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Gendered prisons, relationships, and resettlement policies; three reasons for caution for imprisoned mothers

Abstract

Drawing on the lived experiences and perceptions of five imprisoned mothers, this article critically explores female prisons, relationships, and resettlement policies in England and Wales. The findings indicate how the infusing of gendered, informal social controls into penal interventions and penal policy has the potential to harm mothers. This is why *three reasons for caution* are proposed in relation to 'structural obstacles', 'continued exposure to abuse', and 'ascribed reputations'. With these challenges, the mother's aspirations for a crime and drug free future may be thwarted. Therefore, by showing the complex and dynamic set of circumstances that mothers in prison must navigate, more clearly the need for a nuanced approach for working with women can be appreciated.

Key words

Female prisons; mothers in prison; relationships; penal policy; desistance.

Introduction

The continuing emphasis on the usefulness of family ties as a source of support for a person in prison is found widely within policy literature and discourse in England and Wales (Home Office, 2004; Farmer, 2017; 2019; Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), 2019a). An often cited statistic from government research highlights the potential relationship between receiving visits in prison and re-offending rates; with findings showing how 52 per cent of prisoners who received a visit from a family member or partner did not reoffend, compared to 70 per cent of prisoners who were not visited (May, 2008). Further identified benefits relate to securing housing, employment, and education on release (Niven and Stewart, 2005), resulting in family relationships being labelled as the 'most important resettlement agency' by HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP, 2016: 4). The Female Offender Strategy (MoJ, 2018) and inquiry reviewing 'Female Offenders' Family and Other Relationships' produced by Lord Farmer (2019) acknowledge how relational ties are complex for women owing to gender-specific needs and vulnerabilities, but remain steadfast about the potential of relationships. Lord Farmer (2019:4) reported that supportive relationships 'are utterly indispensable if she is to turn away from criminality and contribute positively to society: relationships she can rely on are a 'must have' for her rehabilitation'.

Academics have been critical of an over-reliance on relationships for resettlement purposes out of concern for over-burdening families who may already have disproportionately disadvantaged backgrounds (Codd, 2008; Jardine, 2017). Expanding this theoretical line of enquiry, in this article *three reasons for caution* are proposed when applying these dominant family-centred penal discourses for mothers in prison. The cautions seek to highlight how interactions between gender, imprisonment, relationships, and lived experiences are dynamic and multidimensional. The data originates from in-depth, semi-structured interviews

with imprisoned mothers housed within one prison serving England and Walesⁱ. A subset of the sample, comprised of five mothers who self-reported long having fractured ties with children and families following years of drug use and often multiple custodial sentences, are the focus of this article. Their capacity to draw on relational and familial ties for resettlement purposes were laden with significant (and somewhat paradoxical) relational and structural obstacles. While there has been considerable research and policy interest with mothers in prison in recent years (Lockwood, 2020; Masson, 2019; Minson, 2018; Baldwin, 2015), directing attention towards this group of five mothers sheds light on the intricate web of relational ties for this under-theorised group.

The analysis is framed using a sociological lens of ‘family practices’ (Morgan, 1999) to better understand how mothers were ‘doing’ mothering before and during custody, as well as their expected - or hoped for - practices on release. The nature of this exploration included much discussion and reflection on other significant relational and familial ties, as well as the mother’s enrolment on a drugs rehabilitation course in the prison during their sentence. Participation on this drugs intervention had (re)ignited and (re)directed their focus onto their maternal identities and responsibilities; providing motivation for drug and crime free futures. Over several years, key feminist writers have identified how women in the criminal justice system are viewed and treated differently to men often owing to their ‘double deviancy’ and the associated *need* to re-socialise women through modes of ‘feminisation, domestication and medicalisation’ (Dobash et al, 1986; Carlen, 1993; Carlen and Worrall, 2004). Given the emphasis on motherhood in the drugs intervention, questions are raised about the State’s recent reliance on relational ties as a mechanism to support resettlement; as this focus has potential - ideologically and practically - to emit contemporary informal social control over imprisoned women.

