide attempts. Chloe lived alone, was childless and recently widowed. As the correspondence with Todd progressed, she started to visit him regularly and, when he had served his term, she invited him to live with her. During their time together, Todd took financial advantage of her and, in all likelihood, physically abused her. She became suicidal, was hospitalized on several occasions, but always discharged herself from hospital prematurely, against medical advice. Ultimately, Chloe killed herself by jumping off the roof of her apartment building.

Methods

These events occurred more than 20 years ago, and, during that time, I have gathered the psychiatric literature on women who are attracted to men in prison. The literature is limited. The aim of this case study is to encourage research on this topic.

Bonomi et al. [1] wrote an important article on the human need to belong. Their hypothesis is that the need to belong is a powerful, fundamental, and extremely pervasive motivation, that most people readily form social attachments and vehemently resist their dissolution.

This would explain Chloe's seemingly urgent need to replace the recently lost relationship with her husband with another intimate bond, even though she and her husband had had a turbulent marriage. Both had had psychiatric problems, which had isolated them from the larger community. The Bonomi et al.'s [1] hypothesis may also explain why Chloe did not tell her mental health team when Todd, having moved into her apartment, began demeaning her verbally, spending her money and not contributing financially to the household, and, most probably, beating her as well.

Reluctance to report

According to the Bonomi et al.'s [1] hypothesis, the unwillingness to leave an abusive intimate partner results from reluctance to break established affective bonds. But it may also be that silence is imposed by veiled threats of retaliation. The Goodman et al.'s study [2] used live telephone conversations between domestic violence perpetrators and their victims to illustrate the chief reasons why victims recant initial accusations of abuse. These reasons were: the perpetrator's appeals for sympathy, his minimization of the severity of the abuse, his seemingly earnest promises to change and his constant reminders of the good life that the victim and the perpetrator shared. There was an implied "or else" inherent in those exchanges. Goodman et al. [2]. had noted earlier that abused women do not usually report abuse or leave; they often turn to alcohol instead.

This was the case for Chloe. She began to come for her psychiatric appointments with bruises, smelling of alcohol, and claiming to have bumped into furniture or fallen down the stairs.

Hybristophilia

There is a little-known syndrome called hybristophilia, coined by Money in 1986 [3]. Individuals with his syndrome (usually women) derive sexual pleasure from having an intimate partner who commits gruesome crimes such as rape or murder. According to Bénézech [4], women who suffer from this syndrome are either attracted to the crimes the men commit, or else nourish unrealistic rescue fantasies, convinced they can reform their man. These women end up seduced, manipulated and lied to by the men they choose.

There was no indication that Chloe was sexually aroused by the idea of Todd having committed an outrageous crime. She believed that he was in prison for car theft or so she told her mental health team [5].

Pen pal sites

There are several websites, such as <http://www.loveaprisoner.com>, whose mission is to connect inmates with the "outside" community. Loveaprisoner.com enables friends and family to stay in contact with people in prison and boasts of a 75% compatibility rating for individuals who join in search of a soul mate among prison inmates. The website, writeaprisoner.com, posts profiles, photos and contact information and permits viewers to select the person with whom they

want to correspond. The first message is free of charge, with a fee per message thereafter. The various postings on these sites suggest a variety of motives for writing, among them: sympathy for the prisoner's plight; the challenge of reforming a criminal; curiosity about the crime; identification of the criminal with someone from the writer's past. Many women on these sites appear to be looking for love and marriage. Prisoners themselves do not usually have Internet access, but they can mail information to Web sites and this information can include claims of innocence as well as paintings, poems and flattering photos. Most sites charge inmates up to \$80 a year. Prisoner pen-pal Internet sites seem to be growing in popularity. Cyberspace Inmates lists 1,625 inmates and claims 5,000 to 10,000 hits a week, while PrisonPennPals.com lists 1,006 inmates and claims 2,600 hits a day, according to an article in the Chicago Tribune [6].

Research into women's attraction to prisoners

Slavikova and Ryba Panza [5] conducted a study to determine why a woman might choose an incarcerated man for a romantic partner. On the assumption that women who enter into intimate relationships with men in prison are emotionally disturbed and are most often products of a disturbed childhood, the authors surveyed 89 such women. One third reported having a relative who had been in jail. A little over a fifth had, at some time in their lives, received either psychotropic drugs or a mental health diagnosis, usually depressive disorder. Almost a quarter reported mental illness in the family. Two fifths had personally experienced victimization; one tenth had themselves committed a crime in the past and 5.6% had spent time in jail. There were very few women who showed either extremely low or extremely high levels of functioning. As a group, they were not distinguishable from the general population of women. The authors then attempted to classify the women according to personality type, and they found two prevalent personality traits: manipulateness and feelings of inadequacy covered by a facade of self-sufficiency. This suggests that a prisoner's very imprisonment is a plus, because it makes a woman feel that she is in control. In addition, because of the subjective feeling of inadequacy, these women may feel that a man who has committed crimes is "all that they deserve" or "all they can expect to attract." Half the women in the Scheyett and Pettus-Davis's survey [7] had, over time, contacted more than one inmate. Interestingly, of all 89 women, only 5% thought that the man they were writing to would be able to steer clear of the law once he was released.

The profile that emerges from this study fits Chloe relatively well. At the time of starting her correspondence with Todd, she had no family, few friends and had recently lost a husband. She tended to be manipulative with mental health staff (a tendency that had earned her the Borderline Personality diagnosis) – she frequently complained about one staff member to another and often incited disagreements and rivalries; she was often demeaning to one person and ingratiating to another; she exhibited bouts of hostility; she often threatened suicide when unable to acquire what she wanted (special favors, extra pills, forms signed, early appointments). She usually appeared self-sufficient and somewhat arrogant, but, at other times, broke into tears and disparaged her own accomplishments. She had many physical and emotional complaints and was often suspicious of efforts to help her, frequently voicing ideas that could be classified as paranoid.

