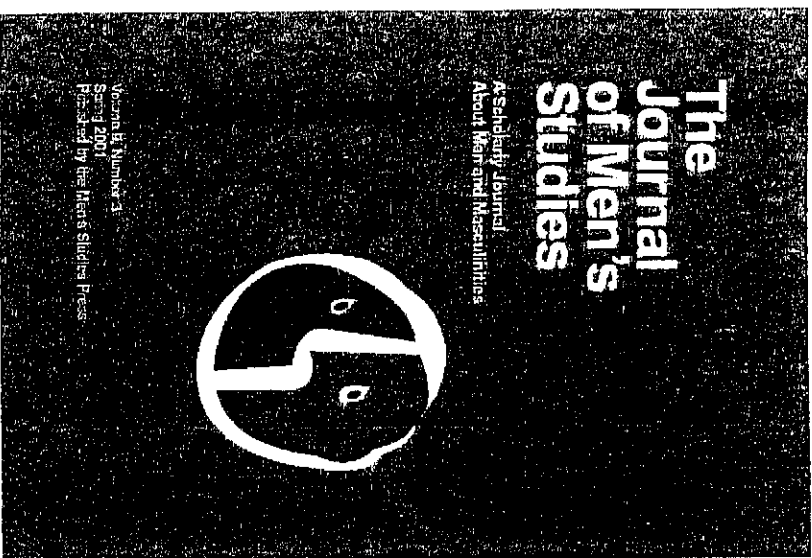


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“It’s Been Hard to Be a Father”: A Qualitative Exploration of Incarcerated Fatherhood

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This study investigated the experiences of incarcerated fathers, their perceptions of fatherhood, and the nature of their involvement with their children. Fifty-one incarcerated fathers confined at two minimum security correctional facilities were interviewed approximately one month prior to their release from prison. A qualitative content analysis revealed detailed description pertaining to participants' feelings of helplessness and the difficulties of being a “good father” while in prison. Incarceration represented a dormant period for men in terms of fatherhood, and reentry signified an opportunity to “start over” with their children. Finally, father involvement was profoundly constrained during incarceration, and men were entirely dependent on nonincarcerated mothers or caregivers for contact with children. Many fathers perceived mothers' gatekeeping, or efforts to prevent contact, as evidence of their powerlessness. Recommendations for future research and intervention are discussed.

Keywords: fatherhood, incarceration, co-parenting, maternal gatekeeping, father involvement

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More than two million persons are held in state or federal prisons (Austin & Irwin, 2001; Harrison & Karberg, 2004). While the federal system accounts for more than 20% of the increase in the inmate population, state prison incarceration rates continue to climb, reflecting the largest increase since 1999 with approximately 1,221,501 prisoners in state custody (Harrison & Karberg, 2004). The resultant trends have given the United States the dubious distinction of having the highest incarceration rates in the world (Austin & Irwin). The impact of criminal sanction policies—especially punitive drug policies—has fallen disproportionately on low-income communities of color (Arditti & McClintock, 2001; King & Maur, 2002). Due in part to the large percentage of individuals convicted of drug trafficking, incarcerated parents reported lengthy average sentences—more than 12 years in state prison and 10 years in federal prison (Munola, 2000).

Given unprecedented growth in prison populations, it is remarkable that so little attention has been given in the social science literature to the experiences of families impacted by incarceration. Despite political rhetoric bemoaning “fatherless America,” family disruption connected to the incarceration of fathers has received minimal empirical exploration.

INCARCERATED FATHERHOOD

Recent data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study research project suggests that incarcerated fathers differ from the general population of fathers and are more likely to be violent, African American, less educated, and prone to drug and alcohol abuse and have poor relationship skills (Carlson & McLanahan, 2002). Incarcerated fathers are more likely to come from underprivileged backgrounds characterized by intergenerational patterns of criminality and often have a history of involvement in the criminal justice system (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Carlson & McLanahan, 2002). In addition to compromised social and family histories that may impinge on responsible fathering, incarcerated men with children are limited by the institutional constraints imposed by the prison setting. It is difficult for fathers to have meaningful contact with their children while in prison for a number of reasons including geographic distance from family members, transportation and financial barriers, the lack of child-friendly visiting contexts, harsh and disrespectful treatment by correctional officers, and, in general, the demanding nature of visitation for both children and parents (Arditti, 2003; Hairston 1998; Sturges, 1999). Indeed, it is no surprise that 58% of fathers in state prisons report never receiving visits at all from their children (Munola, 2000).

It is unknown exactly how many children are impacted by their fathers' incarceration since no precise count exists. Many states do not gather or track family information from individuals in the criminal justice system. The most widely used estimates are drawn from 1991 Bureau of Justice figures, which conservatively indicate approximately 1.5 million children have an incarcerated parent while another 3.5 million children have a parent on parole or probation (Seymour, 2001). However, other scholars estimate that, more likely, about 10 million children are affected by current or past parental involvement with the criminal justice system (Reed & Reed, 1998). Government reports give little insight pertaining to families impacted

by incarceration, although they do provide data describing the demographics of inmate parents. The percentage of state and federal prisoners with minor children (56%) has changed little since 1991, and the majority of parents reported living with their children prior to admission (Munola, 2000).