To caveat, this article is not suggesting that *all* family and/or significant relational ties are problematicⁱⁱ. Neither is it appropriate for the reader to assume that motherhood and relationships should not be supported when a person is in prison, or is due to be released. Great strides have been made recently alongside the attention attained from Lord Farmer’s (2017, 2019) landmark reviews, and growing academic interest in the collateral consequences of imprisonment for children and families (Jardine, 2018; Condry and Scharff Smith, 2018; McCarthy and Adams, 2019). Instead, what the paper invites is a critical reading of the recent fashioning of family ties as a resettlement tool for mothers for whom this route may be unattainable, improbable, and/or harmful owing to insufficient consideration of structural inequalities and poor relational histories.

Context: family relationships for mothers in prison

Alongside the Government’s focus on prisoners’ family ties in England and Wales (e.g. Farmer, 2017; 2019; HMIP, 2016), a growing body of literature has emphasised the importance of prioritising relationships. Discussions are found in academic work (Brunton-Smith and McCarthy, 2017; Jardine, 2018), inquires (Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR), 2019),

and publications from third sector organisations (Prison Reform Trust (PRT), 2018; Crest Advisory, 2019). Desistance scholars have similarly identified how relationships have the potential to support prosocial identities by acting as ‘social capital’, and assisting with attempts at a crime-free life (Farrall, 2004; McNeill, 2006; Weaver, 2015). While there is no agreed upon definition of desistance (Rodermond et al, 2016), it broadly refers to ‘the experience and process of forging pathways away from offending and criminalised behaviour, and maintaining this over time’ (Wright, 2017: 12). Motherhood is found to be a strong variable for cessation, though when parenthood or family relationships generate stress, they might undo these protective bonds (Rodermond et al, 2016). Likewise, it is presence of high-quality social bonds that present potential. Therefore, to varying degrees, relationships can act as a force for change.

Some of the ascribed emphasis on relational ties mirrors notions of ‘responsibilization’; an approach favoured by successive governments in recent years (Garland, 2001), that shifts responsibility for crime (including crime responses), away from the State towards other sectors and institutions, including; individuals, businesses, families, and communities (Hannah-Moffat, 2001; Gelsthorpe, 2000; Crewe, 2011). In absolving State responsibility, this process tasks individuals with meeting their own needs; leaving structural factors under-acknowledged or un-changed (Myers, 2017). This is particularly problematic for imprisoned women who have often experienced marginalisation in their personal, social, and relational lives. Evidence indicates how half of female prisoners have histories of abuse (Corston, 2007), half have observed violence in the home as a child, and a third have spent time in social care (Williams et al, 2012). It should not be a great leap to suggest that fully appreciating the circumstances that women have negotiated in their past are crucial for properly supporting women with their futures (Farrall et al, 2014). Yet, research shows how the structural environments into which women leaving custody must negotiate in relation to housing, employment, addiction, ill-health, and relationships can be equally as disadvantageous, or worse, than their environment before custody (Wright, 2017; Masson, 2019; Sharpe, 2015). Recognising what women might bring with them to prison has been a driving force of the trauma-informed approach and trauma-responsive practices recently implemented across the female prison estate in England and Wales (MoJ, 2018a; Bradley, 2017). This work has helped to draw attention to the insidious way trauma can impact several aspects of the persons’ life and availability of future opportunities.

Some recognition of women’s distinctly adverse past experiences are mentioned in Government reports (MoJ, 2018) with, for instance, Lord Farmer’s review (2019:26) recommending the development of ‘digital personal circumstances files’, proposed to capture ‘which relationships are valuable...and which are toxic’. However, it is unclear whether this approach includes a nuanced understanding of the ways in which a woman’s positionality, perspectives, and prospects are shaped and constructed around their previous and on-going structural and relational experiences (see Österman, 2018). Family – and other ‘significant’ relationships to which meaning is attached (HMPPS, 2019a) - are active entities negotiated

around current, and ever-changing, events rather than binary and static definitions (Jardine, 2018). Obligations are premised on history, culture, biography and reputation, as well as reciprocity and trust (Finch and Mason, 1993). Notions and experiences of 'family' can have several, dynamic, but conflicting meanings simultaneously, interacting with past and current external and internal variables. While a greater awareness of 'individual-level change' is beginning to be discussed in desistance literature (Farrall et al, 2010; Farrall et al, 2014: 290; Österman, 2018), the same assertions do not appear to have been captured in Government rhetoric. To outline the significance of this gap, *three reasons for cautions* are outlined in this article.

