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Telling the Story: A Study in the Segregation of Women Prisoners

Joane Martel

[My] cell was as long as me, as tall as me, as fat as me. There’s a light on you all the time, you know, like one of these bright lights all the time. And you just got a mattress on the floor and a toilet. There’s no sink to wash your hands. And it’s infested with bugs; you sleep with them and eat with them. And there’s no windows for sunlight — you don’t know if it’s light or dark out (Marie).

I was lucky if I got a shower every two or three days, and sometimes I remember washing my hair in the toilet cause.... I just wanted it clean, so I’d try to wash it myself in the cell (Flora).

Canada prides itself on its civility. As a “maturing” society, it views itself as progressing along a continuous path toward the development of the dignity of humankind. Canadians are proud that they provide extensive sociolegal protections for various human rights and freedoms, and that the United Nations’ has ranked Canada as the number one country (out of 174) in which to live since at least 1991 (UNDP, 1992). Regarding the way we imprison people, our collective identity is rooted in the belief that, socially, we have “evolved” from a bleak era in which prisoners were equated with slaves or subhuman beings. We take comfort in the idea that much progress has been made in the 20th century in the conditions under which individuals are incarcerated in Canada. However, the excerpts introduced above tell a different story. They tell of women prisoners’ experiences of segregation (i.e., solitary confinement) in Canadian prisons, a facet of criminal imprisonment that is generally overlooked.

Segregation is a prison practice used for separating and isolating a prisoner from the general inmate population for reasons ranging from safety (e.g., protective custody) to punitive purposes (e.g., disciplinary segregation). Despite its

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widespread use in prison, and notwithstanding the existing literature on a variety of prison-related topics, the issue of segregation still remains largely unknown today. An extensive review of the literature reveals only a few extant studies, mostly on the segregation of American male prisons in the late 1970s. This literature concentrates on the psychosocial characteristics of men usually found in segregation (e.g., Vantour, 1975; Barak-Glantz, 1983; Suedfeld et al., 1982), or on some of the institutional, legal, or psychological implications of segregation (Benjamin and Lux, 1975; Grassian, 1983; Brodsky and Scogin, 1988). More recent Canadian studies focused primarily on the compliance of segregation practices with existing law, or on the psychological impact of segregation as measured by statistical tools developed and administered by agents of correctional agencies (Canada, 1997; Motiuk and Blanchette, 1997; Zinger and Wichmann, 1999).

However, the segregation of women prisoners remains understudied. Apart from one recent study on the conditions of solitary confinement for women of color in an American prison (Shaylor, 1998), this practice has yet to be noticed in any systematic way by policymakers and social scientists. This topic is usually the poor relative of penological studies, and the literature on prisons remains almost completely silent on the prison experiences of contemporary prisoners themselves. Although some seminal studies have documented the rise and maintenance of prison regimes in many Western societies (for example, Foucault, 1975; Melossi and Pavarini, 1981), relatively little is known about the individuals who are the target of, and are subjected to, repressive institutions. A few authors have critiqued this void in the literature (e.g., Rostaing, 1996) and argued that, similar to other marginalized voices, prisoners ought to be given a place in the study of “inarticulate groups, along with women, children, workers, and blacks” (O’Brien, 1982: 6–7). Their argument is particularly fitting when it comes to the way prisoners experience segregation.

This article relays the major findings of a field study of 12 women who experienced segregation while in prison in the Canadian Prairies. Its objective is to create a knowledge base that will partially fill the two vacuums described above — i.e., the lack of studies on women segregated in prison and the general absence of experientially based research in penology — by documenting and examining experiences of segregation from women prisoners’ own perspective. I first present the backdrop that theoretically informs my argument. Then I discuss methodological considerations and outline the regulatory framework of segregation policies in Canadian prisons. In my discussion of the findings, I draw a detailed portrait of the participants and address two predominant analytical themes: women’s experiences during and after segregation.

**Life Experiences and Social Structures**

This study draws from the literature on punishment regimes and on the social control of women. Specifically, women’s experiential accounts are taken as a
valuable form of knowledge about carceral practices, which, in turn, are particular forms of the social control of women. Similar to Rafter (1985), I contend that social controls are exercised on women as women and that women therefore experience segregation as women. Thus, the way in which women make sense of, and give meaning to, their own experience of segregation will be partly influenced by their relative position in embedded social definitions and practices.

As a social group, women have not only been historically subordinated and marginalized socioeconomically, but also in terms of systemic sexualized and racialized social practices (Young, 1996). However, women do not constitute a unified and undifferentiated whole that is socially disadvantaged. Each woman’s experiences are contoured by her particular social positioning in terms of race, class, sexual orientation, education, motherhood, etc. (Howe, 1994). Thus, this study is premised on the idea that institutionalized race, class, and gender relations within Western societies are given concrete expression through actors’ personal interpretations of experiences in specific social settings (Messerschmidt, 1997). In this regard, prisons have been said to be privileged sites for analyzing such power relations in society, especially their role in the reproduction of classed, raced, and gendered relations (e.g., Carlen, 1983; Howe, 1994).