Approximately 60% of male prisoners are parents, often housed in facilities far away from their children. Hairston (2001) discusses at length the implications of the growing concentrations of large numbers of fathers—mostly poor, young African-American males—in correctional institutions. Indeed, it seems that, given recent trends in criminal justice, one point at which fathers are increasingly located on the “social radar screen” is behind the fence in correctional facilities. For example, incarceration is a visible factor in the experiences of even the youngest fathers for 22% to 55% of the juveniles in Nurse’s (2002) study of the California Youth Authority. The decreased physical presence of males in the home and community shifts an enormous burden in terms of childcare and economic provision to women. Fathers in the Hairston studies assumed economic provider and nurturer roles with their different children before incarceration. Although most children were not actually legally residing with their fathers (and, if so, usually the youngest child), most fathers carried out some parenting responsibilities in terms of financial support and caregiving. Hairston concluded that most incarcerated fathers have the potential to positively contribute to their children’s lives.

Despite the lack of systematic data on the families of imprisoned individuals, studies have begun to document the nature of harms to children due to parental incarceration. Overall, children with incarcerated fathers tend to be a fragile population with a complex set of difficulties connected to their parent’s imprisonment. These difficulties include traumatic separation and negative child outcomes such as poor academic performance, emotional suffering, alcohol and drug abuse, and involvement in the criminal justice system themselves (Bielchik, Seymour, & Kreisher, 2001; Johnston & Gabel, 1995; Moses, 1997). Still, little is known about the experience of incarcerated fatherhood and the deeper implications of imprisonment for fathers during confinement and as they approach reentry.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SITUATING INCARCERATED FATHERHOOD

An exploration of incarcerated fatherhood merits the “situating” or contextualizing of imprisoned men’s fathering identity and involvement. We acknowledge the conceptual distinction of fatherhood and father involvement. *Fatherhood* typically pertains to men’s motivations relative to the fathering role, the nature of the man’s behavior, and his internalized image or role identity. *Father involvement* refers to the man’s behavior as he enacts the paternal role (Day, Lewis, O’Brien, & Lamb, 2005). In this study, we consider both fatherhood and involvement as they are inextricably intertwined. Central to how imprisoned fathers define themselves is what they can and cannot do for their children and their children’s caregivers. At the heart of situated fatherhood is the deliberate placement of narrative material into a contextual and historic understanding of what Weiss and Fine (2004) call “limit situations,” which, even if resisted, become foundational to social identities. Thus, incarcerated fathers cannot be understood apart from the prisons that hold them and the

activities relative to their children they believe are constrained as a result of their imprisonment. As Roy (2003) astutely points out, men's parenting and identity work in prison are uniquely shaped by a "corrective" power and are bound to be substantially regulated and redefined. The enactment of fathering is thus likely to be altered dramatically during confinement, and men's identities "prisonized" (Arditti, Acocck, & Day, 2005). Prisonization refers to identity transformation that results from the acculturation into the prison environment, whereby individuals come to mirror the norms and values of the prison environment. Such environments are overregulated, routinized, and characterized by institutional practices aimed at keeping prisoners isolated, controlled, and contained (Terry, 2003). We theorize that the nature of incarcerated fatherhood and men's view of it can only be understood in relation to the "finality" imposed by the prison environment (Roy, 2003) and any resultant prisonization and identity shifts.

Second, our contextualized approach involves a recognition that incarcerated fathers and their families are embedded in a broader sociocultural network that stigmatizes involvement in the criminal justice system (Arditti, 2003; Mazza, 2002). We theorize that the highly stigmatized context of incarceration may contribute to a lack of social support, ambiguous relationships, and the avoidance of relations with the incarcerated father (see, for example, Arditti, Acocck, & Day, 2005). This stigma may extend beyond prison walls and after the inmate's release, contributing to a sense of helplessness or perhaps unrealistic expectations for the future. Indeed, the outcome of an individual's going through the prison system in the United States has been described as a "stigma that never fades."

AIM OF THE STUDY

We seek to understand the experience of imprisoned fathers by considering their own perspectives of their fathering experience and family relationships as they near their release from prison. Specifically, the present study explored the experiences of a group of imprisoned fathers' prior to their reentry into family and community life. We were particularly interested in how incarceration had influenced *fatherhood*, or men's fathering identity, and *father involvement*.

The research question addressed in the present study is "*What does incarceration mean for men in terms of fatherhood and father involvement?*"

METHOD

BASIS FOR A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

The qualitative methodology utilized in the present study was informed by our theoretical framework (i.e., the situating of incarcerated fatherhood) and Weiss and Fine's (2004) "theory of method" obligating scholars to document sites of hope or, especially, sites of deep despair. An element of Weiss and Fine's approach involves analytically embracing the category of "prisoner" and taking very seriously that this category is real relative to institutional life, potentially yielding "dire consequences"

(p. xviii). Additionally, Weiss and Fine locate *dynamism* as a core element of a "theory of method" that embraces movement and captures the shifting of time and space. Our participants were interviewed one month prior to their release, and we would be remiss not to frame their fathering narratives in terms of their anticipation of release. Finally, our qualitative approach emphasizes the importance of people as "meaning makers" as they name and describe their experiences (Harvey, 2002; Weiss & Fine, 2004).

INTERVIEW PROCEDURES

Data from the present study were drawn from the first wave of interviews of a longitudinal pilot study on prisoner reentry conducted by Day, Acocck, Arditti, and Bahr (2003) at three different minimum security state prison facilities in Utah and Oregon. Fifty-one 60-minute in-depth interviews were conducted with incarcerated fathers during their last month in prison. Correctional staff at each respective facility distributed announcements to a list of potential participants who fit the study's eligibility requirements. To be eligible to participate, prisoners must have had at least one child under the age of 18, be 18 years of age or older, and have a release date from prison approximately one month after the interview. Men serving time for sex crimes or committing violence against a family member were excluded from participation. Participation was completely voluntary and in compliance with Brigham Young University and Oregon State Human Subjects regulations. Each father received a \$20 commissary payment for completing the interview.

