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Incarceration and Reentry of Fathers into the Lives of Their Families

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Background and Significance

As many as 10,000,000 U.S. children have at least one parent, usually their father, who has been imprisoned (Reed & Reed, 1998). This is especially problematic in minority communities. We care about this issue because incarcerated fathers who maintain family ties and reenter family life successfully after incarceration are less likely to be rearrested (Petersilia, 2003). This presentation illuminates a case study in the making and represents our attempt to break the usual pattern of studying prisoners and recidivism from either an institutional or macro level within criminology, demography, or sociology or, conversely, an individual level with a deviance perspective. Instead, we use a family perspective—examining family processes, support mechanisms, attachment and bonding, and the reconstitution of family structures following periods of ambiguous parental absence and presence.

The outcome of incarceration is a "stigma that never fades" that "locks out" ex-convicts from opportunity structures and viable employment opportunities—especially the minorities (Barak, Flavin, & Leighton, 2001). Exclusion of felony offenders from social welfare benefits such as public housing or educational loans follows (these limitations are especially harsh for drug offenders). Released fathers tend to have limited employment skills, high rates of illiteracy, and histories of substance abuse and health problems all of which confound successful reentry (Petersilia, 2003).

Family hostile prison practices contribute to the difficulty of familial reentry following. Nurse (2002) labeled these policies the "deep break." Incarcerated fathers are purposively isolated from community and family as a punishment strategy. Because family support is a key factor in reducing recidivism, the deep break policy has inadvertently increased rates of recidivism (Austin & Irwin, 2001). Public policy has transformed prisons from a focus on reentry preparation to custodial containment

Little is known about the family dynamics of the incarceration process and reentry as it effects women and their children. The nature of men's involvement following prison is probably diverse. One inmate hoped to be a "good uncle" who could be supportive and positive in his children's lives. He recognized his limited ability to make an economic contribution and stated he was not likely to be a disciplinarian. Another study participant knew he would be a good father following release, as soon as he got a "fix." These examples highlight a key problem: research is lacking about how parenting roles change following incarceration.

Responsible Fathering and the Ecology of Incarceration

Father involvement research focuses on responsible fathering and promoting positive family outcomes (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Day & Lamb, 2004). Additionally, fatherhood research has moved beyond the simple dichotomous conceptualizations of presence vs. absence. We acknowledge the complex variations of biological and social father-child involvements. However, this level of research complexity has not permeated the father incarceration literature. And, we are unclear how the responsible fathering framework applies to incarceration and reentry and uncertain how it should be refined to reflect this unique familial situation.

Ecological models also have promise: this approach emphasizes contextual factors and is inclusive of diverse family structures and residential patterns (see for example, Doherty, Kouneski, & Erikson, 1998). An ecological framework also recognizes that incarcerated fathers and their families are embedded in a broader socio-cultural network that stigmatizes involvement in the criminal justice system (Arditti, 2002a). We theorize that context takes on a heightened saliency given the highly stigmatized nature of incarceration. For example, Schoenbauer (1986) observes that unlike other contexts of loss such as death or illness, loss of a family member because of incarceration seldom elicits sympathy and support from others—forcing family members to face the difficulties of separation alone. This type of loss could be labeled 'ambiguous presence' (Day & Lamb, 2004). That is, the roles and rules of transition in and out of the primary relationships is undetermined and unclear. With this type of ambiguous presence the stigma of incarceration spreads from the incarcerate father to his children and their mother increasing the intensity of the attendant stress (Goffman, 1963; Western & MacLanahan, 2000). The tendency for stigma and shame to extend to family members may contribute to avoidance of relations with the incarcerated father and increase the overall systemic stress within these families.

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Thus contextualizing fathers' relationships with their family members during confinement and after release necessitates a reconsideration of the idea of responsible fathering. Relative to Doherty et. al's (1998) conceptualization, context overwhelms responsible fathering because of stigma and the "deep break." Harsh institutional practices, lack of family preservation policies, determinate sentencing practices, and cultural emphasis on "punishment" preclude father presence and undermine the possibility of responsible fathering upon reentry.

Prisonized Fathers

Identity theory, extending symbolic interaction theory, focuses on the emerging nature and profile of a person's identity within a specified role (Pasley & Minton, 1997). *Prisonization* refers to identity transformation that results from becoming acculturated into the prison environment; whereby the individual's perspective and view of self becomes: "a reflection of the overregulated, upside-down, violence prone, hyper masculine, and extraordinarily routinized lifestyle common to such institutions" (Terry, 2003, p. 2). Fathers' identities are dramatically altered by incarceration, mirroring prison policies and environment. Our prison visits have illustrated the process of prisonization. For example, in the minimum security prisons in which we conduct our research we have observed small TV monitors bolted to inmate's bunk beds; he is given ear phones to listen. Such policies foster social isolation .

