



**‘I just wanted to be with my family’:
The pain of familial dislocation
among young lifers**

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PALGRAVE
STUDIES
IN PRISONS
AND PENOLOGY



Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood

Time, Identity
and Adaptation

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The study

- A major, ESRC-funded study with Prof. Ben Crewe and Dr Serena Wright
- Experiences of male and female prisoners serving very long life sentences (with tariffs of 15 years or more) sentenced when aged 25 or younger
- Population (2013): 789 men and 27 women
- In-depth interviews ($n=125$ men, 21 women) & survey ($n=294$ men, 19 women)
- Fieldwork sites: 25 men's prisons, ranging from High Security to Open prisons and 9 women's prisons; prisoners at different sentence stages



Dislocation from family - painful

- 'Outside relationships' most severe dimension
- 'Missing someone' most severe problem

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- Particularly 'critical' for long-term prisoners due to length of time incarcerated (Flanagan 1981: 210)



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Who are prisoners missing & why is this so painful?

- **Who?** For male prisoners – parents ('natal' family); for female prisoners – children ('nuclear' family)
- **Why?** 'Role identities are important for self-conception. Role identities are conceptions of oneself in terms of one's location in the social structure' (Simon 1992: 26)
- '[...] problems in a role domain should be more distressing to individuals who are highly committed to the role identity than to those who are less invested in the identity, since ongoing problems threaten a valued aspect of self.' (Simon 1992: 26)



Significance of parental relationships for men

- For male prisoners many parental relationships improved *from a low baseline* (cf. McCarthy and Adams 2018)

‘if anything, [the relationship with my Dad and Step-mum] grew stronger, init, because when I was out, yeah, I couldn’t sit in my house and have a conversation with them ‘cause I was either high, or [...] coming down or too busy, like trying to earn money or trying to steal from them to even chat.’ (Jonathan, 20’s, 17 year tariff)

‘I get on with my mum a lot better now than what I used to.[...] I was growing up I didn’t really have a relationship with my mum, you know, because she was always out drinking and whatever, but I think we’re a lot closer now. We do a lot of talking.’ (Curtis, 20s, 19 year tariff)



Prisoners as sons

- Redefine role as son: Stressful or important events create new challenges and demand a redefinition of role (Walsh 2002)

‘[my relationship with my mum and dad is] probably stronger. [...] probably see ‘em more now. ‘cause you’re not as busy.’ When you’re outside life is so busy that you don’t really get a chance to sit back and look at your relationship with that person and how you can improve it. In here you’ve got a lot more time to think about them sort of things. How can I be a better son?’ (Casper, 20s, 25 year tariff)



Prisoners as sons

- ‘A crisis can be a wake-up call, heightening attention to what matters. It can become an opportunity for reappraisal of priorities, stimulating new or renewed interest in meaningful relationships and life pursuits. In fact, families report that through weathering a crisis together their relationships were enriched and more loving than they might have been otherwise (Stinnett and DeFrain 1985).’ (Walsh 2002: 131)
- Parents offer unconditional love and support: ‘When you’re a life sentenced prisoner your whole world comes crashing down, you realise how important family is [...] you just feel so lucky to have a mum and dad who [...] love you the same, and that feels amazing, absolutely amazing.’ (Thomas, 20s, 16 year tariff)
- Parent-child relationship has a ‘special status’ “‘He’s still my son, whatever he’s done”” (Paylor and Smith 2008: 135), especially for the mother, the ‘kinkeeper’ (Adams 1970)



Paradox of communication

- *More committed* to role of son – demonstrating care, being more emotionally explicit.

‘I never used to really tell my mum that I loved her that much, know what I mean, when I was on road, but now obviously, every time I see her I always tell her I love her’ (Noel, 20s, 16 year tariff)

- ‘Protecting’ parents
‘my uncle committed suicide in prison. He hung himself. So I can never tell my mum my feelings [...] I mean, I can’t tell her everything can I? ‘Cause she’ll be upset. And that’s the way it is.’ (Mohammed, 20s)



Challenges to role identity - son

- **Physical absence**

‘I’m no longer the oldest male in the house because I am not there right now. So in that sense, I’ve had to give that up because my mum got married last July and my brother had to give her away.’ (Carl, 20s, 24 year tariff)

- **‘Protective impotence’**

- **Guilt**

‘With my mum, I don’t know, like is it difficult to be a son? [...] I love her to bits, and I’m always going to have that guilt for what I did. I fucking destroyed her whole life.’ (Hugo, 20s, 18 year tariff)



Role of parent

- Women invest more emotionally in the parental role and their sense of self is tied more closely to parenthood than men's' (Simon 1992: 26)
- Research has shown that 'being stripped of the mother role was one of the most traumatic factors in women's adjustment to institutionalization' (Hairston 1991: 95)
- 'I think the hardest thing for me when I came into jail was nobody told me how to not be a mum - I had spent so many years being a mum, I didn't know how to switch that off [...] it never goes away that missing them, and that kind of ache.'
(Gail, 20+ years tariff)



Challenges to role of mother

- **Lack of control over contact – issues of ‘gatekeepers’**

Prior to imprisonment women were often primary carers: ‘I was with them all the time’ (Fiona, 20s, 21 year tariff)

Frustrated by e.g. distance from home, problematic relationships with child’s carer, lack of financial means to maintain contact, child protection issues (Hairston 1991, Murray 2005).

“I see my eldest [son], which I was meant to see him Saturday but he never turned up, and I don’t know why [...] I’m not allowed to know where he is, I’m not allowed a number, I’m not allowed nothing’ (Fiona, 20s, 21 year tariff)



Challenges to the role of mother

- **Absence**

‘I only get to see [my little girl] 3 times a year, so in a sense I’ve lost the main part of her, but she’s still alive, and then that makes it really difficult because every time I see her it brings up all my feelings for her again, and then I spend the next 4 months grieving, and it’s like that’s really difficult because you’re constantly like going through it, so you’re breaking your heart a little bit more every time.’ (Kathryn, 20s, 22 year tariff)

I was a bit suicidal because my daughter had decided not to talk to me [...] My daughter...the one thing that holds me to this earth, had decided she disliked me. (Jenny, 20s, 15 year tariff)



Role of parent

- Redefinition of role?
 - ‘In the prison context, active, close parenting is extremely difficult to achieve.’ (Murray 2005: 455)
 - ‘It is generally regarded as a usual pattern of events for an adolescent or adult to leave the parental home.’ (Turner 1969: 73). The family ‘reorients’ itself.
- Role requirements:
 - Parenthood: Present and active - important for attachment
 - Adolescence: Absent and passive



Implications

- Welcome research that discusses ‘a broader and richer conception of what we mean by “prisoners’ families’ in order to accurately represent ‘the real diversity and complexity of many prisoners’ kinship (and friendship) networks.’ (Paylor and Smith 2008: 140)
- Family strategies or reactions to stressful events might be ‘functional in the short-term but rigidify and become dysfunctional over time’ (Walsh 2002: 131) e.g. Not having visits.
- Focus only on ‘healthy relationships’ not *all* family relationships
- ‘For some a relative’s imprisonment will offer relief from violent or difficult behaviour at home.’ (Murray 2005: 445).



Implications

- Families provide sense of meaning and hope:
 - '[my daughter] is what keeps my going' (Kathryn, 20s, 22 year tariff)
 - '100% I wouldn't be here today if I didn't have my family [...] when I felt really down I kind of wanted to take my life, it was only my family...that impact that would have on my family, that I'd crush my family [...] so it was only family that stopped me from taking my own life.' (Kelvin, 20s, 20 year tariff)