Interviews were conducted utilizing computer-assisted technology by the pilot study team residing near the respective correctional sites in Utah and Oregon (researchers Day, Acocck, & Bahr). The pilot study researchers were usually accompanied by trained students who assisted in the interview process in space provided by correctional personnel at the correctional site. During these interviews data about the background characteristics of the mother and father, the interactions of the mother, father, and focal child during the period of incarceration, and the family relations and fathering behavior prior to and during incarceration were gathered. Initially, the "focal child" was to be assigned randomly by the interviewers; however, it soon became apparent that men were choosing the child they believed they were most likely to be in contact with upon release from prison. Thus, for the purposes of this analysis, it is important to keep in mind that the predominant content pertaining to children reflected men's narratives about the child they expected to be most involved with upon reentry into community and family life.

Interview development occurred over a period of months and was conducted by the prisoner reentry pilot study researchers (Day, Acocck, Arditti, & Bahr) during the winter and spring of 2003. The content of the interview was informed by the empirical literature on prisoner reentry and father involvement as well as an interview piloted with family members visiting male inmates (Arditti et al., 2003). Interviews were broadly designed to gather psychosocial, health, familial, and economic information from participants. Particular emphasis was given to father-child relationships during incarceration, reentry concerns, and the nature of men's contact with family members (via visiting, phone calls, and letters) while imprisoned. All

Interviews of inmates included both structured items and open-ended questions. The interviews were recorded, and open-ended items were transcribed. Interviews included for analysis in the present study were conducted between September 2003 and February 2004. The participation rate was calculated at roughly 89 percent (see Day, Acocel, Blair, & Arditti, this issue, for more detail regarding a discussion of challenges associated with sampling).

CODING AND INTERPRETATION

Coding, identification of major themes, and subsequent interpretation developed over time and reflected a series of modifications based on repeated readings of the data and discussions with the research team (i.e., Arditti, Smock, & Parkman). This approach to qualitative analysis is consistent with methodology described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Gilligan (1992), whereby codes are developed through knowledge of previous research and theory as well as by hunches developed during the process of data analysis. Additionally, our stance as a team was constructivist in that we embraced different perspectives among ourselves relative to the data and operated from a social justice framework in which we were more interested in giving voice to the prisoners in our study rather than being right about the "truth" of their situation (Patton, 2002). Such a stance does not, however, preclude the search for modal forms or commonalities among participants (Weiss & Fine, 2004), and thick description in various thematic areas is the heart of our analysis.

The qualitative analysis of participant interviews involved the development of broad coding categories and management of the text using NUDIST (QSR, 1997). These categories encompassed "Father-Child Relationships," "Father-Mother Relationships," "Prison Experiences," and "Contact with Family Members" and were clearly defined in NUDIST. Various subcategories were developed within these broad areas to further manage the text. All three authors coded text in the appropriate categories with consistency, and many areas of text were "cross coded" in that they were assigned a code from more than one category. Given the goals of this particular analysis, the lead researcher initially examined coding patterns connected to text contained in "Father-Child Relationships." Retrievals occurred in this category for 80% of the interviewers (41/51) and comprised 223 text units and 51% of text in all documents in the study. After closely inspecting the cross-coding patterns of the text contained in the "Father-Child Relationships" category, the lead researcher retrieved text reflecting the most frequent coding pattern—fatherhood, father involvement, contact, coparenting—via the "overlap" function in NUDIST. Retrievals based on this set of codes were from 71% of the interviews (36/51), comprised 287 text units and 65% of text in all 51 documents in the study, and demonstrated that the data set is reasonably inclusive and sufficiently covers the facets under study (Patton, 2002). Our content analysis is based on this particular body of coded text drawn from the men's interviews.

Confirmability. As recommended by Patton (2002) the aforementioned text report was analyzed independently by the three authors of the present study, through

repeated readings of the participants' responses. Notes and then summary concepts were written in the margins during the examination of the report, representing the fathers' comments extracted from the cross-coded text which encompassed interrelated content pertaining fatherhood, father involvement, contact, and coparenting. We reflected upon and linked previous research and our theoretical framework in developing and situating concepts discussed in the study results (Gilligan, 1992). Themes were then discussed and processed among the authors as a means of confirmability via analytic triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton). We went through the text report page by page and discussed similarities and differences in our interpretations of the text and compared what we had each written in the margins as well as what text had been highlighted. The essence of our thematic analysis was strikingly similar. There was a high degree of convergence among the three of us in terms of the recurring regularities of themes and patterns in the data (Patton), although each of us used slightly different language in conceptualizing these patterns. Table 1 summarizes the themes that emerged from our analysis and also includes information pertaining to the number of retrievals in a particular theme and percentage of text units.

PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

The 51 fathers included in our analysis were approximately 35.5 years old ($SD = 6.7$) and had more than one child ($M = 1.7$, $SD = .9$) from more than one union. The average age of men's children in all households was approximately 10 years old ($SD = 5.2$). Children shared with the focal mother (who were also the children men were most likely to reside with prior to incarceration) were younger ($M = 9$ years, $SD = 4.8$) than children residing in other households ($M = 11$ years, $SD = 5.7$). About 19.6% of the fathers in our study were African American, 62.7% defined themselves as Caucasian, 9.8% were Latino, 6% were Native American, and one participant coded as "other." About 14% of the fathers reported completing some high school, approximately 40% of the men in our analysis were high school graduates, 35% reported some college or technical training, and the remaining 11% completed an associate's or bachelor's degree. Seventy-eight ($n = 40$) percent ($n = 40$) of the prisoners interviewed reported that they resided with the focal mother (i.e., the biological mother of the focal child) prior to their incarceration.

