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## **Narratives as Prison ‘Escapes’: Power, Interaction and the co-Construction of the Female Prisoner by Incarcerated Women**

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### **Abstract**

As a mode of discourse and textual superstructure, narrative plays a nuclear role in construing social reality as well as in creating social identities. That is why the study of narrative is one of the most important investigations of human activity, as Roland Barthes suggested long ago. In fact, it configures the common denominator of cultures of all times and places, in such a way that the notion of a natural narratology is now widely accepted. How prevailing narratives become reified inside the prison walls and how they impact on women serving sentences is what will be explored in this paper. Through listening to and analyzing the accounts of female inmates, we will show the work of narrative as regulation, used upon the female offender’s body, primarily by the cultural and ideological subtexts that proliferate around the processes of deviance and punishment and, secondly, by the formal rules imposed from above, by the prison establishment.

This does not mean, however, that narrative cannot also function as a sphere to resist the conventions, practices and procedures with which the institution fulfills certain aims. Neither can it be said that it is not a site to challenge and negotiate frameworks of thought and power relations. Actually, narratives can sprout from strategies of subversion, particularly those that are used by women against the embodiment of hegemonic norms. Drawing on focus groups and focusing on the ways in which women, throughout talk about incarceration, construct the female prisoner’s identity, we will, precisely, reveal that narratives are a powerful site to ‘escape’ both from imprisonment and from the gendered form of punishment upon which it seems to exist.

### **Keywords**

women; narrative; identity; prison; power relations

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## **INTRODUCTION**

As a mode of discourse and textual superstructure (Van Dijk, 1997), narrative plays a nuclear role in construing social reality as well as in creating social identities. That is why the study of narrative is one of the most important investigations of human activity, as Roland Barthes (1968) suggested. In fact, either personal or collective, the narrative configures the common denominator of cultures of all times and places. It is a polyphonic mode of discourse by which individuals transform their experiences into texts and project images of themselves and others in such a way that the notion of a natural narratology is now widely accepted (Fludernik, 2006).

As we continue to think about the uses of narrative in human life as a form of appropriation and shaping the outer reality and as a way of building the experience and projecting images of oneself and others, we must also pay increasing attention to the political effects of narrative. Seeing storytelling not only as a way of creating community, but also as a resource for dominating others or for expressing solidarity, demands considering the continuing negotiation through which humans create language, society and self as they talk and act.

How prevailing narratives become reified inside the prison walls and how they impact on women serving sentences is what will be explored in this article, which presents results from a research project on the role of narrative in the lives of incarcerated women. Through listening and analyzing the accounts of female inmates, we will show the work of narrative as regulation, used upon the female offender's body, primarily by the cultural and ideological subtexts that proliferate around the processes of deviance and punishment and, secondly, by the formal rules imposed from above, by the prison establishment.

This does not mean, however, that narrative cannot also function as a sphere to resist the conventions, practices and procedures with which the institution fulfills certain aims. Neither can it be said that it is not a site to challenge and negotiate frameworks of thought and power relations. Actually, narratives can sprout from strategies of subversion, particularly those that are used by women against the embodiment of hegemonic norms.

Bearing in mind that narrative is such a privileged discursive construction of the world, of our own selves and others, this study uses narrative analysis to explore the narratives of female prisoners. Drawing on focus groups and focusing on the ways in which women, through talk about incarceration, construct the female prisoner's identity, pick out bits of experience and establish boundaries and meaning by labeling them, we sought primarily to challenge the silence and invisibility surrounding prison routines.

Besides seeking to undo the invisibility of prisoners, by helping to put the prison experience into personal and collective narratives, we are interested in gaining insight into the relationship between media, identity and power. Studying the ways in which female prisoners use specific media resources and texts as sources of identification and resistance to the depriving prison environment and to the disempowered social context in which we seem to live, we are able to investigate not just how female prisoners' stories are structured and the ways in which they work, but also how cultural narratives are silenced, contested and accepted.