Context: Women and social control in prison

Feminist scholars have highlighted how informal social controls operate in society to ensure women are 'good' mothers, wives, and daughters and, from this frame of reference; that women who break the law have transgressed from these norms (Carlen, 1993; 1998; Genders and Player, 1990; Gelsthorpe, 2000). Overall, these transgressions are minimal as women comprise just five percent of the prison population in England and Wales, and are consistently a smaller prisoner population internationally (World Prison Brief, 2020). However, particular unease surrounds women in prison who have children (Carlen and Worrall, 2004; Corston, 2007; Baldwin, 2015; Lockwood, 2020). Gendered obligations, and socially expected roles pertaining to motherhood, fuel anxieties around maternal imprisonment; for instance, around childbearing and childrearing. With the goal of realignment, penal institutions domesticate, feminise and medicalise the small number of 'doubly deviant' women who have offended against both the law and womanhood (Carlen and Worrall, 2004). Prison-based interventions have been aimed at improving mothering and domestic skills with realignment found in 'treatments' and enforced dependence on the institution via infantilization (Genders and Player 1990; Carlen 1993; 1998; Hannah-Moffat, 2001; Moore and Scraton, 2014).

Crewe et al (2017) suggest that oppressive penal practices do not completely diminish agency and voice, but ought to be appreciated as interplaying with the wider set of constraints in women's pre-prison and prison lives. As Howe (1994: 164) indicates, we cannot understand the punishment of women 'without losing sight of women prisoners, and also without limiting the focus to the penal sphere'. Therefore, to unpack the intricate web of relationships for the five mothers in this study, recognition of the broader web of gendered power relations and social dynamics is woven into the analysis, both *alongside* and *in conjunction* to a focus on the mother's accounts (Howe, 1994; Bosworth, 1999). Morgan's (1999) theory of 'family practices' is a useful, active lens with which to explore *what* individuals are 'doing' and *how* people are managing their relational lives. 'Family practices' not only encompass a reactive capacity (for instance, following significant life events including imprisonment), but focus on the minute of the everyday active and passive practices in relationships. Within this penal climate that champions relational ties for supporting resettlement, the application of this theoretical tool has generated original insights into the complex social structures and

relational environments that constitute the lives of mothers in prison, and alongside this, *three reasons for caution* when considering resettlement policies.

Context; the research study

The findings presented in this article are taken from a qualitative study exploring maternal imprisonment and family life in England and Wales. Prior to its commencement, and following Prison Service Instruction (PSI) 22 (NOMS, 2014), permission for the study was gained from the researchers' university ethics committee, the National Research Council, and prison Governors. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two unrelated cohorts (not from within the same families) with first-hand experience of maternal imprisonment. The first cohort was made-up of twenty-four family members and friends self-identifying as caregivers owing to their caretaking role to children whose mothers were imprisoned (Booth, 2020c). The second cohort was comprised of fifteen mothers convicted of an offence and serving a custodial sentence at one female prison in England. Ten mothers in this second cohort were serving their first prison sentence and had been primary caregivers prior to custody. The remaining five mothers are the focus of this article owing to their distinct characteristics of not having lived with their children for many years, reporting long histories of drug addiction, and having often served multiple custodial sentences.

The sample

A purposive sampling strategy (Bryman, 2012) was used to recruit mothers to ensure that they all had at least one child under the age of 18 years, were convicted, and had been in prison for at least two months. This timeframe was chosen to ensure the mothers had sufficient time to become familiar with the prison regime. All residents at the prison research site were informed about the study; information leaflets were distributed under cells doors, and posters displayed in communal spaces. Mothers opted into the study when they believed they met the above-mentioned inclusion criteria, and some snowball sampling - via word-of-mouth from prisoners and staff - also resulted in eligible women deciding to participate.