Fathers in the study were incarcerated for their most recent conviction an average of approximately 24 months ($SD = 16.1$) and were in confinement relatively far from home ($M = 204.3$ miles, $SD = 589$). Additionally, 75% of fathers reported that they had at least one prior felony conviction, and the most commonly reported type of offense for their current conviction was drug related (28%) followed by robbery/theft (14%) and assault (8%). However, 22 participants did not specify the type of offense, or their response was coded as "other." Comparative analyses conducted between participants in Utah ($n = 33$) and participants in Oregon ($n = 18$) revealed no significant differences between the two groups on the reported participant characteristics.

It should be pointed out that the racial distribution of our participants (i.e., pre-dominance of white prisoners) is not reflective of national demographics of inmates

Table 1
Content Analysis: Summary of Coding Categories and Related Themes

Coding Categories and Retrieval Information	Themes and Exemplars
Father-child relationships Fatherhood (41/51) ¹	Helplessness and regrets "It's been hard to be a father." Wishes and hopes/feeling "I want to get really close." "I want to make a difference." "Whatever hoops I got to jump through I will!" Identity shifts and ambivalence "Being a father instead of not wanting to be a father." "Do it the right way." "I really don't know whether to give up or try...."
Involvement (40/51)	Efforts to father behind walls "I am being the best dad I can." Constraints on fathering functions "I'm not there, I'm no help...." "I can't <i>Protect, Provide Support</i> (Emotional and Financial), <i>Guide, Discipline</i> . Noninvolvement as care "I don't want him to see me like this."
Contact with family Visiting difficulties (24/51)	Emotional pain and uncertainty "They wonder where I am." "He was screaming in the hallway for me." Benefits of contact "Helps me do my time." "They know I'm here."
Visiting with children (39/51)	Fathers as gatekeepers "I feel like the mother is the problem." "I have no control." "She keeps us connected." Coparenting by phone "Are you listening to your mother?"
Father-mother ¹ relationships Father-mother coparenting (136/51)	

In some instances, children were under the care of their grandmother or another caregiver. We note these cases in our results.

¹Signifies number of retrievals (i.e., participants' total retrievals with text pertaining to code.

"IT'S BEEN HARD TO BE A FATHER"

in terms of the disproportionate minority representation in state prisons relative to the general population. For example, 64% of state prison inmates belonged to racial or ethnic minorities in 2001 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2004). However, the racial distribution of our participants was similar to prisoner racial demographics of state prisoners in Utah (67.8% of inmates are Caucasian) (L.L. Bench, Ph.D., personal communication, May 18, 2005) and somewhat representative of prisoners at the Oregon facilities where we collected data (mean percentage of Caucasian inmates at two Oregon data collection sites = 80.5) (State of Oregon, 2005). Furthermore, our participants were representative of state prisoners nationwide with regard to the primacy of drug related offenses (Beck, 2000; Harrison & Karberg, 2004).

FINDINGS

Our findings are descriptive and correspond with the coding categories and themes summarized in Table 1. We begin by discussing men's narrative pertaining to the fatherhood role and thematic content centering on paternal identity. Based on the theoretical framework and qualitative approach of the study, we were particularly interested in the apparent identity shifts and ambivalence that characterized incarcerated men's view of themselves as fathers. Next, we present findings related to men's attempts to enact the fathering role and the meanings attached to their efforts to parent or, more often, their perceived inability to engage in fathering functions such as discipline and financial support. Finally, we discuss two pivotal challenges which emerged in men's narratives with respect to their involvement with their children: contact and coparenting. These challenges, often perceived as insurmountable by many prisoners, highlight the inmate's dependence on children's biological mothers or caregivers, fathers' loss of control over their children's lives, and the unique constraints imposed by the prison environment.

INCARCERATED FATHERHOOD AND PATERNAL IDENTITY: "IT'S BEEN HARD TO BE A FATHER."

Utilizing a "theory of method" is essentially a study of contrasts and relationships. Qualitative interpretation is conceptually akin to an artist's composition in that it cannot be created, understood, or appreciated without paying explicit attention to positive space (i.e., what is obviously before us or "the main object") and negative or "blank" spaces (what "borders" or is in the background) (Weiss & Fine, 2004). The artists' metaphor is useful in considering men's descriptions of incarcerated fatherhood, which by and large centered around their helplessness, regrets, and difficulties of being a "good father."

For example, one father serving three to five months for an assault conviction expressed his inability to be a father while in prison: [I regret] "not being a good father while in prison. I'm not really helping at all." Another father, who served 41 months in prison, was separated from his child's mother at the time of the interview. He reflected: "I know that it really doesn't count behind four walls to make an attempt to be a father to someone. I don't think that's a father, I think that's a cowardly move."

Thus, defining oneself as a "bad" father only makes sense relative to cultural images and prescriptions of what men can and should do when fathering (Day et al., 2005). Participants seemed to have an internalized referent ("negative space" to use Weiss & Fine's [2004] metaphor) of responsible fathering from which to define their experience of incarcerated fatherhood. The crux of this internalized referent seemed to be that good fathers are at the very least available or, to use one inmate's words, "pay attention." For example, this 42-year-old father equated incarcerated fatherhood with child neglect: "To me, it is obvious it is neglect because I'm not there. I'm not available to my children." After "being down" for 24 months, he likens his confinement with child abandonment: "It never made me abandon my daughter but it's like equivalent I guess I'm locked away and can't be there for her."

