Female Partners of Male Prisoners: Questioning Caring Stereotypes

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Risks and Protective Factors in the Resettlement of Imprisonment Fathers and their Families

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- Partnership with Ormiston Children and Families Trust

- 2010 - 2012

+ Paper Aims

1) Understand the relationship between heterosexual couples who are separated by the man's imprisonment

2) Identify women's economic, health and social circumstances

3) Explore women's caring roles during and after the father's imprisonment

Methodology

- Prospective longitudinal design
  - 54 families at Time 1, 40 families at Time 2
  - Retention rates (T1-T2):
  74.1% fathers, 90.7% mothers, 88.9% children

- Interviews and standardised assessments with fathers, mothers and children

- Quantitative & qualitative data

- Various inclusion/exclusion criteria. For example:
  - Father's sentence between 8 months and 6 years
  - East Anglia and London (13/8 prisons)

- Interviews at Time 1 during imprisonment (release within four months), Time 2 within 6 months after release

- This paper analysed data of the 49 mothers who took part at Time 1 and Time 2
  - Quantitative data - descriptive statistics.
  - Qualitative data analysed thematially (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Parental Relationships

Couples' Relationship Before, During and After Prison

	Before prison		During prison		After prison	
	%	M (SD)	%	M (SD)	%	M (SD)
In a relationship*	79.6		79.6		71.4	
Length of relationship (years)		--		6.84 (4.51)		6.90 (4.64)
Living together^	61.5		--		77.4	
Relationship quality		3.19 (1.30)		3.92 (.92)		3.37 (1.44)
Physical relationship		3.71 (1.18)		--		3.78 (.94)

Contact with (Ex)Partner During Imprisonment

	Time 1	
	%	M (SD)
Contact yes/no	98.0 YES	
Amount of contact		2.47 (1.07)
Quality of contact		4.00 (.97)
Periods of release	18.4	

Parenting Roles

	Before		During		After	
	%	*M(SD)*	%	*M(SD)*	%	*M(SD)*
Number of children				1.98 (1.07)		
Age of children		--		5.22 (3.85)		5.61 (4.02)
Women main carer	63.8		100.0		67.3	
Dad involved		3.56 (1.03)		--		3.30 (1.27)

Finances, Health and Social Support

Financial Status Before, During & After Prison

	Before prison		During prison		After prison	
	%	M (SD)	%	M (SD)	%	M (SD)
Employed	24.5	--	18.4	--	22.4	
Weekly net household income (£)		243.25 (149.25)		177.50 (76.23)		265.38 (274.90)
*Benefits	89.6		89.6		100.0	

Note: *Excludes Child Benefits and Child Tax Credits

Women's Health and Substance Use

	Before prison		During prison		After
	%	*M* (SD)	%	*M* (SD)	%
Physical health problems			26.5		16.3
Mental health problems			38.8		49.0
GHQ total score				14.06 (7.54)	
Alcohol units		8.02 (18.24)		8.02 (18.24)	
Illegal drug use	22.4		4.1		8.2

Social Support

	Time 1		Time 2	
	%	*M (SD)*	%	*M (SD)*
Her family	65.3		67.3	
His family	26.5		30.6	
Friends	46.9		28.6	
No informal support	8.2		6.1	
Formal support	21.3		26.5	
MSPSS score		5.33 (1.38)		5.43 (1.31)

How does the father's imprisonment affect women's caring roles?

Policy Positioning in England & Wales

- Caring by **prisoners' partners** within policy seen as a resource to be tapped into – instrumental value

- **Mothers** in 'Troubled Families' not fulfilling society's expectations of their social roles
  - Caring responsibilities
  - Work

Policy Positioning:
Care for Men Leaving Prison

Women have been described as the **"release plan safety net"** for men exiting prison (Scheyett & Pettus-Davis, 2012, p. 582).

"Given that the majority of **prisoners' families** are profoundly motivated to help men serving sentences build a better life for themselves, free from offending patterns of behaviour, they **constitute a potential army of support for the prison system** that has not as yet been strategically and consistently deployed across the estate" ('Farmer Report', Ministry of Justice, 2017 p.17).

