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The role of family in the lives of incarcerated women

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Introduction

In recent years, the growth of female incarceration in the United States has outpaced that of male prisoners. Yet, many important issues regarding imprisoned women's experiences and the impact of their relationships on imprisonment remain understudied. This article explores the role of family and children in the lives of incarcerated women with a special focus on my own research—both a qualitative analysis of interviews with incarcerated mothers and a quantitative analysis of national prisoner survey data. This research centers respectively on the strategies that incarcerated women employ to cope with separation from their children and how contact with families impact women's prison adjustment. Incarcerated women and mothers throughout the world face similar experiences and challenges, so its broad insights regarding family involvement and its consequences for prison life should apply outside of the American context.

Incarcerated women and mothers

In 2011, there were nearly 1.6 million prisoners in state and federal institutions in the USA. Although the prison population remains largely male (93 per cent), the female inmate population grew over nine-fold from 12,279 in 1975 to 111,387 in 2011¹. According to many scholars, this dramatic increase was largely due to punitive criminal justice policies such as mandatory sentencing for drug offences.

Statistics show that the typical female prisoner is demographically similar to the typical male prisoner. She is from a lower-socio-economic class, a single parent, and a racial or ethnic minority. However, female

and male prisoners are disparate in a few key respects. First, only female inmates tend to face a 'Triple threat' of drug and alcohol abuse, childhood and adulthood sexual and physical victimization, and mental health problems. Most women in prison are incarcerated for drug-related offences and sexual victimization is found to be a common gendered pathway to drug use and criminal behavior².

Another distinguishing characteristic of female prisoners is the fact that most of them are mothers, and they were the primary caregivers before their imprisonment³. In fact, much of the research on women in prison emphasizes the central role of motherhood. Research indicates that mothers view separation from their children as the most difficult aspect of imprisonment. Imprisonment challenges women's ability to sustain their relationships with their children. Enos⁴ conducted 25 in-depth interviews with incarcerated women and she found that imprisoned mothers tend to present themselves as 'good mothers' and they seek to maintain relationships with their children while in prison.

During my research project on incarcerated women I found that the literature on relationships between imprisoned mothers and their children focuses nearly exclusively on the extent and nature of their contacts during imprisonment. A common assumption among many scholars is that children's visits help in maintaining a bond between mothers and their children, thus lessening the strains of separation and isolation from the outside world. However, researchers and practitioners also point out that most female inmates are never visited by their children. The women who are visited tend to endure short, yet highly regulated visits. Among the reasons for non-visitation are the remote location of women's prisons (there is often only one female prison in a state), lack of transportation due to financial limitations of families of

1. Statistical data came from Carson, E.A., and Sabol, W.J. (2012). *Prisoners in 2011*. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice and Hill, G., and Harrison, P. (2008). *Female prisoners under State or Federal jurisdiction*. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
2. The typical female prisoner is described by many researchers. See for example Glaze, L.E., and Maruschak, L.M. (2009). *Parents in prison and their minor children*. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice; Gido, R.L., and Dalley, L. (2009). *Women's mental health issues across the criminal justice system*. Upper Side River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall and Dalley, L. P. (2002). Policy implications relating to inmate mothers and their children: Will the past be prologue? *The Prison Journal*, 82, 2, 234-268.
3. In contrast to incarcerated fathers, incarcerated mothers are primary caregivers of their children before incarceration. See Mumola, C. J. (2000). *Incarcerated parents and their children*. Bureau of Justice Statistics. Special Report. Washington, DC. Department of Justice and Glaze, L.E., and Maruschak, L.M. (2009). *Parents in prison and their minor children*. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice.
4. Enos, S. (2001). *Mothering from the inside. Parenting in a women's Prison*. New York: State University of New York Press.

incarcerated women, restrictive prison rules (early hours and selected days for visitations), child-unfriendly visiting areas, and mothers' and/or their families' concerns about exposing children to harsh conditions of imprisonment. Although some of these factors detract from the quality of family interactions, researchers and prison officials tend to agree that visits, phone calls and mail between inmate mothers and their families, help sustain parent-child bonds and improve mothers' adjustment to the prison environment⁵.

How incarcerated mothers cope with separation from their children

My research, published in *The Prison Journal*⁶, was based on a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted by professor Siegel with 74 mothers (17 incarcerated, 20 jailed and 37 awaiting sentencing in community). We found that separation from children and families due to imprisonment is a very stressful event and that female inmates have developed specific coping techniques. The typology of coping techniques most prevalent in the literature is the binary categorization of emotion-focused and problem-focused coping⁷. Emotion-focused coping decreases stress via cognitive-emotional responses, whereas problem-focused coping involves actively managing the problem and choosing action-based solutions.