By and large, incarcerated fatherhood was characterized by impotence and the inability to carry out fathering functions. As one prisoner with five children asked, "How can you be a father while you're incarcerated?" Indeed, prison and the resultant loss of control relative to children was perceived as stripping a man of his fathering identity.

One prisoner, now separated from his wife, poignantly reflected on this shift to the margin:

Her (his daughter's) mom makes reference to me as "Rusty" when it comes to her (their daughter) and ... I don't appreciate that. Anytime my daughter's with me, she'll call me Daddy. But when she's with her mom, she'll call me Rusty... How would she (child's mother) feel if I was to send her back home calling her mom by her first name?

We suspect that, for many men in the study, prison meant going from "Daddy" to "Rusty," and shifting to an ambiguous role without definition. Helplessness and ambiguity were evident in this prisoner's account, creating ambivalence with regard to his fathering intentions upon release:

But, I mean, after being so far in the hole and digging myself this low, it's really hard to climb out. It really is. Because once when I get to the top, it seems like they just throw this dirt back on top of me. I mean, and I don't really know whether to give up, or try to be a part of his life. I really don't know.

Despite the helplessness study participants seemed to associate with incarcerated fatherhood, some men saw things differently. For example, this father of two children, divorced from his child's mother at the time of the interview, tried to be optimistic for his youngest son's sake: "I can't let me being incarcerated get him down.... I gotta be the best father I can even though I'm in prison."

For other inmates, incarceration was a catalyst for new fathering intentions. One participant with a history of involvement in the criminal justice system had been down for 24 months for his most recent conviction. He reflected:

"IT'S BEEN HARD TO BE A FATHER"

This charge [and the resultant incarceration] has allowed me to become more aware of the relationship I'm not having with my kids, because I'm consciously thinking about my fathering role as opposed to when I'm living a reckless lifestyle when I don't pay attention.

Thus, in contrast to most study participants, this inmate defined himself as a better father while incarcerated than when he was out of prison. For him, good fathers pay attention.

Another inmate, completing a 42-month sentence, revealed a similar shift in terms of his fathering intentions: "My opinions of being a father have changed. I've gone from not really wanting to be [a father] to knowing that I am and being a father."

For this man, "being a father," then, resulted from an internal shift in thinking and intention rather than any specific behavior or enactment of the paternal role.

Wishes and hopes for the future. Prison seemed to preclude not only men's presence in the family but their presence in time. Fathering only made sense relative to what a man used to be or do, or more commonly what he hoped to be upon release. Given participants' impending reentry into community and family life, we were not surprised by the predominance of a futuristic time orientation toward fatherhood. For many men, "doing time" was just that, and attention was directed at what one hoped for in the vanguard. We were struck by the fact that this futuristic orientation emerged as a specific theme for at least 10 of the study participants. Being a good father after release centered around intentions of starting over and setting things right with children (and sometimes their mothers), getting close to children, "being there" for children, and "making a difference."

Thus, with respect to fatherhood, emergence from prison represented rebirth. One 28-year-old father with three children, down for 12 months because of drug possession, explained:

"I mean, there's not really too much of a relationship now but I love him ... when I get out, I mean, it's the beginning of a new relationship."

Incarceration seemed to represent a dormant period for men in terms of fatherhood, and reentry signified its resurrection. Indeed, several of the men in the study were quite explicit in that being reborn as a father involved sacrifice and effort. For example, this 31-year-old father with seven children stated:

I really want to be there for my kids and help out as much as possible, and I'm willing to make the sacrifices necessary to be there for them as much as I can. Whatever hoops I got to jump through I'm willing to jump through them.

Similarly, a father of two children expressed his desire to be his "personal best" upon reentry, noting that incarceration was a catalyst for his new intentions:

Because I want to be the best father and obviously the best husband I can be. And maybe it's just the fact that I love them so much and they love me so much that we miss each other, but sometimes prison makes the relationship worse depending on how you choose, or just the situation but actually in this situation I think it's actually gotten better, and I can't wait to get back out and spend more time with them.

Another father tentatively expressed similar hopes: "You know, and I just hope—I'm hoping that, uh, I can be part of his life. Whether it be now or in the near future."

The desire to "make a difference" in the life of his daughter, who visited him monthly, was central to this Utah prisoner's shift in fathering intentions and wish for the future: "I've gone from not really being a part of her life to—now I wanna be a part of her life, and I want to ... help make a difference."

Overall, fathers' hopes and wishes centered on improved family relationships upon their release from prison and intentions to "do whatever it takes" to rekindle father-child relationships, although admittedly some men seemed aware of the future's uncertainty.

FATHER INVOLVEMENT: CONSTRAINTS AND EFFORTS TO FATHER BEHIND WALLS

The nature of father involvement behind walls was constrained and predominantly cognitive (i.e., limited to thinking about children; see, for example, Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999). There was little evidence in men's interview responses of fathering opportunities to display affectional or behavioral aspects of involvement. Men in the study provided thick description regarding their inability to have contact with their family members, the inability to help their families, particularly their children, and being "out of the loop" with regard to information pertaining to the family. Issues around a lack of control also extended to interactions with children's mothers and were presented in the section on coparenting. As previously discussed, in prison, fatherhood was equated with impotence and low levels of paternal esteem. For many men, fatherhood was dormant while incarcerated, due in part to the inability to carry out fathering functions. Seven of the study participants, in describing their lack of involvement in their children's lives, focused on their lack of capacity to carry out fathering functions such as protection, support, guidance, and discipline. These functions were seen as essential elements of how one enacts the fathering role. In particular, several men expressed their frustration over their inability to discipline their children. For example, this father, who maintained weekly phone conversations with his child, states: "I can't really discipline her. All I can do is tell her ... to be good."