Studies have long documented that class assumptions have shaped the imprisonment of women over time (Dobash, Dobash, and Gutteridge, 1986), and that women prisoners are largely drawn from the most undereducated and under/unemployed groups in society. In terms of race, recent studies indicate that women of African ancestry are becoming the most overrepresented group of incarcerated women in Canada, although Aboriginal women are still in greater numbers (Canada, 1988; LaPrairie, 1993). For women of Native descent, this situation is symptomatic of years of colonial rule and forced dependency. That imprisoned women are more coerced than those outside prison is particularly true for women prisoners from minority cultural backgrounds. Beyond the coercive nature of the prison, they suffer from the coercion and oppression of a distinctive institutionalized racism within Western criminal justice processes.

Besides the classed and raced social structures affecting women’s lives, relationships are deeply gendered. According to Comack (1996: 32), this reality implies that “many of the problems, conflicts, and dilemmas...women encounter they encounter as women and because they are women.” Various forms of the social control of women are predominantly based in patriarchal assumptions — on “familial” expectations, for instance — and ideologically based constructions of gender-appropriate roles, such as those of woman and mother (Howe, 1994: 125–126). In the wider society, women are constructed in specific ways within many frames of reference, such as sociability, femininity, adulthood, and domesticity. Each of these spheres has historically developed its own regulatory powers, and together they form an intricate web of interrelated powers for the social control of women. Like other institutions of social control, prisons for women have been
developed, since the 17th century, on the basis of similar patriarchal assumptions and gender-based constructions about women’s sexuality, domesticity, and pathology (Bosworth, 2000: 277). During the 19th and 20th centuries, training for domesticity and motherhood have been predominant features of women’s prisons in Great Britain and the United States (Carlen, 1983: 17–19). Therefore, women suffer multiple burdens as prisoners. While women outside prisons are constructed as holding a specific position inside sociability, femininity, adulthood, domesticity, and pathology, women prisoners are constructed as inside and outside these spheres of social regulation. Thus, the prison serves to incapacitate women considered to be beyond betterment — in terms of sociability, femininity, domesticity, and pathology — or to “improve” those judged redeemable. In this last case, the prison becomes a gendering enterprise as it aims to make women’s behaviors and attitudes more closely fit socially acceptable gender roles. As such, women’s incarceration is a form of imprisonment specific to women since it exhibits distinctive repressive features not found in men’s prison regimes and not experienced as repressive by male prisoners (Ibid.: 76).

Women’s experiential accounts of segregation must be viewed and understood in terms of these dynamics. Institutionalized societal structures are operative long before women enter prison and will likely play a major role in the way they experience the oppressive and stressful nature of imprisonment. Moreover, several “overdetermined presences” (Ibid.: 15) in women’s lives — abuse, unemployment, and poverty — affect women prisoners in ways that are often distinct from the impact they may have on men. Consequently, women’s personal construction of their daily experiences may be seen as a form of coping, surviving, or resisting the hierarchical and uneven distribution of power in patriarchal, colonialist, and imperialist societies (Harding, 1991; Faith, 1993). Although segregation is practiced similarly in men’s and women’s prisons (deprivations and humiliation are often generalized practices), women will have a unique sense of their confinement in segregation because this sense is intertwined with the gendering project of the prison regime and their own disadvantaged position in society. Thus, experiences of segregation should be viewed as gendered.

**Methodological Issues**

Participants in this study were selected using two criteria:

1. They were incarcerated in or around the vicinity of Edmonton, the capital city of the province of Alberta, which has two provincial prisons and three federal penitentiaries² (two for men and one for women); and
2. They had spent time in administrative or disciplinary segregation, in either the provincial or federal prison systems, or both.

Women meeting these criteria fell into three life situations at the time of the study. Some were confined to segregation cells, others had experienced segrega-
tion in the past and were still incarcerated, and still others had been segregated in the past, but had since been released from prison into the community. Most participants had experienced segregation as recently as 1996, 1997, or 1998. Due to the frequent practice of transferring inmates from one prison to another, qualified participants were found in two federal institutions in the neighboring province of Saskatchewan. Overall, 12 women were willing or able to participate in the study. Four of them had been released, four were jailed in the Edmonton Institution for Women, two others in the Regional Psychiatric Centre in Saskatchewan, and two more in the Saskatchewan Penitentiary in Prince Albert.

Since many women were still in prison, extensive anonymity and confidentiality measures were guaranteed to all participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed using an open-coding procedure to identify recurrent themes and initiate the construction of analytical categories. Interviews were supplemented by official segregation log entries provided by the Women’s Program of the Correctional Service of Canada, the government agency responsible for federal corrections.