Giddens's (1984) theory of structuration is particularly important for our theoretical framework. Giddens's model of human agency, which takes into account both unconscious drives and knowledgeable choice, counters the prevailing view of prisoners as a unified and passive subordinated public. If combined with the theory of narrative, structuration theory gains a more easily identifiable cultural dimension. Focusing on narrative, examining the ways the female prisoners frame their stories in relation to the dominant cultural storylines which form the context of their lives, we are able to uncover what the women's experience tells us about the social construction of femininities and to see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning. This explains our interest in how narratives follow, are constrained by, or resist, larger patterns of social and cultural storytelling, strongly reproduced by the media, and how they are tied up with negotiations of identity.

It must also be said that our framework of thought is firmly oriented by a gender approach. We are thus concerned with the asymmetrical gender relations in terms of access to symbolic, social, political, and economic capital. Indeed, although individuals may deviate from the archetypes of masculinity and femininity, this nonetheless occurs against the ideological structure of gender that privileges men as a social group. That is why we think it is important to study the counter-narratives of the female inmates, understood as personal stories women tell and live, which can offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives.

The consideration of the overall social context is mandatory, since prisons do not exist in a vacuum. As suggested by Foucault (1975), they reflect, often in refracted forms, something of the global society<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, an important strength of feminist prison sociology is that it shows how prisons for women are intimately connected with discourses on feminine conduct in and beyond the prison walls<sup>2</sup>.

Furthermore, we should point out that the trends in prison population in recent decades unsettle one of the features in the official distribution of crime as well as in the dominant cultural narratives: the lack of female criminals. Often, the symbolic construction of the female offender is based on myths and beliefs of a 'natural' and a 'deviant' femininity and, more broadly, on the moral polarization of the female offender: a woman that not only challenges the law but the gender norms, which are based upon sexual difference. In fact, the female prison population has been growing in all the continents since 2000 (Walmsley, 2012). In Portugal, the percentage of female inmates decreased during the last decade, but continues to be one of the highest among the countries of Western Europe<sup>3</sup>. Also, while the percentage of males held in custody without conviction stands at 19.5%, women in the same situation, that is, as pre-trial detainees or waiting for a judicial decision that cannot be re-litigated, represent 29.9% of the female prison population<sup>4</sup>.

Finally, while not specifically concentrated on our own 'stories' about the narratives of female inmates, we pay attention to the context in which we listened to and analyzed our data. Our interest in the narrative 'performance' (Butler, 1990) of identities in social contexts and in the interpersonal construction or 'co-construction' of narrative requires the consideration of the shaping of personal narratives by larger social and cultural narratives as well as by our own meta-narrative as researchers.

## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NARRATIVE AND IDENTITY

When William Labov (1978, p.295) defines narrative as a 'method of recapitulation of past experience that consists of a sequence of events corresponding to a sequence of verbal

<sup>1</sup> Different interpretations of this same thesis can be seen, for example, in Cunha (2008), Jewkes (2006) and Liebling (2004).

<sup>2</sup> Relevant studies within the field of feminist prison sociology are: Carlen & Worrall (2004), Howe (1994) and Walker and Worrall (2006).

<sup>3</sup> According to the Portuguese state prison service (Direção-Geral dos Serviços Prisionais, 2012), in the first trimester of 2012, the female prison population represented 5,6% of the total of inmates. This percentage is only lower than the ones registered by the World Female Imprisonment List in Cyprus (5,8%), Malta (7,2%), Spain (7,6%) and Andorra (16,4%).

<sup>4</sup> Actually, although the procedural and criminal reform that took place in Portugal in 2007 was said to be oriented to reduce the prison population, prison sentences prevail as the classic criminal conviction (Santos *et al.*, 2009). Not only the occupancy rates continue to exceed the capacity of the penitentiary system, but the female prison population continues to increase, especially due to the conviction of foreign women involved in crimes related to drug trafficking. The same reform has limited the use of preventive detention measures.

propositions', he presents a fundamental notion of narrative as a mode of discourse and textual structure whose temporal component makes it suitable to represent both the world, whether real or imaginary, and past experience.