A father of four expressed similar sentiments: "They [his children] get a lot of emotional support from me, that kind of stuff, but as far as parenting goes, I don't play the role. I don't discipline them ... I'm incarcerated."

The lack of physical or "face to face" contact with children was seen as an important reason for fathers' failure to stay involved. For example, this father of three discussed his inability to provide effective guidance for his children: "You

ain't got no contact with your kids; physically, you know, it's kind of hard to get your point across."

Other men commented on their inability to pay child support or protect their children from harm. One participant, separated from his child's mother, told interviewers of his concerns about the possibility that a boyfriend was abusing his daughter and his anger over his impotence to protect her: "I would never let somebody harm my daughter if I was out there.... But, you know, there ain't nothing I can do now."

Still fathers did describe their efforts to stay involved behind bars, which typically involved attempts to remain in contact with their children through letters, phone calls, or visits or provide emotional support. The overall sentiment of these descriptions was: "I did the best that I could."

This father of a seven-year-old girl believed trying, via weekly phone conversations, was evidence of care: "I did what I could do from behind bars. And so, I think she [daughter] sees ... that dad is trying to be a part of her life."

Another father described his efforts to stay involved with his son while in prison, although he believed them to be inadequate: "When I came to prison I started writing, sending handkerchiefs, beanies, socks ... and it's like, this doesn't pay the bills. This isn't showing him love.... He basically was raised without me being there."

While most men perceived their lack of involvement as a bad thing for themselves and their families, five of the 51 fathers interpreted their noninvolvement as evidence of care for their children. For example, a father who is still dating his child's mother told interviewers: "I don't want to have him see me [in here]."

Another father who does not receive visits from his child stated: "I see why [visiting] corrupts a kid's mind and bothers him.... I'm not going to be there for him."

Drug use was an issue for this father who was uninvolved with his son prior to his incarceration and had no contact with him during his five-year confinement. He confided that he did not want to be a bad influence on his son:

I haven't seen him since he was five years old. I know where he goes to school; I know where he lives. But it's because I'm using drugs that it's not—or I was using drugs—it was better for me to stay away. It wouldn't have been fair to him.

Thus, involvement may signify care, or conversely, a lack of it may be interpreted as a demonstration of concern for children in the context of the prison environment or other problem behaviors, such as drug use.

PIVOTAL CHALLENGES: CONTACT AND CO-PARENTING

In other contexts of nonresidence such as divorce, scholars identify the difficulties a separate living arrangement may pose for fathers in terms of staying involved with their children. As Dudley and Stone (2004) note, fathers' efforts to adjust to noncontidential efforts can be quite "troublesome" or bewildering. Theoretical models of responsible fathering (see, for example, Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998) and

involvement (e.g., Lamb, 1986) identify the importance of frequent, meaningful contact in keeping father-child relationships vital. Within the divorce literature, factors about the co-parental relationship (e.g., the relationship between the nonresidential father and the mother of their children) have long been identified as influential in terms of the quantity and quality of contact nonresidential fathers have with their children (Ahrons, 1983; Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Arditti & Keith, 1993). Two pivotal challenges for most nonresidential fathers involve making contact and being dependent upon collaboration with the biological mother for such contact (Dudley & Stone). Fathers participating in our study seemed all too aware of these challenges, which more often than not were perceived as insurmountable.

The level of contact between the inmate and his family members varied substantially among the participants of the study. Fifty-one percent of the fathers in our study reported receiving "no visits" from their children (similar to national averages), and the majority of men reported either no phone contact with children (33%) or weekly (37%) or monthly (21%) phone conversations. Forty-five percent of the fathers told us they either received no letters from their children or perhaps heard from them one to two times a year; yet the majority (56%) of fathers reported sending cards or letters to their children monthly or weekly.

Painful and uncertain. In a corrections context, nonresidence and efforts to make contact with children seemed to move beyond "troublesome" given institutional restrictions (e.g., access and expense of phones), changing family membership during imprisonment (e.g., mother taking on a boyfriend), and/or confinement far from home. There were several instances in which inmates told interviewers that family members had moved away or that they simply did not know exactly where the children were or how to reach them, leaving the prisoner without recourse in terms of making the contact that he seemed to desire so much.

One father, confined for 40 months in Oregon, 180 miles from his son and twin girls, explained, "I've only seen them [the twins] once ... because their Mom took off with some dude. I haven't seen them since then [their first birthday]."

He goes on to say, "Since I've been down, my whole family picked up and left and moved out of state.... So I don't have visits ... and I don't have nobody to call.... I don't have nobody to come bring my son to me."

It is worth pointing out that men's motivations for contact with their family members or children while imprisoned may not simply reflect a desire to be a part of children's lives or a good father. Contact seemed to have specific benefits for the inmate rooted in the need to feel remembered, or as a welcome distraction from a highly routinized life "behind the fence." For example, one Oregon inmate, who did not receive visits due to the 2,500 miles between him and his family members, discussed the importance of letters:

They [the letters] make the time go by quick ... and let me know that I'm still wanted. It ... strengthens my morale.... As long as the letters keep coming in, as long as ... your child's sending you something even once a month, then you know that you're still remembered, that you're still wanted ... as a father.... The more

contact you have with your child and your family, the better off you are, the easier you get to do your time, the less stress.

For this father, contact via letter writing with family helped him do his time. However, not all prisoners—or children, for that matter—may reap such benefits. Specifically, several men in the study expressed worries about their children relative to father-child contact during imprisonment. Many believed the contact made their children sad and or emotionally upset. One Utah prisoner who spoke with his son weekly recounted: "At first when I called him and talked to him on the telephone he'd start crying and get really emotional."