The Regulatory Framework of Segregation in Canada

In Canada, the administration of carceral facilities is divided between the federal and provincial governments. Each level of government has the prerogative, and constitutional responsibility, to develop its own body of rules and procedures for their respective systems. Thus, the regulations governing the practice of prison segregation are specific to each jurisdiction. The prison system under the purview of the federal government is managed through the Corrections and Conditional Release Act of 1992 (hereafter CCRA). This federal law stipulates two forms of segregation in federal corrections. The first is administrative segregation and its comprehensive purpose is to prevent a prisoner from interacting with the general prison population for reasons of institutional security, personal safety, or for investigation purposes (CCRA, sect. 31.3(a) and (b)). The second form of segregation is disciplinary (punitive) in nature. It is to be used exclusively as a sanction for prisoners found guilty of disciplinary offenses, such as damaging property, fighting, disobeying a justifiable order, refusing to work, or being disrespectful (CCRA, 1992, sect. 40). Disciplinary segregation is reserved for serious disciplinary offenses and for no more than 30 consecutive days (sect. 44.1(f)), unless there are exceptions. Under federal law, prisoners in administrative and disciplinary segregation are confined to isolation cells for 23 hours a day.

At the provincial level, each province drafts its own set of prison rules and procedures; thus, variations across the country may be considerable. In the province of Alberta — where many participants had been incarcerated — prison regulations are rather vague about the purpose of administrative segregation. The only clear provision related to this practice stipulates that some form of seclusion may be imposed for prisoners considered violent (Correctional Institution Regu-
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lations [hereafter CIR], 1977 sect. 49(1)), or to ensure the adequate observation of prisoners “whose mental condition requires it” (sect. 19(1)(2)). Alberta law is far more explicit regarding living conditions and privileges allowed in disciplinary segregation. For instance, it clearly stipulates that disciplinary segregation may be used as one of several available forms of “punishment” (sect. 42(5)) to be imposed on prisoners found to have “broken the rules of the institution” (sect.42(1)). For example, a Disciplinary Board may rule that a prisoner be punished and segregated for situations ranging from assault, vandalism, or possession of contraband, to disobeying an order, being disrespectful or idle, feigning an illness, or failing to keep oneself or one’s cell neat and clean (sect. 45). The following sections discuss the way in which women prisoners experience the daily implementation of such formal rules and regulations in segregation.

Portrait of the Women

The women participants are on average 31 years old, are mostly single (83%), and mostly mothers (67%). Moreover, they are mostly of Aboriginal descent (67%), with only 23% of the sample being Caucasian and another 10% of African ancestry. The significant overrepresentation of Aboriginal women in the study is consistent with findings in the literature that Aboriginals are disproportionately present in the Canadian criminal justice process, especially women in prison (LaPrairie, 1993). Recent Canadian research has also revealed that 60% of the women segregated at the time of their study were of Aboriginal ancestry (Solicitor General, 1998). Considering that Aboriginal peoples account for approximately three percent of the total population of Canada (Statistics Canada, 1996), this reveals a rather unsettling situation.

Incarceration practices toward Aboriginal peoples exemplify institutionalized race relations that are a legacy of colonial rule and ongoing coerced dependency in Canada. Several interviewees describe being the target of “racial comments” made by other segregated prisoners and staff; moreover, “Native girls” — in contrast to other women — were not allowed to shower after being “tear gassed and maced,” contrary to clear prison regulations. They were also confined in the basement section of a segregation unit while the “girls that were white” were held upstairs in better lit, better ventilated, and better-heated cells. With 67% of the participants being of Aboriginal ancestry, the findings suggest a racialization of segregation practices, with segregation serving as a physical and symbolic space reserved for particular women. Due to their assumed racial characteristics, they do not “fit” into stereotypical conceptions based on white femininity held within prisons’ institutional framework. For example, Native women report being sent to, or maintained in, segregation for reasons such as “throwing things around” and being “mouthy” or “argumentative.” The model of femininity reproduced here supports and perpetuates stereotypical notions of women as inherently polite, docile, and submissive. This is further perpetuated if “proper” (feminine) behavior
results in the granting of privileges (e.g., being considered for release from segregation), or, conversely, if “improper” (feminine) behavior leads to an unfavorable outcome (e.g., when being “mouthy” leads to disciplinary charges and additional time in segregation). If women’s actions and reactions in prison are “judged” using this model of femininity, the overrepresentation of Native women in the study is symptomatic of the way in which structural racism may result in determined paths and kinds of “troubles” an Aboriginal woman will likely encounter when she is imprisoned. The situation for black women, who are becoming increasingly disproportionate in the Canadian federal prison system, may be similar.