Warnings about Prison Pen Pals

The women who correspond with prisoners are not the only ones with manipulative traits. According to a blogger [6], prisoners often

write to several women at the same time, lie about the reason for being in prison, portray themselves as victims, or else vow that they have now totally "changed." The writer of the blog reports that prisoners frequently enclose poetry (the same poem for all their female pen pals) that they claim (falsely) to have written just for them. Prisoners, according to this blogger, are masterful liars. There are similar warnings in the following guidelines for women who feel attracted to men in prison. This is from an Ann Landers column in the Chicago Tribune.

Guidelines: 1. Think of three good reasons to be involved with a man who has been found guilty of a crime. 2. Contact the inmate's correctional counselor or case manager to determine if he has given accurate information regarding his marital status and criminal history. 3. Meet his family. 4. Contact an attorney re financial responsibilities in case of marriage. A new spouse may be responsible for past fines and debts.

The opinion of the writer of these guidelines (who reports having worked in adult corrections for 15 years) is that only 4/10,000 of relationships with inmates ever work out well.

In an inquiry about male inmates' views on women, Schyette and Pettus-Davis [7] conducted focus groups with prison personnel and interviewed 7 former prisoners. These investigators concluded that, in general, male inmates tend to both idealize and demean women. While in prison, they are very dependent on their women friends and relatives, but, once released, very few feel an obligation to financially contribute to their household. Many, although by no means all, offenders are characterized by narcissistic, psychopathic, and Machiavellian personality traits (this has been called, the dark triad) and these traits are associated with a preference for short term rather than committed romantic relationships [8-11]. Such men possess considerable charm, intelligence, poise, and verbal facility. At the same time, they are described as unreliable, irresponsible, untruthful and insincere. They seem to lack remorse or shame. They frequently exhibit poor judgement and failure to learn by experience. They are impulsive and self-centered and drawn to antisocial activity. Their emotions are described as shallow and they seem incapable of love, loyalty or permanent attachment [12]. They are dangerous in the sense that, in a world that tends to run on mutual trust, many people are easily deceived by them [13], especially since they are skilled at taking advantage of other people's needs and greeds.

Psychopathic traits are widely distributed in the general population, and may be so minor as to escape initial notice [14]. Such traits include selfishness, impulsivity, lack of remorse or empathy, shallowness, manipulateness and callousness. Women who reported being in a relationship with psychopathic men [15] also reported experiencing emotional and psychological abuse such as public humiliation, sexual harassment, physical threats, abandonment threats, and restriction of liberty. These women reported that their partners cheated on them, were physically and sexually assaultive, undermined their mental well-being and emotionally abused their children. In addition, three quarters of the women reported they were forcibly isolated from family and friends, and their bank accounts were drained. In their survey of women with prior relationships with psychopathic men, Orzeck et al [13], have characterized all romantic involvements with psychopathic men as traumatic relationships.

Good men behind bars

It goes without saying that not every man who ends up in prison is a psychopath. There are men in prison who are emotionally affected by the multiple losses that come with incarceration (loss of liberty, of autonomy, of security, of relationships, of meaningful occupation, of personal possessions) and who are probably sincere when they reach out to pen pals for support [14-16].

Many women feel sympathy for such losses and identify with these men. An analogy can be made to European women during World War II, who, feeling sympathy for young German and Italian prisoners of war, sometimes got involved in romantic relationships with them. There were Government rules and legislation forbidding such fraternization, but, in spite of these prohibitions, clandestine relationships flourished [17]. There were 796 recorded marriages between German war prisoners and British women through to the end of 1948, and probably more after that time [17].

Usual outcomes

The women who married war prisoners seemed to give relatively little thought to how this might be viewed by their community or what kind of punishment they might receive for breaking the law. In the same way, women who enter into relationship with incarcerated men also appear oblivious to the disapproval of their friends and families and seemingly naïve about potential negative outcomes. Although accurate numbers are not available, the outcomes for women who get involved with prisoners, during peace time, are overwhelmingly poor. The women suffer abuse and interpersonal trauma, which frequently lead to depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and self-harm. Life with an ex-prisoner can engender fear, despair, feelings of worthlessness and self-contempt [18].

When Chloe brought Todd home to her low rental apartment, she either did not know or did not tell her mental health team why he had been in prison. She said it was "something minor." Chloe received a government disability pension on the basis of her Borderline Disorder, which she began to share with Todd. He was unable to work for unspecified reasons. He drank and she drank with him. She came to her mental health appointments with black and blue marks saying that she had fallen down the stairs while drunk. This could have been true, but the consensus among her mental health team was that Todd was abusing her. She never admitted to this. During the months that he lived with her, Chloe signed herself into hospital on several occasions, feeling suicidal. On the last occasion, she stayed two weeks and was discharged against medical advice. Three days later she jumped to her death from the roof of her building.

Conclusion

Although the patient described in this case study died many years ago, most of the literature cited in this article is current. Vulnerable women write to men in prison for reasons that they do not always communicate to others. Interest and affection grows over time and, when the men leave prison, as in this case study, the couple often move

in together. This is a situation of risk for the woman because many men who have been incarcerated harbor psychopathic personality traits. They do not treat women well and the women, as in this case, can suffer severe mental health consequences.

Consent

The patient described here died over twenty years ago and had no known relatives. For this reason, permission to publish could not be obtained. Identifying information has been omitted.

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