A father confined in Oregon explained how visiting was not only hard on his daughter but also on him: "She misses me; it's hard on her, um, counting the days for me to come home. It makes me sad when she stands outside the gate here."

Another father elaborated on the difficulties for his child as well as himself when visits were "cut short":

I just have a problem when they cut the visits short; he's screaming at me, and he don't want to go, and I have to explain, you know, there's other daddies in here who want to see their kids. And then the last time when he came to visit, he was screaming in the hallway for me, and that was kind of hard.

The emotional pain connected to contact likely contributed to infrequent visits. One father sums things up: "He don't like to come here to visit me because it makes him sad."

The implications of visiting difficulties have been speculated about elsewhere in terms of child outcomes or deteriorating family ties (see, for example, Arditti, 2003). It is interesting to note previous work at a jail facility in Virginia based on interviews with children's nonincarcerated caregivers, primarily mothers, revealed similar concerns about the emotional pain for children associated with visiting. Pain may indeed be a shared reality for the prisoner and his family members.

Coparenting and mothers' gatekeeping. Coparenting has generally been defined as how a mother and father support or undermine each other in their parenting roles (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1990) and in contexts of father nonresidence, implying redefined power boundaries. The crux of such redefinition, at least in situations of divorce, involves parents', mostly fathers', need to accept the loss of control over aspects of their children's lives (Emery, 1994). Our findings reflected men's loss of control over the care and upbringing of their children. Given the fathering limitations imposed by incarceration, it would make sense that mothers' gatekeeping was perceived as a salient reason for fathers' lack of control. We defined gatekeeping as "mothers' preferences and attempts to restrict and exclude fathers from ... involvement with children (Fagan & Barnett, 2003, p. 1021)." For example, this father, divorced from his child's mother, discussed the reason why he could not see his son while in prison:

If my son wants to visit me, and the majority of my family thinks it's a good idea, and I think it's a good idea, he tells me over the phone he wants to see me, but yet because his mother doesn't agree, basically there's no way he can come without her consent, so it can't be done.

He minimized his ex-wife's concerns about the implications of the prison visiting environment for their young son and sums up why he believed his son does not visit: "I was really an excuse not to come.... I believe it's a control issue."

The result of mothers' control via gatekeeping was not only a lack of father-child contact, but also feelings of profound helplessness. The same father continued to say, "My responsibility, my right as a parent is automatically taken away, and I have no control over anything."

Thick description was evident with respect to mothers' gatekeeping and their perceived role in regulating and discouraging men's contact with their children. It has been suggested elsewhere that fathers under criminal justice supervision relied on mothers of their children as catalysts for their family involvement (Roy, 2003). Our qualitative findings confirm the importance of mothers in mediating incarcerated-father involvement. Overall, men recounted incidents whereby mothers discouraged father-child contact with children. Gatekeeping also involved preventing phone contact, a "fisceline" for inmates—especially those housed far from their families. A 27-year-old father of a 10-year-old son, confined in Utah 1,000 miles from home, discussed his estranged wife's position with regard to phone contact: "You know, she's told me already, 'I don't want you being in his life. I don't want you to call. Why don't you ... accept it?'"

In the following example, mothers were also seen as pivotal with regard to successful letter writing: "I wrote a letter, but you know, she never sat down and helped them write me back, so I don't know if it's because she's like upset with me or what.... I think she's got some issues."

There were, however, a small number of cases when mothers facilitated contact for some of the men when their relationship was still active and on friendly terms. Those men who were on better terms with their children's mothers described the importance of phone contact in terms of discussing matters pertaining to the children and providing emotional support for children and their mothers. Oftentimes "co-parenting by phone" involved fathers' urging children to "listen to their mothers."

In sum, coparental relationships had bearing on fatherhood, compromising or in rare cases strengthening fragile paternal identities, and largely determined father-child involvement via mothers' gatekeeping. Contexts of contact and co-parenting further reflected and intensified men's prisonization (i.e., identity transformation defined by a lack of personal agency as discussed in Terry, 2003).

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study of incarcerated fatherhood is a composition of contrasts in space and time, and shifting, ambiguous family boundaries. Being a father inside prison could only be defined by what one did before and the kind of father one hoped to be upon

release. Similar to the young men in Nurse's (2002) study, fathers in our study had optimistic expectations and fantasies about returning to their children and families after incarceration. Our findings shed light on the nature of these expectations. Men's hopes and wishes went beyond simply returning but reflected their rebirth as a "good father" or, at the very least, a "better father." The point of the present analysis was not to determine how realistic such an identity transformation might be but rather to draw attention to the identity work that is under construction within contexts of incarceration. Roy (2003) speculates that identity work for individuals in "liminal" space is relentless and, our findings suggest, shaped by feelings of helplessness and a profound lack of control. We speculate that such internalizations of helplessness are characteristic of prisonized paternal identities and run counter to images of responsible fathering (e.g., Doherty et al., 1998). Furthermore, identity work as it pertains to fathering must also be framed within a relational context, which views the network of expectations of others external to the self as critical in shaping role behaviors (e.g., father involvement) as well as one's definition of self (Fox & Bruce, 2001). Our findings highlight the importance of mothers (or children's caregivers) in terms of their potential to influence men's view of themselves as fathers and contribute to the growing body of literature (e.g., Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Barnett, 2003), which suggests maternal gatekeeping is negatively associated with father involvement.