The data for time spent in segregation cells, as well as for time generally spent in prison, are located in Table 1 (found at the end of the article). The lack of systematic entry codes for the data is intentional. Entries in days, weeks, months, or years reflect the women’s descriptions — their temporal sense of their time in prison and in segregation. As Table 1 shows, three women were exclusively jailed in provincial prisons and two exclusively in federal institutions. The remaining seven experienced imprisonment in both provincial and federal prisons, where they all experienced segregation in both institutions. The average time they spent in federal institutions was 3.4 years cumulatively, almost equivalent to that spent in provincial prisons (3.6 years). Six women spent more time in federal institutions than in provincial prisons, while the other six did the exact opposite. The longest cumulative stays in provincial prisons were 11 years in one case and nine years in another. Both were served through a number of shorter prison sentences over a long period.

Interestingly, a more noticeable difference between federal and provincial institutions is apparent when one looks at the time spent in segregation. Of the entire sample, nine women experienced segregation in federal penitentiaries for an average of 7.8 months, while 10 did so in provincial prisons for an average of 12.8 months (cumulated stays in segregation). Therefore, more women spend more time in segregation in provincial prisons than in federal institutions. Despite the limited sample, this difference raises concerns about segregation in provincial prisons. First, incarceration in provincial prisons is shorter (less than two years), is generally imposed for less serious offenses, and most women are held in maximum-security conditions in most provincial prisons (Finn et al., 1999). It is also worrying inasmuch as the incarceration of women in provincial prisons has been a generally neglected issue in the literature (e.g., Imbleau, 1987; Comack, 1996). In a comprehensive review of the literature, Shaw (1994) highlighted the rather sparse research done on women in provincial prisons in Canada, a grave concern considering that many more women serve their sentence in such prisons than in federal facilities. Federal institutions admitted 220 women between 1997 and 1998, while 8,878 were admitted to provincial prisons that year (Reed and Roberts, 1998). Since 83% of our participants have been segregated in provincial
prisons at one point, more research is needed on this neglected and inconspicuous reality of prison life.

**Living in Segregation**

The themes that emerge from our analysis pertain to the motives for being confined to segregation, the material conditions of segregation, the predominance of idleness and solitude, and the resistance strategies that women devise to cope with, survive, or escape segregation. According to the participants and their institutional segregation record, the motives invoked for their segregation fall into three categories. First, segregation is used to control or punish women who have allegedly engaged in (or threatened to use) forceful behaviors toward prison staff or fellow prisoners. Reasons such as fighting with ex-girlfriends, lighting fires, being disrespectful (e.g., “mouthing off”), “flipping out” (e.g., swearing, “smashing” objects in cell), tampering with a prisoner’s personal care products, and participating in a major disturbance are often recalled by the women. Second, prison administrations segregate women prisoners to ensure the peaceful and uneventful operation of prisons, that is, to maintain a stable prison environment. Various institutional reasons are invoked: security purposes (e.g., segregation after a transfer to a prison that housed an “incompatible” prisoner, or after the media or a high-ranking prison administrator had been contacted to protest prison conditions), assessment processes (e.g., segregation while undergoing a 12-week assessment program), the observance of institutional policies (e.g., segregation because she was “in a condition other than normal”), and targeted decisions relating to individual cases (e.g., segregation because forbidden items — a deck of cards, little packs of salt and pepper — were found in cell). Although prison administrations used segregation with this stabilizing intent, its use perturbs the peace inside the institution more than it guarantees it. Indeed, the extensive, habitual, and unquestioned use of segregation — including the threat of segregation — excites conflict and hostility between the prisoners themselves and their keepers. This agitation in turn increases the likelihood of crises that justify emergency measures (e.g., emergency response teams, lockdowns), and thus more frequent use of segregation. Administrative accounts of such crises tend to focus on prisoner behavior as refractory, while losing sight of the inherently inflammatory components of segregation. In the end, segregation as a control strategy generates that which it seeks to suppress.

The third motive for resorting to segregation — to curtail self-injurious activities in prison — exemplifies this argument. One-quarter of the women cited such activities (e.g., slashing, setting their pants on fire, attempted hanging) as the reasons for being sent to segregation. Once in segregation, however, one-quarter of the participants reported self-mutilation to be an almost daily occurrence, often to counteract the negated self that results from the subhuman conditions there. It provides women with some sense of their own corporeal existence, some sense of
being “half human, half alive.” In prison, self-destructive actions, and other inward-focused actions such as vandalizing one’s cell, have often been explained as coping mechanisms used by prisoners to channel the anger, frustration, and tensions attached to institutional constraints, difficult pasts, or uncertainty about their future. Female prisoners are more likely than are male prisoners to respond to imprisonment with such actions (Dobash, Dobash, and Gutteridge, 1986; Pollock-Byrne, 1990; Heney, 1990; Crump, 1995; Shaylor, 1998).

Self-harming activities often lead to administrative reactions that are diametrically opposed to the ones the women may have hoped for. Because of the assumed institutional risks involved in self-injurious demeanors, the women are placed under observation to restrain or calm them. The ultimate outcome of a self-destructive action is additional segregation time. Such forms of social control have probably increased in frequency and severity with the introduction of therapeutic-oriented regimes in prisons that, in the case of women, were underpinned by mythic psychiatric conceptions of women offenders as medical cases needing treatment (Genders and Player, 1986).