If, for some decades, especially until Structuralism, the study of the nature of narrative depended solely on the literariness of verbal productions, its latitude and scope is now fully assumed, being accepted that it is present in multiple contexts and across different functional 'substances' of expression. According to Barthes's seminal and innovative approach,

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances, as though any material were fit to receive man's stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative it is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, in history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio's Santa Ursula), stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation (Barthes, 1966, p.1).

It is therefore understandable that, in addition to the study of the great literary and fictional narratives, Narrative Studies have opened up to new objects and methods: from Cultural, Media and Women's Studies to Psychotherapy and Cognitive Sciences. This expansion of the field meant 'the evolution of narratology itself (...). No longer designating just a subfield of structuralist literary theory, *narratology* can now be used to refer to any principal approach to the study of narrative organized discourse, literary, historiographical, conversational, filmic, or other' (Herman, 1999, p.27).

The concept of a natural narratology follows this line of thought. It is based on the fact that, in social acts, trivial, common, everyday life, we are facing narratives that reflect human experience as 'natural', as if the act of building time and experience through narratives were 'innate' to humans (Fludernik, 2006).

If we take the definition of narrativity offered by Gerald Prince, we easily realize that it is through narrative that human beings discursively organize their relation to time, appropriating a reality that is external, shaping it and communicating it to others. In fact, for Prince,

the narrativity of a text depends on the extent to which that text constitutes a doubly oriented autonomous whole (with a well-defined and interacting beginning, middle and end) which involves some kind of conflict, [...] which is made up of discrete, particular, positive, and temporally distinct actions having logically unpredictable antecedents or consequences and which avoids inordinate amounts of commentary about them, their representation, or the latter's context (Prince *in* Reis, 1994, p. 275).

Emphasized by authors as diverse as Bremond or Ricoeur (Bremond, 1973; Ricoeur, 1983), this intrinsically human dimension of narrative is what gives it the status of a discursive mode par excellence of the construction of the subject and its position regarding other subjects and the wider world. In this sense, the construction of the subject's identity, of its projection in interpersonal relationships, is largely the result of the way in which he or she, as a narrator, puts his/her experience into narrative, projects him/herself in space and time, giving a logical sequence to his/her multiple experiences.

From this perspective, to explore the narratives of the female prisoner is a way of valuing human agency. That is why we consider structuration theory so important,<sup>5</sup> since it provides a relevant counter view to the prison deprivation literature, which points to imprisonment as a dehumanizing experience. We do not question the mortifying prison environment, in which the prisoner suffers a series of deprivations that fundamentally weaken his or her sense of identity. Nevertheless, we must recognize, as suggested by Giddens's model of human agency, that prisoners do not represent a unified and passive subordinated public.

Also, power relations are never stable. They are subject to ongoing negotiation, constantly being confirmed or put into question. In discursive processes of affirmation and subversion, cultural references and symbolic meanings intersect, social identities merge or interfere with each other, and new knowledge is constructed. In this process, multiple and blurry borders are drawn between various linguistic, cultural and social affiliations, often organized in problematic oppositional structures such as inside and outside, top and bottom, foreign and familiar. From this viewpoint, as soon as we acknowledge the agency of the narrators, we are able to understand the ways in which their narratives are powered by hegemonic visions and dominant cultural patterns.

## 2. RESEARCH ON MEDIA AND IMPRISONMENT

Along with the ability of narrative to create identity, we must also acknowledge its role in the crucial processes of apprehending, organizing and understanding the world's knowledge. Indeed, the knowledge of the world, how we understand reality and how we apprehend knowledge, is mainly provided by narratives. However, if the antiquity myths structured the grand narratives of civilization, currently the major producers of narratives are the media. Partially responsible for how we organize the world, for how we generate images of reality, read and articulate its complexity, media narratives – fictional or factual – produce and reproduce social beliefs, dictate standards of conduct, disseminate stereotypes and provide us with images of others. We can even say, in line with some authors, that the world we have access is necessarily built according to certain narrative principles, since our thinking, our mental structures and our knowledge are processed through narratives (Bruner, 1991). Indeed, if the world to which we can have access is necessarily built according to certain narrative principles, since our thoughts, our mental structures and our knowledge is processed through narrative, it is also true that media narratives are extremely powerful sites of mediation.