Engelbeen and Knoester (2001) observed that "once men step away from co-residence" (with their children), the transforming power of fatherhood dissipates" and involvement weakens (p. 391). Our findings confirm the risk, nonresidence poses in terms of weakening paternal identity and undermining meaningful involvement as well as the interrelatedness between the two constructs. Men defined themselves as "not very good fathers" while in prison based on their lack of involvement with their children and their inability to enact fathering functions. Their fathering identities were largely overshadowed by their status and identity as prisoners and the resultant constraints associated with their confinement. In turn, their lack of involvement and role enactment contributed to internalizations of "helpless dad" who was of no consequence to his children. Thus, we speculate that incarcerated fathers are a growing group of "fathers at high risk" (e.g., Dudley & Stone, 2004) due in part to their nonresidence and the unique "liminality" associated with prison, prisonized fathering identities characterized by a lack of personal agency, and a lack of present time orientation and meaningful presence in their children's lives. Additionally, incarcerated fatherhood implies a unique dependence on children's mothers or caregivers for contact and encouragement for men to remain involved. Discouragement is the more likely scenario; the stigma, emotional pain, and ambiguity associated with contact, as well as institutional/structural barriers associated with phone access and family visiting, likely diminish paternal investment during imprisonment.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTERVENTION

Our recommendations for intervention are purposely conservative due in part to the qualitative nature of our inquiry and the limited generalizability of our findings. For example, it is unknown whether men who chose not to participate in the study were

different in terms of their fathering experience than those who chose to be interviewed. Additionally, our findings do not necessarily suggest that increased levels of father involvement would be beneficial for men's nonincarcerated family members. We also acknowledge that increased father involvement may not promote positive outcomes in children in socially disadvantaged families (Sano, 2005), as is characteristic of the majority of families impacted by incarceration (Arditti et al., 2003; Carlson & McClanahan, 2002).

It seems likely, given scenarios of traumatic separation and emotional pain on the part of both children and their fathers, that unanticipated consequences for children could emerge via blanket recommendations to increase contact between men and their families during imprisonment, even if such contact seemed to be beneficial for the inmate. Similarly, while men clearly doubled their children's mothers' good intentions with regarding to mothers' gatekeeping, we have no way of knowing whether in fact such gatekeeping was in children's best interest or more a result of structural barriers (such as distance from prison to home or costs associated with phone use). Thus, within the highly stigmatized context of incarcerated fatherhood, gatekeeping is both salient and complicated because of the potential emotional risks contact may pose for children and their caregivers. Longitudinal research that carefully assesses outcomes related to the implications of contact for prisoners and non-incarcerated family members is clearly needed. It does seem obvious, however, that fathers were entirely dependent on their children's caregivers—usually mothers—for contact.

Any intervention aimed at incarcerated families would need to be sensitive to fathers' concerns and promoting positive paternal identities and fathering behaviors without doing so at the expense of children or their caregivers. Indeed, a hallmark of a "responsible fathering" framework involves the primacy of the needs of children and fathers' moral obligations to provide emotional and physical care for their children (Doherty et al., 1998). With respect to promoting responsible fathering during and after periods of incarceration, at the very least, responsible fathers ought to "do no harm" to their children or their primary caregivers. As in other contexts of non-residence (such as divorce), clarity with regard to the nature and extent of fathers' involvement would be helpful, although admittedly challenging. A key issue would be facilitating men's involvement in ways that were meaningful and beneficial to both the prisoner and his nonincarcerated family members. Enhancing men's abilities to financially contribute to their children while incarcerated, which can be done at a distance and with minimal emotional toll on children, is one aspect of involvement that would likely benefit both men (by giving them a meaningful opportunity to "help," thus enhancing paternal identity) and their family members (by improving generally compromised economic situations).

Giving prisoners opportunities during confinement to take part in identity work focused on reconstructing fatherhood also seems particularly important. Narrative therapy's empowering methods hold great promise in facilitating identity work that might move prisonized fathers from helpless to capable—an important issue as they prepare for reentry and attempt to establish or renew relationships with their children. Narrative therapy is based on the perspective that experience is constructed through language and is greatly influenced by society. Based on experience, one

forms stories that constitute one's reality. In return, these stories shape the manner in which a person lives (White, 1995). The deconstruction of an individual's dominant story (in this case "It's hard to be a good father" or "I'm no help") serves as the main crux of narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990). Stated another way, the purpose of narrative therapy is to enable people to "separate their lives and relationships from knowledge/stories that are impoverishing" (Epston, White, & Murray, 1992, p. 108). Additionally, narrative approaches are particularly attractive in that they are nonintrusive, nonstigmatizing, and self-reflective. Thus, narrative techniques can easily be incorporated in the prison setting through journaling or writing letters to family members. By aiding incarcerated fathers to restore their paternal identity, the entire family system may benefit.

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Gatekeeping in Context: Babymama Drama and the Involvement of Incarcerated Fathers

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In this study, we explore the process of negotiation between mothers and fathers to secure, to restrict, and to define men's roles in their children's lives. Field notes and life history interview data were collected with 40 incarcerated men in a work-release program in a Midwestern metropolitan community. Partnering relationships were marked by confusion and conflict due to incarceration, deteriorating commitments, and stresses of low-income family life. Half of the participants described their children's mothers' efforts to discourage their involvement, while almost 75% noted instances of mothers' encouragement of their involvement. We use Identity Theory to frame the transformation of father identities in response to correctional policies and negotiations with their children's mothers. We conclude with implications for the study of the process of maternal gatekeeping and paternal involvement in correctional facilities.

Keywords: fathering, gatekeeping, incarceration, low-income families, identity theory

Researchers have begun to pay closer attention to the ways in which fathering is situated in unique contexts (Marsiglio, Roy, & Fox, 2005). As the papers in this issue indicate, research on fathering and families in correctional facilities is underexplored

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