Another approach is to employ a social capital approach (Coleman, 1988) and argue that resources inhere within relationships and generate both strong and weak ties. Therefore, the "deep break" policies create purpose separation and isolation that hampers successful reentry processes into society. Subsequently, prisonized fathers have few resources and their unemployability economic provisioning of family members difficult, at best (Arditti & Keith, 1993; Day & Lamb, 2004). It is no surprise then that the systematic incapacitation associated with prison life and reentry contraindicates responsible fathering. And, it is surprising that this issue has received little attention from family scholars. One reason, of course, it that these families are difficult to locate and hard to interview. Attending to them is reminiscent of Howell's (1973) "hard living" families. It is always uncomfortable and tricky to work with hard living families who are rootless, exist in social alienation, and have high levels of mistrust for government (See Howell for more on 'hard living' families).

With incarcerated fathers we seem to have forgotten that families are a potential pathway to establishing relationships that, in turn, generate social capital. Terry (2003) emphasizes that, however challenging, it is plausible to assume that the longer the ex-inmate is able to maintain new and meaningful associations and activities, the more likely he can avoid a "regression" . However, ex-prisoners must cope with "hangover identities" from prison that cloud future roles, giving rise to contradictory meanings between life behind the fence and life outside of prison

walls (Ebaugh, 1988). For example, rebuilding, or in some cases, creating a fathering identity, in the presence of these ghosts is difficult. Concept development related to prisonization and the ecology of the "deep break" represent first steps in theorizing about incarceration, reentry, and fathering during these times of ambiguous presence.

Methodological Considerations

The study of marginalized prison populations is fertile ground for bringing a "qualitative consciousness" to our research. Such a consciousness is an implicit aspect of a feminist epistemology that seeks to expose disadvantage and "multiple jeopardy" (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003) and is appropriately applied to prisonized fathers, their partners and ex-partners, and children. Bringing a qualitative consciousness to the study of marginalized populations also exposes the unavoidable place of values in scholarship. Acknowledging values requires us to be reflective of our research process in terms of how we obtain access to the world of the imprisoned, and any emotional difficulties we may experience in the field. Indeed, a feminist epistemology is useful in this work because it forces us to raise consciousness about the people we are study via emancipatory knowledge. It offers the "studied" something of value in telling their story, and requires us, the researchers to reflect politically and subsequently view our own lives differently as a result of the research. (Fonow & Cook, 1991). Such a consciousness also requires researchers to develop cultural competence—in our case, having an awareness of the politics of location relative to prisonization and the criminal justice system.

Family relations are extraordinarily complex for "hard living" families and this was clearly the case in our pilot study. Inmates had difficulty responding to the Likert type questions that rely on a single underlying dimension of positive to negative. Their worlds are too complex and their isolation has left them ripe with ambiguity and ambivalence about relationships. Several inmates described relationships that were extremely sad, but answered Likert type survey items by agreeing that the relationships were "good or very good." Thus great care is required when doing quantitative analysis of fragile populations and the use of open ended questions is needed to allow them to qualify their answers.

Our Project
Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

This is a pilot study for a larger data collection effort that is currently being coordinated between Oregon State University and BYU. At those two sites, we have obtained preliminary permissions to interview 30 men at each site who will be exiting prison within the one month period. We also have the name and location of their probation officer after they are released so that we can follow them.

For this pilot study, our plan is to interview incarcerated men three times. We have begun our interviews at the Lone Peak Minimum Prison Facility in Draper, Utah and a similar facility in Salem, Oregon.

Time One

We use an initial screening interview as we select the 30 incarcerated fathers. We selected only those who met the following criteria:

- intend to be involved in with the children after release
- not convicted for a sex crime or abuse of the mother or children
- they agree to allow us to contact them two additional times following their release and provide the necessary information to complete two follow up interviews
- they provide us with the name and location of the mother of a the child.

Each was asked a series of questions that capture the following

- What has his experience in prison been like with regard to family life? (An assessment of visitation, correspondence, changes in marital status, and relationship with children)
- What is his description of his relationship with his spouse/partner during prison. (An assessment of changes in relationship quality, changes in status, and an assessment of the spouse as a resource during the prison experience.
- What other resources were available. These will include visits and support from extended family, community/church workers, and friends.
- What programs and training, if any they participated in while incarcerated.
- What are their goals and wishes concerning family life upon release. What do they expect to happen with regard to reconnecting to children and family? What will they provide as support?

Associated with each of these areas, the incarcerated fathers are asked to identify barriers and incentives that assist or hamper their efforts to fulfill a 'father' role.

The primary work of interviewing the men is being done by a trained student team. The team has been meeting for about one year in training, developing materials, and completing the interviews.