While the media are the major producers of narratives in our mediated societies, imprisonment is closed to public and media scrutiny. Stories about criminal behavior usually end with either a confession of guilt or a courtroom conviction. Interestingly, it seems that it is when the criminal is removed from the narrative that justice prevails. Actually, several factors contribute to the infrequent presentation of news about the daily operation of prisons and how inmates adapt to the conditions of incarceration (Ericson *et al.*, 1987; Chermak, 1995; Chermak & Chapman, 2007; Simões, 2011). Studies in the sociology of news have

<sup>5</sup> We follow closely the approach used in the work of Yvonne Jewkes (2002a, 2002b).

shown that editors and reporters provide stories to the public in response to their primary concerns, and they tend to think that a defendant's correctional behavior is not interesting to the public. One way of making sense of this absence is thus seeing it as part of the cultural and ideological subtexts that proliferate around the processes of deviance and punishment. By excluding from the public space the convicted person, the mediated narratives tell us that order is restored and we, the law-abiding people, can feel safe again.

The invisibility of the prisoner can also function as a way of focusing our attention on the crime itself, not the broader social forces behind it. By ending the story here, the criminal vanishes. His or her story is silenced, and thus the problems of the prison system remain unacknowledged: its living conditions, modes of discrimination and failure to offer education, training skills or rehabilitation can be overlooked more easily. From this viewpoint, studying the prison subculture is a way of rectifying a problematic invisibility by shedding light on the prison experience. Besides, this investment can be seen as a means of giving voice to those who have been hidden and silenced.

However, most studies of prisoners' use of media focus on trying to establish a causal relationship between the nature of the offences committed and media preferences<sup>6</sup>, or alternatively make claims about the therapeutic effects of the mass media among the confined<sup>7</sup>. Our study is neither concerned with prediction of behavior nor with causal explanations of media use, nor even with acknowledging media habits inside the prison walls. Our intention is both to understand how individual media choices and the very presence of media technologies may shed light on the various experiences of and adaptations to imprisonment. What differentiates our empirical study from the traditional approach of narratives within the humanities is that it is concerned with the social positioning they produce in a unique context: the prison environment.

### 3. EMPIRICAL CASE STUDY: PROCEDURE AND METHOD

Conducted as part of a wider and more detailed analysis (Simões, 2011), the study drew upon focus group interviews, which constitute the data, and conventional methods for qualitative analysis were only then applied. The construction of the female prisoner by incarcerated women is, thus, investigated through the use of focus group methodology, which allows examining context-embedded gendered experiences, combined with narrative analysis, through which it is possible to challenge the methodological hegemony of quantitative research paradigms in social science and discover the diverse forms and details of social life.

Focus group methodology, which essentially involves group discussions during which the participants focus collectively upon a topic selected by the researcher and presented to them in the form of a news story, a film, a game to play or simply a set of questions, differs from other methodological tools in the social sciences not in its mode of analysis but rather in its

<sup>6</sup> For an understanding of the impact and limitations of the academic literature in this area, see, for example, Reiner (2002), Jewkes (2004: Chap. 1) and Barker & Petley (1998).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Bryant and Zillmann (1984). Although demonstrating that media use by prisoners from five Flemish correctional institutions with varying regimes and populations is the complex product of their background, concrete living conditions and psychological reactions to confinement, Heidi Vandebosch (2000) also shows that the mass media can soften the pain of imprisonment.

data collection procedures. In recent decades, it has been advocated by feminist researchers for being suitable for research with oppressed and marginalized groups. Among the main advantages attributed to focus group methodology are its ability to allow the understanding of collective experiences of marginalization and developing a structural analysis of individual experience (Kitzinger, 1994; Montell, 1999) as well as its potential to shift power from the researcher to the participants (Madriz, 2001; Montell, 1999; Wilkinson, 1998).