In sum, women prisoners are placed in segregation to counter or circumscribe particular types of violence that often result from the oppressive nature of imprisonment (e.g., self-induced violence, fires, drugs, “smashing” one’s cell) or from assumptions about femininity (e.g., “mouthing off,” swearing, fighting, “tattooing”). Ideas of gender are apparent in the reasons used to justify the segregation of many women since men are rarely segregated for conduct such as “mouthing off,” swearing, or tattooing.

Segregation as practiced in federal and provincial prisons in Canada is generally abusive. Segregation violence is pervasive in both systems, and although it takes different forms in each apparatus, neither is more or less oppressive than the other. For example, several federal institutions that incarcerate women came under public scrutiny when abusive practices against women prisoners in segregation were revealed in the media. In 1994, the Arbour Commission of Inquiry (1996) condemned the violent and abusive treatment of six women prisoners during their segregation (for up to nine months) after a fierce altercation with staff at the Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario. Thereafter, fellow prisoners murdered a woman while in segregation at one of the new carceral facilities for women in Alberta, and an Aboriginal woman committed suicide while segregated in a men’s penitentiary in Saskatchewan. Suicides and drug overdoses are frequent occurrences with women in segregation in Canadian federal prisons.

The study this article is based upon indicates that, at the federal level, segregation is carried out inconsistently from one facility to the next. Some institutions more actively attempt to alleviate the deprivations endured by segregated women. For example, they are flexible regarding the rule about being out of the cell one hour a day, allow frequent or regular interactions with staff, or permit...
women to keep personal (and often crucial) belongings in their cell. Other federal institutions do not sustain similar efforts, particularly in disciplinary segregation. In these cases, women must sleep on a mattress on the floor, with only a blanket and no pillow, and no personal belongings.

In provincial prisons, the conditions are reported to be as oppressive as in federal institutions. In the best scenarios, women are forbidden access to telephone calls, cigarettes, personal belongings, grooming items (e.g., toothbrush, shampoo, toilet paper), undergarments, and programs. In the worst scenarios, they must cope with cold temperatures, dampness, insects, drugs, sleeping on mattresses on the floor with wet blankets, or being chained to their bed (if they are allowed a bed). More worrisome, women are repeatedly subjected to degrading and sexually humiliating practices (e.g., camera monitoring and harassment from staff or male prisoners), as the following excerpt exemplifies:

The most difficult, I think, was doing it [segregation time] in the Remand Centre because you’ve got both men and women there.... You’re not allowed an extra [sanitary] pad in your room, you know.... At that time, they wouldn’t give you a roll of toilet paper. Um, so every time you needed to go to the bathroom or change or something, you had these people with cameras on you...and their attitudes were “well, you work the street, what are you ashamed about?” ...It was always freezing in there and...they give you a great big ugly thing called, uh, baby dolls, which don’t resemble anything, like, what I know baby dolls to be. And these blankets that are just gross...half the time they come up there and give us clean ones every second or third day. And because they were such heavy material, they’d be soaking wet.... It wouldn’t be so bad if you were willing to flirt with the guards to get what you wanted, you know. But if you weren’t willing to play that game, then you had some sicko across from you and you’d be sitting on your toilet and [he] can see through your window, or you’d have some sicko standing at your door beating his meat. Somebody coming knocking at your door standing there trying to, you know, flash me (Charlotte).

The baby doll features prominently in segregation in many prisons. Women most frequently reported its use. The baby doll looks vaguely like a gown or tunic and is made of a strong, heavy, colorless (gray), and nonflammable fabric. Usually tied at the sides, it can be knee length or come down to the ankles. In provincial and federal prisons, baby dolls are used when the administration suspects a segregated prisoner of having suicidal intentions. A prisoner may be forced to wear the baby doll to prevent suicide attempts using shoelaces, shirtsleeves, belts, or pants. Prisoners are usually left without underclothing. The following illustrates several other accounts of the “baby doll experience”:
And then you had like this giant canvas dress to wear; well, we call it baby
doll. It goes down to your ankles. No underclothes, no nothing.... It’d be,
like, humiliating because you have to shower and walk out and the guards
are standing there looking at you. And they have these big openings in
these segregated dresses.... I didn’t only feel beaten; I also felt like I was
raped, because I was going through the emotions of it too, of not having
any underclothes.... I had to fight to get an undershirt so that I wouldn’t
be showing myself. I ended up getting crabs down in there because it’s
so dirty.... I thought crabs were sexually transmitted, but they were on the
one dress, one baby doll.... All you’re allowed to do is shower once a day
and you have one hour to that, clean yourself, and (sniffle) you wear the
same baby doll day after day, after day (Agnes).