We have currently completed the interviews with about 40 men and 12 women. We are now beginning the follow up interviews with the men after release.

Participants are paid $25 for each interview. The women are being contacted by phone and receive $20. Both father and partner receive $20 for the follow-up interviews.

During the two months following their release, we are contacting using semi-structured interviews that focus on the following:

- Involvement and contact with the children they self-identify as one's they are responsible for and intend to remain in contact with
- Relationship quality with the mother of the identified children
- Relationship quality with the children
- An assessment of changes in expectations about family life following prison release
- An assessment of resources to which they have access following release (jobs, finances, friends, and family support networks)
- Barriers/incentives for their role as responsible fathers.

An additional set of telephone interviews will be conducted with the mother. These be open ended and address the same issues.

Importance of this Research for Outreach Policy

Little is known about how men re-enter family life and assume responsibility for their families following incarceration. This pilot study has two primary functions in that regard. First, the primary purpose of this study is to assess whether or not this type of work can be done. There is little to guide us in the extant literature about men's willingness to be interviewed and re-interviewed about family life in this situation. Therefore, the methodological refinement possible in this project has potential to inform researchers and program providers about men reentering family life.

Second, there are few programs that target family life skills as a part of the rehabilitation process. There are, of course, programs designed to assist prisoners in obtaining one's GED, securing a job, and other general life skills. This research can begin to demonstrate the power the

reconnecting with one's family, what those barriers may be, what predicts success in reentry, and how reentry in family life can effect the occurrence of future problems.

In conclusion, some of the barriers we encountered in conducting our research include difficulties with the university IRB process, access to the prison, difficulties working with the prison population, and then finding them again upon release. Researchers starting to study in this area need to be prepared for the impact of human subjects policies, institutional barriers related to gaining entry, and characteristics and inconsistencies related to the interview setting itself. Our frustrations and our successes will aid other scholars who plan research on stigmatized families and facilitate the study of these "hard to reach" fathers.

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Fatherly love helps children develop a sense of their place in the world, which helps their social, emotional and cognitive development and functioning. Moreover, children who receive more love from their fathers are less likely to struggle with behavioral or substance abuse problems. Non-residential fathers. Research on the impact of absent and non-residential fathers on the lives of children illuminates how crucial their role is. Theoretical models of fatherhood have outlined four major tasks involved in "responsible fatherhood": providing financial support the father had been incarcerated while only 16 percent of the fathers self-reported incarceration, for a combined incarcera-tion rate of 39 percent. In the fathers' sample, 31 percent of the mothers reported the father had been incarcerated while 22 percent of the fathers self-reported incarceration, for a com-bined rate of 38 percent. So, the rates of incarceration in both samples are nearly identical. Furthermore, 17 percent of fathers reported drug or alcohol problems that interfered with their work or family, 16 percent reported some symptoms of de-pression, 17 reported poor or bad health, and 33 percent grew up without their father. These statistics are consistent in both the full sample and the smaller sample of fathers. CHAPTER ONE Returning Incarcerated Fathers to the Family. (pp. 1-19). https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvp2n5h7.5. The partners and spouses of incarcerated men have been described as the "front line" of reentry because of how their material and emotional support shapes men's recovery from incarceration and reintegration into the community (Bales and Mears 2008; Bobbitt and Nelson 2004; Hagan and Coleman 2001; Shapiro and Schwartz 2001). CHAPTER SEVEN On the Horizon: The Social Science of Incarceration and Family Life. (pp. 129-140). https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvp2n5h7.11. For decades, social scientists have studied low-income families and households as one discrete sphere, and "criminals" and prisons as another. Despite the daunting challenges that fathers face upon their release, did you know that incarcerated fathers are more likely to stay out of prison once released when they know they have a unique and irreplaceable role in the life of their child? Also, when dads connect with their children and families (especially prior to release), they're more likely to stay out of prison. It's true! Research shows that fathers who are connected to their children and family prior to release are more likely to successfully integrate back into the community and less likely to return to prison. Furthermore, hous... Prisoners once removed: The impact of incarceration and reentry on children, families, and communities, 259-284. Sands, R., & Solomon, P. (2003). Developing Educational Groups In Social Work Practice. Social Work with Groups, 26 (2), 5-21. Individual and Family Goal-Setting. Growth as a Father, Partner and Co-Parent. Successful Reentry and Navigation of Community Supervision. Financial Planning. Stability and Success for Fathers. Mann, R. E., Ginsburg, J. I., & Weekes, J. R. (2002). Barriers to Prisoners' Reentry into the Labor Market and the Social Costs of Recidivism. Social Research, 74(2), 575-611. Whitelaw, S., Baldwin, S., Bunton, R., & Flynn, D. (2000). The status of evidence and outcomes in Stages of Change research. Health Education Research, 15(6), 707-718.