Two focus group interviews were conducted in one Portuguese female prison, named Estabelecimento Prisional de Tires, involving a total of fifteen women. One of the groups of participants was in a special unit of the prison, the Educational and Therapeutic Unit. Nine female inmates serving prison sentences between three and 10 years, in the majority because of convictions related to drug trafficking, attended that discussion. Aged between 21 and 59 years old, the six women who attended the other focus group were in the main section of the prison. These six inmates were convicted to prison sentences between seven and 25 years, in most cases for homicides<sup>8</sup>. In both cases, recruitment was by confidential letter, as agreed between the researcher and the head of the prison unit<sup>9</sup> and the participants were stimulated to interact with each other and with the researcher in order to counteract individualistic accounts of gendered experiences.

A narrative analysis was then employed to explore the narratives of female prisoners in conversational contexts, paying attention to the ways dominant and counter cultural narratives enter into the construction and expression of the female prisoner by the incarcerated women.

Bearing in mind that it is through narratives that we discursively organize our relationship with space and time, appropriating a reality that is external to us, shaping it and communicating it to others, we concentrated on some of the basic features of the narrative: themes (the central meaning of the texts), character/narrator (focusing on both first-person narratives and conversational stories), and time and space (particularly focusing on the inter-subjective nature of story formation in such a unique social context).

#### 4. DISCUSSION OF THE MAIN FINDINGS

In approaching the main findings, we are interested in laying emphasis on the fact that, inside the prison walls, space is well defined, both in relation to the outside world, and in relation to the world as it is perceived within the prison walls. While the inmates serving time within the conditions of the 'usual' punishment balance the popular demand for imprisonment with the spatial constraints that make the prison a 'school of crime', the women doing time in the Educational and Therapeutic Unit appear to have found in the space where they serve their time a strong support to provide a renewal of both life and meaning.

Certainly due to the fact that they were included in a special program, which seeks to emphasize the rehabilitative possibilities of punishment, the women doing time in the special unit of the Estabelecimento Prisional de Tires do embrace the cultural articulation

<sup>8</sup> See Table 1 in appendix.

<sup>9</sup> A discussion guide was used to help the interaction between the participants. The conversations were recorded, but confidentiality and the freedom to speak «off the record» were guaranteed. The initial step in analyzing this kind of orally elicited personal experience narrative involved decisions about transcription. All the material was transcribed and subject to certain conventions which were expected to allow the social dynamics of small groups to become explicit.

of 'proper behavior' as well as the punishment for their misbehavior in the past. This position in relation to cultural institutions shows that the state constitutes the ground of their collective narrative. Indeed, instead of protesting against the fact that their personal body and subjectivity are overtly open for testing, therapy, and control, they express a feeling of gratitude that encourages a continuance of their correction.

The narrative constructed by the discursive fragments of these inmates is, thus, a site of resistance to the dominant symbolic universe of the prison as a dehumanizing environment in that it is viewed as place of order, discipline, routine, mutual respect, and even of freedom. It is surely no coincidence that the dominant discursive person is the first person plural, as if each one of these women were assumed as part of a community that, under the wings of the state, works organically to fulfill its dues:

*FG1*

*Participant 6: Inside the prison, we walked at will, we are not closed – we are only closed up at seven o'clock – we are free all day here in this space, we can go out there and there is a very close connection between us in the prison establishment.*

*Participant 1: It is a paradise we have here, because we own it, because we respect the rules and respect each other, we have to respect the times, we must have the house in order, among us must be harmony.*

The patterns of social interaction of these women, particularly the use of associations rooms to watch television, seems to contribute to this position: it promotes community life. Interestingly, it is as if they had waived their previous identity, their 'pre-prison' sense of self in favor of a prisoner identity, which tends toward stability of the overall imprisonment system. Also, as expected, their narrative reveals apparent strong conformity to hegemonic feminine expectations. They discouraged narratives that would call their femininity into question, including in relation to the tasks they have to fulfill:

*FG1*

*Participant 1: Here we have a life and have responsibilities within the prison, we will compare it to the reality outside ... being outside is not lying in bed all day, get hungry and go to the cafe. Here, we have obligations and have a schedule to keep, so when we get out, we are already prepared.*

*Participant 5: We develop many activities. Apart from the work tasks that are mandatory and daily, the kitchen, the table, the laundry room, the hallway, the locker room, etc ... we work as a community.*

*Participant 1: Today she cleans the corridor, tomorrow she goes to the laundry, the other day she does another task ... we change tasks if one of us is sick...*

*Researcher: Are you expected to participate in some sort of profitable activities?*

*Participant 6: We produce plastic components for assembling aluminum ... apart from that we have gymnastics, management of social resources, theater and gardening for the least busy.*

This contrasts with the media construction of the prison and the prisoners. In fact, according to these women, the media do not provide realistic images of the world inside prisons: they misrepresent their reality:



FG1

Participant 7: Who is out has a completely wrong idea: people think the prison is a great breakdown, that there is a great promiscuity, that here we commit acts less worthy ... there may be a case in point, but the image we have is the image we get from television ... it's the channels of American movies that have nothing to do with our day-to-day reality.

Participant 7: [the media] should talk more and talk well and not misrepresent reality.

The media are nevertheless seen as a crucial bridge to the outside world: a world of asymmetries, of injustice, of chaos and lack of solidarity, for which the routines of the prison prepare them. In fact, in this narrative we find clearly the confrontation of two macro areas: the inside and outside of the prison walls. The sense of belonging to the physical and psychological space which hosts them is so strong that they necessarily assign negative images to the outer social space, including other prison environments like the core unit of the Estabelecimento Prisional de Tires. In this sense, it is the space outside their special unit that is marked as a place of confinement, supervision, punishment and repression:

FG1

*Participant 2: I think there are so many problems out there that I'm lucky to be here ... the images that the media projects all over the world ... the global crisis ... Here I can be free in religion, I can be Catholic, Muslim, I'm not broken by anyone in here while out there ... things are different.*

In relation to the narrative category of time, which we divided in two classes – time as punishment, linked to the time of the sentence, and time as routine, linked to the disciplined behavior – clearly these women do their time as training for life outside the prison walls. Their time is, consequently, made up of routines and disciplined behavior imposed by the prison establishment, for whom it seems to be important that these women have access to material for escapist or romantic fantasies. By watching movies, reading magazines, listening to radio programs and, especially, watching television, they willingly accept all the imposed routines as a way of ameliorating the time of deprivation and above all to not lose the notion of time passing:

*Participant 7: I'm the oldest. I have six years to comply ... it is important for me to know what is happening out there. Even having to be here five or six years more I want to know what happens to be able to adapt myself.*

Substantially different, the narrative of the second group of female inmates, doing time in the core unit of the Estabelecimento Prisional de Tires, conveys a negative vision of the prison environment, mainly grounded in first-person narratives by which each of these women talks about her own history and individual experience inside and outside the prison walls.

FG2

Participant 1: (...) I can say I am a criminal, I participated in a serious crime, because nobody has the right to take someone's life. I acknowledge what I did, but it was an act of 5 minutes, it does not mean that when I get out I'll start killing everyone that I appear ahead... for God's sake ... on one hand, I

feel I am a criminal, on the other, I know it was an act of desperation, an act of madness that happened (...) I am a person with feelings, I have my qualities and my defects and I have my ideals. But when you enter here, you are already a criminal to the society, so I'm talking about questions of my conscience and subconscious.  
(...)

*Researcher: What does a 25 years sentence represent to you?*

*Participant 4: For me it is too much. If I have to do 25 years here, I will come out with more prison time than that I spent outside (...) I believe that it was fair enough these 8 years that I spent here, I think I'll not learn anything that can make me better than I was before I entered here.*

In this case, we are not in the presence of a community organically organized in space: the women preserve a 'pre-prison' sense of self and seem to build a public identity for presentation during social interaction with others. This new identity, far more distant from the patterns of patriarchal femininity, seems to help each of them to fit into the prison subculture.