+ Policy Positioning: 'Troubled Families'

- Families with at least 2 of the following problems:
  - parents or children involved in crime or anti-social behaviour
  - children who are not attending school regularly
  - children of all ages who need help are identified as in need or are subject to a child protection plan
  - adults out of work or at risk of financial exclusion or young people at risk of worklessness
  - families affected by domestic violence or abuse
  - parents or children with a range of physical and mental health problems

- Aims:
  1) To achieve significant and sustained progress with up to 400,000 families with multiple, high-cost problems
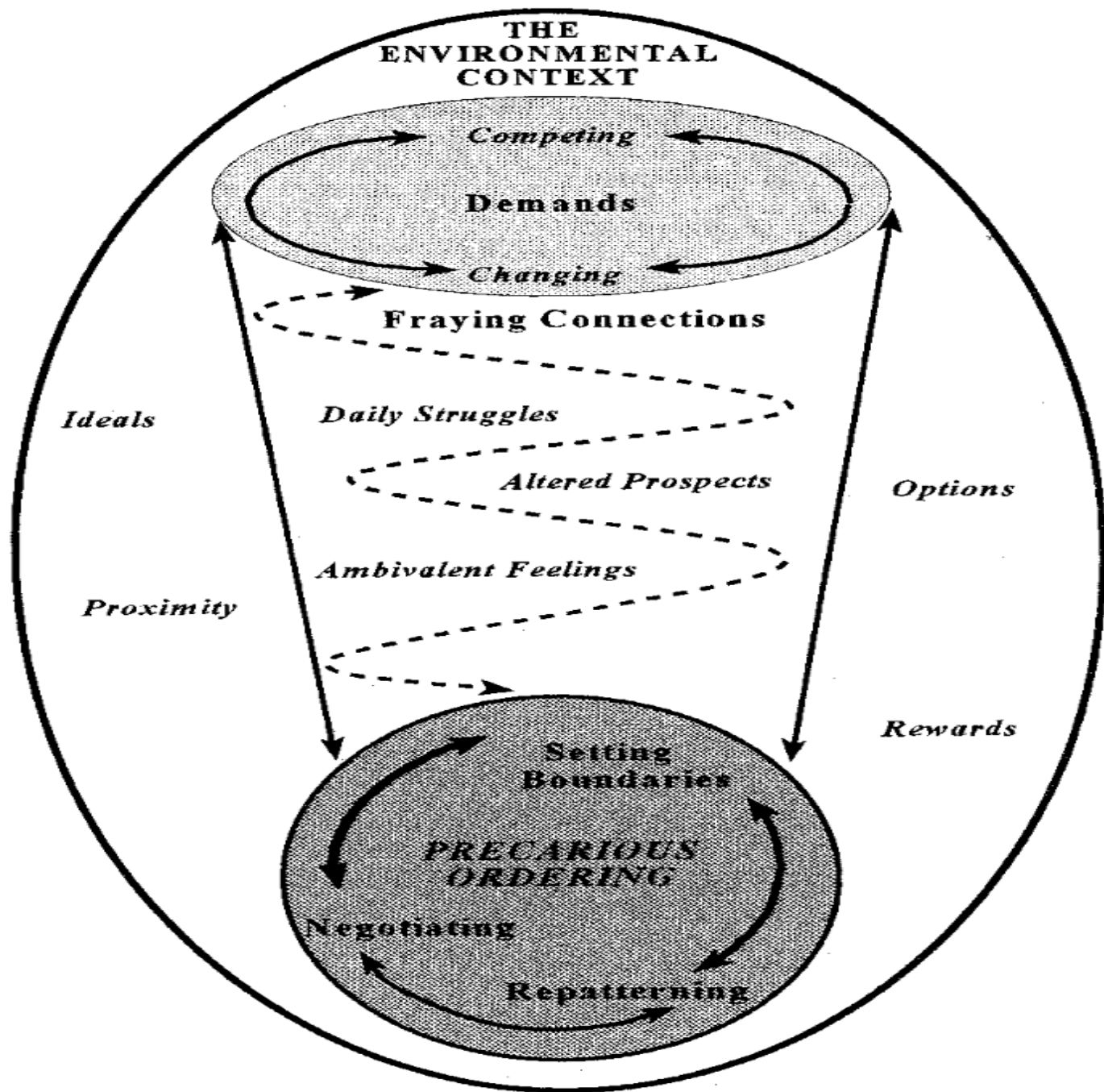 2) To make work an ambition for all troubled families