The women frequently report highly sexualized practices surrounding the use
of the baby doll, and all accounts point to its arbitrary, humiliating, and degrading
aspects. The literature has extensively noted the prevalence of past abuse among
women prisoners and thus sexualized practices toward women prisoners greatly
contribute to their sense of powerlessness and their marginalization in society.
Practices surrounding the use of the baby doll in segregation are consequently
gendered (although men may be required to wear baby dolls) due to their focus on
women’s sexuality. These practices are also gendering since they contribute to
women’s sexual objectification, and perpetuate and legitimate social inequalities
based on gender.

As Shaylor (1998) has documented, women are kept idle in segregation. Given
the nearly total absence of programs and recreational activities, women use
whatever means at their disposal to alleviate the monotonous pace of time:
sleeping or doing trivial and mindless busywork (e.g., cleaning their cell, pacing
back and forth, doing puzzles). Being bored out of one’s wits is a difficult
condition to endure for any length of time. It alters one’s perception of actual time
and decelerates the passage of time. Minutes seem like hours and days like weeks.
Consequently, it often creates the impression that one has been placed on a slow-
moving side track, where life does not “go on,” but is suspended or stopped. As
such, idle time in segregation is simply doing time, not taking time, spending it,
or even wasting it, since that implies that their time spent in particular activities
could be better used. Segregated women must learn to exist in insipid conditions.
As Foucault (1975: 145) noted, discipline can only proceed through a manipula-
tion of time and space, and hence the rigid control of space and the temporal
seriation of activities in prisons. Although segregation is a particularly strict
control of space, it does not display a similarly rigorous control of time. Indeed,
the time dimension is nonexistent. As such, segregation is a distinctive “analytical
space” within prison, a space where women can be watched, treated, and
controlled, unbounded by the time constraints prevalent in the rest of the prison.
Living in segregation means existing in inertia and adapting to loneliness. This is the most significant feature of the participants’ experience of segregation, and its prevalence is far from surprising. The literature has long documented the fact that, as a direct result of incarceration, women suffer more than men do from their separation from sources of support (Macleod, 1986; Pollock-Byrne, 1990; Shaw et al., 1991; Bertrand, 1998). Because such emotional linkages are a pivotal feature of women’s socialization into “proper” gender roles in society, they are paramount to women’s cultural sense of themselves as women:

For women, the disruption of family life and of significant relationships has the effect of undermining or removing their most salient social roles of wife, lover, mother, sister, daughter, and so on, roles to which their identities are tied and within which their affectional and security needs are met (Williams, 1987: 422).

Unlike men, women’s ability to “fit” social expectations of their gender roles as women and mothers is connected to the presence and continuance of these linkages. Although the rupture of significant relationships is often an unavoidable consequence of imprisonment for both women and men, the ability of imprisoned women to fulfill social expectations is more seriously impaired because significant relationships are such a central organizational feature of their gender roles in society. This situation is exacerbated in segregation. Women are often severely cut off from the sources of support they count on in the community and internally within the prison (e.g., friends, lovers, or Aboriginal Elders), as revealed below:

My mom died when I was back there [in segregation]. I got the call at nine o’clock at night that my mom passed away. They called the doctor and got me, um, some Ativan, these tranquilizers.... (Clears throat.) They gave me a pill at bedtime and just shoved me in my room alone. Like, here I just heard the news my mom just died, you know. And then the next day the nurses found out that, um, that the nurse the night before had this Ativan order coming from the doctor and they were all upset because they didn’t want me having that. And so that was cut off (Flora).

Every day, women are unable to engage in the most basic verbal interaction with others. Most women in segregation state that verbal contacts are nonexistent at worst and sporadic at best in several federal institutions. Contacts with staff are often reduced to the minimum stipulated in law: with health professionals, the warden, or deputy warden. Besides “screaming,” “talking through the wall,” or “yelling underneath the [cell] door” to have some semblance of human communication with other segregated prisoners, women appear to be virtually silenced by their general lack of access to quality or sustained human contact. As Charlotte said, “you’re just in there and that’s it.”
Living conditions in segregation affect the women’s sense of the value of their existence. They disclose feeling “lost,” being “out of touch with what was going on” around them, being “nowhere, but at the same time somewhere very far removed from humanity,” being “put on a different planet,” or in “a cocoon.” They also express feeling “ignored, like [they] don’t exist” or feeling like “everybody hated [them] totally.” Segregation is experienced by the participants as rejection, abandonment, dehumanization, and as a general lack of acknowledgment of their existence.

Living in segregation means devising tactics to survive or escape it, as well as to resist one’s helplessness. Tactics range from spirituality, contacting the media, vandalizing the cell, assaulting disregarding staff, and “playing the system,” to dissociating mentally, putting thoughts in neutral, or engaging in self-induced starvation or strangulation to trigger half-consciousness. Women report intentionally harming themselves in the hope of being transferred from segregation to the institutional health services unit or a community hospital. They reported deliberately slashing their faces or wrists, stabbing themselves, eating “screws and knobs off radios,” setting their pants on fire, or burning themselves with cigarettes or matches so that they “wouldn’t have to be left there” and the prison administration “would have to move [them] somewhere else.”