FG2

Participant 1: I entered here for a crime, but, if we see, I already learn everything and it was not the prison that taught it to me: it was the inmates themselves (...) I already know how to traffic, I already know how to cheat. This place can be a punishment but it is also a school and the people who work here, this kind of employees, they do not give us the support we need ... (...) a person sometimes learns things she never imagined: I never in my life learned to fake a check, but I've learned to fake a check here and other issues that we learn here: go rob a store and wrap a paper to go through the alarm, disassemble alarms and so on. I think it's a punishment but, in the end, it is a school and who should help us, the ones that should help us don't give us neither that support, nor any opportunities.

The use of in-cell television sets seems to be important, because it allows them not to be dependent on communal televisions and, thus, they do not find themselves neither conforming to the media patterns of the dominant group nor to a dominant individual who decides what to watch. They are, nonetheless, always subject to official surveillance. In fact, the prohibition of access to media resources functions as a form of punishment in case the prison rules are not met. Therefore, it is not surprising that the media are so crucial to these women: they allow them to escape the prison environment, characterized as a site of restrictions, prohibitions and mortifying confinement, also as the result of discriminatory forces based on gender status and privilege, which operate both inside and outside the prison system:

FG2

*Participant 6: Women are tucked in their place ... here and everywhere. There is no freedom for the woman who is afraid and has no strength to fight for herself, for what she wants ... A man is always in politics ..., there is always a man blocking the way for women. We are in a prison of women and we have nothing: we do not have a gym, activities, playground... but the men do.  
(...)*

*Participant 4: Whether in the society of the street, or in the kind of society we have here, men are the most benefited ...*

*Participant 6: We cannot have football equipment, we cannot play with other prisoners ... men can...*

*Participant 1: I tried to talk to the sub chief about that...*

*Participant 6: Our director doesn't allow it.*

However, and like the women doing time at the special unit, they talk about two different universes, the world outside and the world within, metaphorically expressed in the following statement:

FG2

Participant 1: I usually say that we are in a lost island in the middle of the ocean and no one found us.

Although generated by individual narratives, their construction of the female prisoner also reveals similar perceptions regarding the experience of time. In this case, it is the penal time that dominates. Predictably, it is experienced as a burden by most participants, for whom access to the media is also a bridge, as some of them say, to 'chronological time', which only runs outside the prison walls. Indeed, media technologies seem to have a structural capacity, providing these women with a means of filling, structuring and marketing time. In this sense, the prime-time news and the soap operas are not simply pleasures: as for the first group of participants, they may 'normalize' their everyday life inside prison.

GF2

Participant 4: We realize that time has passed by the news or photos sent by families, we see that people marry, grow, have children, die ... for us it seems that time is dead, especially for us that are here.

Participant 5: It is extremely difficult because we are completely detached from the world ... so it is good that the media bring us some news, but we're here very disconnected from the outside world ... I have the support of my family but for those who don't it's extremely difficult.

Nevertheless, they too have a critical view of media narratives, particularly those that portray the crimes for which they were sentenced. As in the case of the first group, they see the media as a deforming reflection of reality, responsible, according to some, for the public condemnation of their actions.

FG2

*Participant 3: Sometimes they influence people with certain information. I think they are only interested in selling magazines and newspapers ... they write there certain things I happen to read and see the things that they write ... they put up a lot in people's lives and often what they write about that person has nothing to do with what's going on with the person. (...) I think their behavior, what they write, is to sell. They try to compose it in that way. It's like when we write a poem. We try to link the things together. To sell more newspapers and magazines is the same thing: they always try to change the things for their convenience.*

*Participant 1: We return to the same point: write what people want to read or what people seek to find.*

*Researcher: Did you personally have bad experiences?*

*Participant 1: No.*

*Participant 3: In my case, the story appeared in the newspaper Crime and I saw that they added a lot more things.*