+ To what extent do these representations capture the realities of the women in the study?

Theorising: Women's Caring and Social Roles

- Precarious ordering (Wuest, 2001)
  - Theory of women's caring which moves beyond traditional dichotomy of 'caring as fulfilment' and 'caring as burden.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

Competing

Demands

Changing

Fraying Connections

Ideals

Daily Struggles

Altered Prospects

Options

Ambivalent Feelings

Proximity

Rewards

Setting Boundaries

PRECARIOUS ORDERING

Negotiating

Repatterning

Changing and Competing Nature of Caring Demands

- Multiple caring roles
  - Mothers
  - (Ex-)Partners
  - Daughters

- Changing caring responsibilities
  - Emotional
  - Material
  - Spatial (caring over distance – geographic, relational closeness)

Caring Challenges and Dissonances During Father's Imprisonment

- **Single motherhood**
  - maintaining children's routines
  - relationships with children - discipline
  - relationships with father
  - financial security

"*I didn't know how to cope with being a single mum at 20. [It] hit me in a big way.*"

- **Diminishing social visibility**
  - employment and training
  - social circles – "*People shout at me in the streets.*"
  - social service interventions –

  "*Made me more stressed because of the way they talk to you. I find them patronising. They look at you like you're a young Mum with a kid.*"

Caring Challenges and Dissonances After Father's Release

- Family Relationships
  - Adjustment on father's return

    e.g. *"I found it very hard to get my head round it. He had his routines I had mine and we clashed."*
 - *"I want to take things slowly. I've changed, become more independent."*
  - His unemployment *"leads to depression and jealousy towards me because I am."*
  - *"My children were all for him and not for me. I was jealous initially."*

+ Coping Strategies

- **Following routines**: "*We just got on with it.*"

- **Re-framing relationships**
  - "*We've all gelled together very well. He has a lot of energy. He does things I can't compete with. He looks after me and the kids.*"
  - "*Strange at first having a man in the house… having to let go of my independence.*"
  - Ending relationships: "*He's not going to change. He was born that way.*"

- **Harnessing resources**
  - Social support
    - "*I've found it hard looking after her on my own but my family and friends have helped me.*"
  - Voluntary and religious organisations
  - Medicine and substance use (e.g. alcohol, cigarettes, drugs)
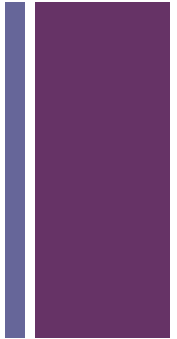
Legacy of Caring, Personal Vulnerability and Resilience

- *"It is hard looking after her on my own but my family and friends have helped me and since (ex-partner) has not been around I've found it easier without him hassling me.'*

- *'Sometimes I feel I could go off the rails when everything gets too much.'*

- *'I feel I rely on him too much.'*

- *'I'm really independent. I feel good about myself. I feel I am doing a good job as a mother and [I am] more career hungry. Made me realise I need to do things for myself.'*

- *'Positive to think how much we've come through.'*

- *'We can stand up for ourselves, others might not be able to.'*

+ Conclusions

- Commonality and diversity of partners' caring experiences

- Shifting caring demands over time

- Shifts in caring roles led to dissonances and conflicts in relationships during and after imprisonment

- Outcome continuum from increased vulnerability to increased resilience

- Penal and social policies might reflect a more nuanced understanding of partners of prisoners' caring roles and their consequences