However, a binary typology does not adequately capture the rich variation in coping strategies developed by incarcerated women. From the interview data, we derived a typology comprised of seven techniques that incarcerated mothers employed to cope with maternal separation: Mothering from Prison, Being a Good Mother, Role Redefinition, Disassociation from Prisoner Identity, Self-Transformation, Planning and Preparation, and Self-Blame. We identified four emotion-focused, one problem-focused and two mixed coping techniques. First and foremost, 'Being a Good Mother,'

an emotion-focused coping strategy, was present to varying degrees among all sampled incarcerated mothers. Incarcerated mothers often presented their pre-prison relationships with their children as challenging but positive overall. They talked about intimate knowledge that they have of their children and how no one else can replace them in their mothering role. One method of maintaining an image of themselves as good mothers while incarcerated was an emotion-focused coping technique that we called 'Disassociation from Prisoner Identity.' Many mothers claimed that they did not belong in prison and made downward social comparisons to the many unfit mothers they had observed in prison. Another way of preserving the 'Good Mother' image was by practicing 'Mothering from Prison.'

It is a problem-focused coping that entails active mothering via visits, phone calls and mail. In keeping with national statistics, most interviewed women were not visited by their families. Thus, the main ways of communication were phone calls and mail. However, the phone calls were expensive (paid by the outside recipient) and mail was infrequent. Overall, 'Mothering from Prison' was a very difficult and burdensome undertaking for incarcerated mothers and for their families. We also found that women with a shorter stay in prison appeared to be more likely to employ 'Being a Good Mother' and 'Mothering from Prison.' A plausible explanation is that

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separation from families was more recent. Accordingly, these mothers were more likely to be in contact with their children via visits and to make decisions about their children's future. They either actually were or self-servingly believed that they were more involved in raising their children.

We also found that some mothers employed 'Role Redefinition' as an emotion-focused coping technique. This technique involves a reversal of the roles of mothers and children. Children start acting like friends and confidantes while mothers become dependent emotionally on their children. Some mothers employed

5. Some of the literature on maintaining contact with families: Mumola, C. J. (2000). *Incarcerated parents and their children*. Bureau of Justice Statistics. Special Report. Washington, DC. Department of Justice; Casey-Acevedo, K., and Bakken, T. (2002). Visiting women in prison: Who visits and who cares? *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 34, 3, 67-83; Berry, P. E., and Eigenberg, H. M. (2003). Role strain and incarcerated mothers: Understanding the process of mothering. *Women and Criminal Justice*, 15, 1, 101-119; and Bloom, B.E., and Steinhart, D. (1993). *Why punish the children? A reappraisal of the children of incarcerated mothers in America*. San Francisco: National Council on Crime and Delinquency.
6. Celinska, K. and Siegel, J. A. (2010). Mothers in trouble: Coping with actual or pending separation from children due to incarceration. *The Prison Journal*, 90, 4, 447-474.
7. Lazarus, R. S., and Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal and coping*. New York: Springer.

'Self-blame' which is emotion-focused and maladaptive coping. Finally, some mothers employed 'Self-Transformation' and 'Planning and Preparation' — two coping techniques that we labeled as mixed because while incarcerated mothers talked about getting jobs, finding place to live after release and staying out of drugs, these plans seemed to be insubstantial and indefinite. These techniques were more emotion-focused than problem-focused X because of lack of practical options and opportunities in prison and in community for female prisoners. 'Leaving prison' was a main concern that most of the time was not followed by practical solutions.

Overall, most mothers in the study used multiple coping strategies. Due to the physical constraints of the prison context as well as limited resources both inside and outside the prison, emotion-focused coping techniques were much more prevalent than problem-focused techniques. As noted by other researchers, 'Being a Good Mother' remained the most important and challenging task for imprisoned mothers. Maintaining contact with children and planning for reunification after serving time in prison are an integral part of prison life for incarcerated mothers.

Family relationship and adjustment to life in prison

Prison adjustment is usually quantitatively assessed in criminal justice literature via frequency of prison rule violations. Researchers tend to study misconduct among only male inmates' and rely upon these studies to inform their theories about the reasons behind prison violations⁸. Thus, there is an unfortunate tendency to assume that explanations originally developed to explain male misconduct also apply to females. However, studies on female and male offenders and inmates have provided ample basis to posit that various factor contribute differentially to female inmates' misconduct and their prison

adjustment. Male-oriented theories seem to neglect the distinct pathways to crime and misconduct among women such as the co-occurrence of mental health problems, drug/alcohol dependency, and prior sexual and physical victimization. Another important, above mentioned difference between male and female prisoners is that the parental role is more salient for female inmates. Thus, models of women's behavior in prison should include contact with their children and families via visits, phone calls and mail.

The literature suggests that females are considerably less likely to engage in prison misconduct compared to males. They also commit less serious and violent violations⁹. These patterns contribute to the inattention to female inmates' misconduct and the general tendency to explain it with male-oriented theories and variables.

