


Prisoners' Families and the Referred Pains of Imprisonment

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‘Prison - it doesn’t affect just one person, it affects everyone. I feel I have had a harder sentence’ (partner of prisoner).

The Research - Study 1

- Prospective longitudinal study investigating risk and protective factors in the resettlement of imprisoned fathers with their families.
- Semi-structured interviews, standardised assessments and statistical data with fathers, mothers and children aged 4 - 18 years at 2 times: Time 1 within 4 months of the father's release, Time 2 up to 6 months after father's release.
- The sample at Time 1 in 2010 consisted of 54 (step)fathers, 54 (step)mothers and 90 children. The sample at Time 2 comprised 40 fathers, 49 mothers and 80 children

The Research - Study 2

- Small-scale evaluation of a school-based support service for children with mothers or fathers in prison in 2016 to 2017.
- Interviews with 7 children and their parents outside and documentary analysis of 51 case records of children seen over the twelve month.

Penal Power and the Pains of Imprisonment

- Depth (Downes, 1993)
- Weight (King and McDermott, 1995)
- Tightness (Crewe, 2011)
- Breadth (Cohen, 1985)

Referred Pains of Imprisonment

- Vicarious and direct
 - Acute and chronic
 - Related to...
 - depth
 - weight
 - tightness
 - breadth
- ...of penal power

Depth - darkness, distance

- Anxiety from lack of information:
 - *'[I felt] lost when he was away. [There] was no one to call and ask news'* (partner).
- Anxiety about separation:
 - *'I feel worried in case he might not come (back)'* (Callum, 8 years).
- Vicarious anxiety:
 - *(I) worry how he's coping in there'* (partner).
- Social isolation:
 - *'[There was] no one to talk to. [It was] quite shocking. [I] struggled at first'* (partner).

Depth

- In contrast to King and McDermott's definition (1995) the level of contact did not always equate to the security categorisation of the prison; also associated with geographical distance of the prison from the family home.
- The extent to which 'depth' was experienced as painful depended on the quality of the relationship between the imprisoned parent and individual family members.
- Children's experiences of the 'depth' of imprisonment were affected by other forms of social control associated with the state's welfare function, children's age and status within the family.
- Opportunities to rekindle a past normality of physical closeness in 'liminal spaces' (Moran, 2013) of prison visits and home leave. Temporary nature of these spaces could generate other pains.

Weight I

- First experience of weight through direct contact with the prison.
- ‘Weight’ was generated by the complex rules and regulations surrounding the visitation process which were often difficult to negotiate and varied from prison to prison. Aligns closely with secondary prisonisation’ (Comfort, 2003).
 - *‘I hated how prison staff would treat you like you're the criminals’* (partner).
 - *‘(It was) quite scary when... dogs had to sniff me and a bit scary going to the library today through the prison’* (Sara, 10 years).

Weight II

Second experience of 'weight' was an inverse consequence of penal power - the increased demands on the family in the imprisoned parent's absence.

- The 'weight of absence' affected partners' responsibilities:
 - *'Everything now rests on me'; 'if he was here it would halve my problem.'*
- Anxieties for well-being of children:
 - *'It's a worse nightmare, watching what the children are going through.'*
- 'Weight of absence' mitigated by social support networks and whether or not imprisoned parent had felt as a greater burden:
 - *'All the debts went with him when he went to prison - it was a relief'* (partner).

Tightness

- Anxieties induced by the ubiquity and unpredictability of of penal power.
 - In prison: *'Calls are monitored and recorded, [we] can't speak with confidence. We're always careful what we say. We're terrified of jeopardizing my coming out... [it's] caused difficulties between me and her as [we] cannot talk properly'* (father).
 - After release: *'He's paranoid. (He) thinks they're going to come back to get him. I have to tell him - it's not real, it's like he's re-living it'* (partner).
- Although penal power deployed by agents of the criminal justice system, could be invoked by partners. What was experienced as 'tightness' for one could be experienced as 'liberating' or 'empowering' by another. The distinction hinged on the relationship between the parents and the extent to which they viewed themselves as a couple and 'on the same side'.

Breadth I

- Stigma associated with the parent being in prison.
 - *‘I’ve had threats, people shout at me in the streets’* (partner)
 - *‘Some people took the Mickey out of me as I haven’t got a Dad’* (Max, 11 years).
- An isolating process. Emotionally and physically painful.
- When children resisted through fighting back or by self-withdrawal, the labels of ‘troubled’ or ‘aggressive’ and the resulting actions by the school authorities often served to further set them apart from others.
- Different experiences depending on personal and local community attitudes towards imprisonment (See Fishman, 1990).



Breadth II

- Challenges of re-establishing a life together after the parent's release linked to structural and social barriers, and to the processes of institutionalisation and mortification of the self that took place in prison (Goffman, 1961).
 - *'It was a bit difficult seeing him when he had his tag'* (Julia, 18 years).
 - *'Finding a job with a criminal record is a nightmare'; 'He's out of breath going from here to there'* (partner).
 - *'When ..I came out you have to get yourself self-motivated - get yourself into another routine...I was used to peace and quiet. The first few days were hard, like carnage!'* (father)
 - *[It was] strange at first, having a man in the house, I'd been independent - having to let go of my independence'* (partner).

Acute and Chronic Pains

- Pains experienced at the early stages of the process - the arrest and sentencing in court - were often acute; shock was accompanied by intense sadness or anger.
- Over time, partners and children developed strategies for coping but for many the continued absence of the parent left an ongoing sadness or anger which had to be managed:
 - *‘[I] mostly keep it bottled inside; [I] don’t think it helps to talk about it because it won’t get him out any sooner’ (Leah, 16 years).*
- Ongoing effects of earlier insecurities resulting from the parent’s incarceration - despite the return of this father, one 15 year old said he still did not like being *‘home alone’* and *‘felt safer’* when *‘someone stays in the house with me.’*

Resilience

- Despite the pains and deprivations endured, many families were forward-looking and worked steadily at rebuilding their lives together:
- *‘He’s been out about five months. It took about three months to get fully used to it. He had to build up a relationship with all of them, spending time with them individually and as a family’* (partner).
- More to understand about how the referred pains of imprisonment shift and transform over time, about the strategies families employ to address them and about their longer-term consequences for the resilience of the family.

Referred Pains of Imprisonment

Contribution of the Analysis

‘We speak of the individual and his environment, of the child and his family, of individual and society ...without clearly reminding ourselves that the individual forms part of his environment, his family, his society’ (Elias, 1978:13).

- Conceptual link between the punishment of imprisonment administered to offenders and the experiences of their families.
- Reveals unintentional consequences of penal policies and an approach to criminal justice which takes insufficient note of the social reality of human interdependence.
- Highlights limitations of a perspective of imprisonment as punishment of an offender only.
- Invites consideration of how the adverse effects of the ‘depth’, ‘weight’, ‘tightness’ and ‘breadth’ of penal power on prisoners’ families might be addressed.
- Suggests the interests and concerns of prisoners’ families would be well placed within the decision-making framework of social as well as criminal justice policy.