*Participant 3: Actually, I was not expecting, I was not expecting even, that news appear the way it was written...*

*Researcher: Were you identified with your name and photography?*

*Participant 3: With name and photo yes.*

*Researcher: In what way were you affected by it?*

*Participant 3: At that time, when things happened, I guess, that hurt me. Many people, maybe even some I knew, others I knew slightly, got an idea of who I was by what they wrote. And they wrote nothing, nothing, nothing or little about what really happened. So, afterwards people, even those who knew me well, when they read it, they said they were deceived, that the person wore a mask that fall down. (...)*

*Researcher: Were you able to give your version of the story?*

*Participant 3: No.*

*Researcher: Why do you think this happens?*

*Participant 3: (...) I think they want to sell ...*

*Participant 4: They do it for sensationalism.*

*Participant 1: They amplify the rotten side and completely forget that we are people...*

## **CONCLUSION**

We can therefore conclude that there are substantial differences in the narratives construed by the group of inmates doing time at the Educational and Therapeutic Unit and by the group of inmates serving sentences at the core unit of the Estabelecimento Prisional de Tires. Accordingly, we found the existence of two different co-constructions of the female inmate by the incarcerated women we listened to. While these opposite positions do not reject the importance of our contemporary cultural understanding of prisoners and imprisonment, which creates the sites for the current discussions, they reveal how the context and the individual experiences act as material forces for constituting subjectivity. Furthermore, it is interesting to see how we, as a culture, have constructed a reality that allows these particular configurations of punishment: one that characterizes punishment as discipline, accepting the potential for emancipation of such a disciplinarian and normalizing role attached long ago to the prison by the civil libertarians; and another that views

the prison as a ghetto, particularly for women, whose deprivation represents not only the penalty for having broken the law, but also the punishment for having challenged gender norms collectively shared throughout History.

Regarding the role of the media, in both cases, media resources may ease the process of socialization inside the prison walls. They seem to provide continuity with one's former life and give a sense of control over one's current environment. In respect to the first group of inmates, they can even offer a sense of common identity and shared fanship. Of course the media are used 'undemocratically', because, while media use is allowed in the prison cells, particularly in the case of the women serving sentences within the 'usual' conditions of punishment, not all inmates have resources to take advantage of personal media. Also, to the prison service, the media may simply serve to ensure that the embedded practices of imprisonment are accepted as natural to inmates over time.

Either way, although media narratives are not a mirror of reality – nor it could be – they have a crucial function as prison escapes. They particularly allow the inmates to transcend the confines of time and space, including the psychological time and space where subjectivities are construed. For those who, like us, are interested in studying the mediation of reality from an emancipatory perspective, the investment in the study of the presence of media technologies inside de prison walls is, thus, a promising one, because it reveals the various experiences of and adaptations to imprisonment. Furthermore, bearing in mind that in order to comprehend the present narratives about punishment and about those who are punished we have to examine the mediated public discourses dealing with punishment and prisoners, it does help to see the social positioning the media help to produce in the unique and disturbing context that imprisonment represents.

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## APPENDIX

**Table 1: Focus group discussions**

<b>Focus group 1</b>		<b>Focus group 2</b>	
Female inmates doing time in the Educational and Therapeutic Unit of the Estabelecimento Prisional de Tires		Female inmates doing time in the core unit of the Estabelecimento Prisional de Tires	
<b>Participants identification</b>	FG1 P1; P2; P3; P4; P5; P6; P7; P8; P9	<b>Participants identification</b>	FG2 P1; P2; P3; P4; P5; P6
<b>Ages in years</b>	From 21 to 59	<b>Ages in years</b>	From 19 to 56
<b>Ethnicity</b>	White, Black African, Black Caribbean	<b>Ethnicity</b>	White, Black African
<b>Offences</b>	Supply for drugs, burglary	<b>Offences</b>	Murder, aggravated assault
<b>Sentences in years</b>	3 to 10	<b>Sentences in years</b>	7 to 25