The strategies adopted to cope with segregation are specific to one’s personal experience of segregation. They are related to each woman’s sense of her situation, and of herself as a segregated prisoner. The strategies adopted (or abandoned) are also linked to the resources (or lack thereof) available to them. Similar to several studies on the imprisonment of women, our analysis reveals various strategies that women use to attempt to regain control over their lives while in segregation. By doing so, they resist the repressive and dehumanizing conditions of segregation. Although one would hope that this disavowing of women’s existence might cease once released from segregation, it does not. Beyond segregation, women struggle with its lasting effects. They must live the best they can both during and after segregation.

The Aftermath of Segregation

Confinement to segregation, especially under austere conditions, will likely have consequences that reach far beyond a woman’s release from segregation and even from prison. Segregation forces many women to surrender their unassuming or low profile, and to acquire an unprecedented and “tainted” social visibility. Indeed, it often brings about invalidating labels that encourage reactions toward prisoners that further their isolation. After being released from segregation, women encounter a stigmatizing response from the staff. Henceforth portrayed as a fragile, disturbed, suicidal, or violent individual, upon returning to the general prison population the segregated woman may face paternalistic attitudes and their corollary behaviors on the part of staff. For some women, this translates into
frequent inquiries or checks to verify how they are doing, perpetuating feelings of suffocation and of relinquishing one’s entire life to the control of the prison — often-felt experiences in segregation. One woman reported that “staff members want to smother” her whenever she is released from segregation. Such responses perpetuate the invalidating self-image with which women often had to cope in segregation. Although well intentioned, they are gendered responses since release from segregation is not likely to elicit such reactions from staff in men’s prisons.

Segregation produces long-lasting effects of another kind for a few women. Past abuse is frequently relived whenever women recall the annihilation and shame suffered in segregation. Rehashing such feelings mirrors and reinforces their particular position in the established power structure in society. It invariably sends women a distinct message about their vulnerability and position of inequality in relation to authority, conditioning even their post-prison lives. In the masculinist mindset of a patriarchal culture, it reminds women of their status as women, and, more specifically, as women behind bars. The prevalence of survivors of abuse among imprisoned women (see Heney, 1993; Comack, 1996) must draw our attention to these concerns. If personal memories of segregation are likened to a re-experiencing of past trauma, a significant proportion of the women will probably be affected.

A recurrent “side effect” of segregation reported in the literature and by many of my participants is that of coping with various degrees of panic in open or public spaces (Jackson, 1983; Grassian and Friedman, 1986; Brodsky and Scogin, 1988; Haney, 1993; Shaylor, 1998). Half of the participants experienced difficulties with being in crowded or noisy rooms, ranging from mild but manageable discomfort or irritation, to anxiety reactions, paranoia, fear, or utter hate of being around people, especially soon after being reintroduced to the general prison population. As one woman explains:

I just wanted to violently tell everybody to shut up, sit down, and fucking be quiet because it was too noisy. And a lot of things irritated me; I was very irritable. It was like an open wound and you just put a grain of salt in it. It would bleed. It was very hard. I couldn’t go anywhere. I was asked to go to the gym to do some weights. I tried to go to the weight room, but because of [the] noise of weights and the people, and I felt, like, all the time I had to urinate. And I was, like, running all the time away from everyone and everything. It was just a scary place to be (Emily).

To adapt to such overwhelming feelings, many women willingly seclude themselves from the rest of the prison population. This self-imposed segregation takes different forms. For some, it means not engaging mentally in any type of interaction — talking or otherwise — whenever they are hurting. Others physically isolate themselves when they feel they cannot cope with something: “I would just stay in my cage,” reports Emily. For some, voluntary seclusion has repercus-
sions for their family life, since they “cut themselves off” from their children and “push them away.”

Some women expressed concern over their inability to interact due to the dissociation they endured while in segregation. This isolation from human contact eventually led them to experience feelings of “invasion” of their personal space when in the presence of unsolicited or intimate human contact. For one woman, having been alone for so long in segregation means she now feels unable to eat in front of people: “I’ll eat fast to get out of there. I’ll stop eating and tell them I’m done” (Flora). A second woman explains that after her release from prison, she is comfortable being by herself, but feels that her space is “invaded” whenever someone knocks on her apartment door. The presence of men in elevators or taxicabs, for example, especially exacerbates this impression.