However, there were some recent attempts to link prison misconduct with gender-specific explanations. For example, Jiang and Winfree¹⁰ found that phone calls decreased the frequency of violations for female and male prisoners. In another study, Gover, Perez, and Jennings¹¹ found that length of imprisonment increased the probability of only females' misconduct. They theorized that female inmates cope with more stressors than male inmates including mental health issues and separation from children and families. Longer imprisonment lengthens separation and isolation from their families leading female inmates to commit more prison misconduct.

Researchers are increasingly likely to include gender-specific explanations in their explanations of prison adjustment, but the number of studies examining these explanations empirically is still very limited. My recent collaborative research on prison misconduct among a national sample of state and federal prisoners found that gender and gender — related factors were fundamental in explaining prison rule violations¹². The selection of independent

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8. Warren, J.I., Hurt, S., Loper, A.B., and Chauhan, P. (2004). Exploring prison adjustment among female inmates: Issues of measurement and prediction. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 31, 5, 624-645; and Craddock, A. (1996). A comparative study of male and female prison misconduct careers. *The Prison Journal*, 76, 1, 60-80.
9. Craddock, A. (1996). A comparative study of male and female prison misconduct careers. *The Prison Journal*, 76, 1, 60-80.
10. Jiang, S., and Winfree, L. T. (2006). Social support, gender, and inmate adjustment to prison life. Insights from a national sample. *The Prison Journal*, 86, 1, 32-55.
11. Gover, A., Perez, D. M., and Jennings, W. G. (2008). Gender differences in factors contributing to institutional misconduct. *The Prison Journal*, 88, 3, 378-403.
12. Celinska, K., and H.Sung (in press 2013). Gender differences in the determinants of prison rule violations. *The Prison Journal*.

variables for the analysis was guided both by the theoretical literature on prisoner adjustment and on explanations of female offending. The twenty-four independent variables represented six major categories: demographics, history of victimization, criminal history, current legal status, substance use and mental health status, prison program participation, and social support. Concordant with prior literature, younger, single, and black prisoners, those who suffered prior physical abuse, who had a substance abuse or dependence problem, who were serving a lengthier prison sentence, and who were convicted of a violent offense were more likely to violate prison rules. We also included a set of variables designed to capture pathways to criminality relatively prevalent among women with a particular emphasis on the role of parenting from prison. Unfortunately, some results failed to confirm our hypothesis. For example, although female inmates report more incidents of abuse in childhood, both prior sexual abuse and physical abuse were unrelated to prison rule violations for females. Likewise, we unexpectedly found no relationship between having a psychiatric disorder and the odds of prison rule violation for females. On the other hand, we found that the number of phone calls during the past week and the number of visits reduced rule-breaking behavior among females. The higher number of phone calls was also a protective factor for male inmates, but visits did not have a protective effect. This seems to bolster our theory that support from families and children and sustaining a strong parental identity are not only more significant for women than for men but that the visits in particular help women to protect their 'Good Mother' image and assist in their prison adjustment.

These preliminary findings have several limitations. Some important and relevant variables were not available for analysis. For example, the social support measures did not differentiate between contacts with children and contacts with other family members. Nor was it possible to separately measure the number of phone calls and the number of visits involving children. Moreover, no variable on mail from family and friends was available. Thus, the issue of social support and maintaining contact with families and children is ripe for further analysis.

Discussion

Female and male inmates differ in their characteristics, experiences and needs. Yet, researchers tend to employ male-oriented theories and variables when studying female prisoners' behavior. The reliance upon male-oriented concepts and theories has narrowed the scope of research on coping with separation from children and families, on prison adjustment, and especially on prison misconduct.

This article, based on my prior collaborative research, aimed to enhance our understanding of how female inmates cope with separation from their children and how sustaining contact with families might help in adjustment to life in prison. There is no doubt that incarcerated mothers tend to focus on their relationships with their children and present themselves as mothers first, regardless of the nature of their relationship with children before incarceration. The coping techniques that they employ while in prison have a couple of meanings — women not only cope with separation from their children and families but also use the same techniques to cope with imprisonment. Given opportunities to cope better with separation from families and children, they would also adjust better to prison life which would yield less misconduct.

Research that focuses specifically on female inmates, on coping techniques that they employ and on prison misconduct may yield useful information for correctional policy-makers and practitioners. Models of prison misconduct among female inmates will suggest risk and protective factors that should be of interest to those who wish to reduce inmate misconduct and improve prison adjustment. Information on the prevalence and predictive influence of various coping methods and techniques will be particularly important in this connection. For example, whether visits, mail, and phone calls positively predict prison adjustment has obvious policy implications. In sum, the research findings will inform corrections' interventions that seek to minimize female inmate misconduct while improving their coping capabilities and prison adjustment. In addition to offering important scholarly contributions, this research will recommend specific correctional policies that, if implemented, might have a positive impact on female inmates, their children and women's prospects of successful reentry.