The aftermath of segregation generally translates into overpowering feelings of inadequacy, thereby contributing to a reshaping of a woman’s self-image. Most of them now struggle with “altered” and negative views of themselves. Several participants acutely sense themselves as angry persons due to the arbitrariness of their confinement in segregation or to the helplessness they experienced. This anger takes different forms. Some report developing a “terrifying” temperament or a “scary” rage, while others believe they have become “cold,” “calculating,” or emotionless persons. Still others are fighting profound feelings of disrespect for themselves, or, after their release from prison, against the “conditioning” they were subjected to while incarcerated, such as becoming “used to getting kicked around” and disrespected. Many women have wrestled with some seemingly irreversible aspects of their situation. Following segregation, they view themselves as “isolated,” “loners,” who feel “disjointed and separated from [their] own body.” Charlotte described herself as feeling “so segregated still from everybody.” “I’m hopeless.... Look what they did to me,” added Flora.

Segregation leaves women with a precarious self-image and rather fatalistic attitudes about their ability to counteract that image. Far from empowering women — and even further from “rehabilitating” them — segregation accentuates their marginalization and perpetuates it beyond their actual confinement in segregation cells. Segregation denies them personality, recognition, and full adult status. It replicates — and participates in the maintenance of — the societal status quo in which women have historically been denied access to “legitimate” means of individual (and collective) promotion within society.

Concluding Remarks

This article aimed to develop a knowledge base of women prisoners’ experiences of their confinement in segregation in Western Canadian prisons. I have sought to partially fill two lacunae in the literature, the scarcity of experiential studies in penological research and the almost complete absence of inquiry into the practice of segregation with women prisoners. The women in this study have
revealed that living conditions in segregation and, more disturbingly, the effects of these conditions are more damaging and reach far beyond the original intent of segregation policies: to prevent prisoner association or to “encourage” behaviors that promote the “good order” of the institution. Apart from two women who had mixed feelings about the benefits of segregation — and who spent a total of 48 hours in segregation — none of the participants reported benefiting from their time in segregation.

The motives for segregating women are related to minor “misbehaviors” (e.g., being disrespectful, “smashing things around”) or to an array of institutional reasons said to threaten the good operation of the prison. One participant effectively describes the interpretive logic for segregating women: “if you were laughing you were probably high, and if you were crying you were probably suicidal, and if you were not saying anything you were probably ready to kill someone” (Charlotte). In such circumstances, the segregation of women is arguably an oppressive institutional (and social) response to somewhat innocuous actions and reactions. This lends support to the literature suggesting that since the 17th century, surveillance and regulation often have been closer and more omnipresent toward women prisoners than that usually directed at men, and that ideas of gender have been historically present in the reasons used to justify the internment of women (Dobash, Dobash, and Gutteridge, 1986; Bosworth, 2000).

Given the dire experiences shared by these women, to discuss anything but the complete and swift eradication of the segregation of incarcerated women in Canadian prisons dilutes the harshness or reality of these experiences, or minimizes their effects on women. In other words, it legitimizes the prison rationale and its array of assumptions.

In view of the richness of the participants’ experiences, a larger-scale study should be undertaken to document more systematically women’s experiences of segregation in Canada. This is especially pressing since the current trend in the Canadian criminal justice process is one of escalating punitiveness toward women. For example, in the last decade, the number of women on probation increased by almost 30%, and the ratio of women admitted to federal institutions rose from two percent of the total adult admissions in 1986–1987 to five percent in 1997–1998. For their part, women admitted to provincial prisons between 1997 and 1998 accounted for nine percent of adult admissions, an increase of two percent compared to 1986–1987 data (Finn et al., 1999). Boritch (1997: 183) asserts that the rate of incarceration for women in provincial prisons has risen by 102% since the 1980s. This situation far outstrips rates in England, the United States, and Australia with very short sentences (Shaw et al., 1991), even though England and the United States have witnessed marked growth in their incarceration rates for women, suggesting an increased willingness to use imprisonment to punish women. Furthermore, several new Canadian institutions for federally sentenced women have been operating at full capacity, and others are already
experiencing overcrowding. As a result, some of these facilities are engaged in the process of expanding. In essence, Canada remains far more unthinkingly over-punitive toward women than are other European and Western countries. In view of this trend, a serious questioning of the practice of segregation is warranted.

Table 1:
Brief Institutional Profile of the Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Total time in prison</th>
<th>Total time in segregation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provincial</td>
<td>Federal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>6 months</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnes</td>
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<td>5.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
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<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pauline</td>
<td>5–6 months</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cora</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>15 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nellie</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>6.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabrielle</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thérèse</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flora</td>
<td>19 months</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>15 months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTES

1. The Correctional Service of Canada only recently began to consider the impact of segregation on federally sentenced women. This interest is closely tied to its current efforts to implement an unprecedented “woman-centered” correctional philosophy.

2. In Canada, provincial prisons have jurisdiction over offenders sentenced to incarceration for less than two years. Federal penitentiaries have the sole responsibility for offenders sentenced to imprisonment for two years and more.

3. This is probably partly due to the absence of community alternatives for women, their small percentage relative to male prisoners, or “tradition” (what has usually been done).

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