Table 1 shows the demographics of the five mothers explored in this article. All the information in the table was self-reported by the mothers as access to prison records were not sought for this project. All the mothers were aged between 25 – 35 years of age, identified as White British, and all but one (Verity) reported having served previous custodial sentences. The sample reflects the female prisoner population as, in 2017, nearly half (48 per cent) of women in the criminal justice system had between 1 and 14 previous cautions and convictions (MoJ, 2018b). The children to the five mothers had varied living arrangements; Rochelle's children lived with their father, while all the other childcare arrangements had been (or continued to be) mediated by social services. With the exception of three children (both of Verity's children, and Carly's youngest daughter) they resided with blood relatives and maintained contact in prison by letter and/or telephone. All the mothers reported issues with drug use prior to custody, which is consistent with the literature which suggests high levels of

drug dependence for women entering prison (Light et al., 2013). Relatedly, all the mothers had been engaged with a drugs rehabilitation programme on their current sentence.

<INSERT TABLE 1>

Ethical considerations

Ethical practices were constantly considered owing to the sensitive nature of discussing children and family for imprisoned mothers. In-depth interviews were chosen as the data collection method to create a confidential space to disclose and discuss experiences (Bryman, 2012). A private office was selected to undertake the interviews to ensure, as far as possible in the prison setting, anonymity and privacy was maintained. Special attention was given to explaining clearly, verbally and in writing, the parameters of confidentiality out of recognition of the limited liberty already experienced by virtue of the mothers' imprisonment. The process of consent and withdrawal was also clearly communicated orally and on information sheets and consent forms. Some mothers who initially opted into the study later withdrew their consent either following pre-interview meetings with the researcher, or by deciding not to attend the scheduled interview despite having a movement slipⁱⁱⁱ. Both of these practices indicated to the researcher that the mothers' rights to exercise consent were upheld. The mothers who took part in the interviews, which often lasted two hours, were understandably emotional at times; regular breaks were offered, and taken, and the option to end the interview or withdraw were reiterated. However, the mothers' were motivated to participate to communicate their experiences in the hope of providing others with a better understanding of their lives.

Data analysis and reflexivity

The findings were developed following several iterations of analysis, including; the initial thematic data analysis which was conducted manually^{iv}, discussions and reflections with peers^v, and continued reflexive practices. The credibility of qualitative research can be enhanced by reflexive accounts of the research process (Shenton, 2004). Kretz (1991: 218) defines reflexivity as 'an assessment of the influence of the investigator's own background, perceptions and interests on the qualitative research process'. The findings are intrinsically linked to an uncomfortableness that the researcher had felt, which developed from recognising a significant misfit between the dominant family-centred discourses in the literature and the five mothers' lived experiences. Some elements of this uncomfortableness were aired in a critical commentary which considered the 'definitions, developments and difficulties' of the notion of 'family' for women in prison (Masson and Booth, 2018). Expanding on this, the *three reasons for caution* were identified by further teasing out the nature of these tensions to make sense of the research data within the gendered context in which they were operating. Importantly, the process has enabled the mothers' accounts to be positioned alongside the current penal and policy context; thus contributing to our understanding of the relational circumstances that people in prison can face and negotiate.

Limitations

First, all the mothers in the sample self-identified as White British, and so there is no scope to examine cultural differences, despite 10 per cent of the female prison population being foreign nationals (MoJ, 2019) and 11 per cent identifying as black and minority ethnic (MoJ, 2017). This is important as research with mothers in the United States (US) found cultural differences in the responses and attitudes of the women who participated (Enos, 2001). Second, even though insights into family and other relationships were accessed via the mothers' meaning-making, their direct accounts were not collected; for example, the perspectives of children's caregivers were not captured. Third, while the mothers discussed in the article, have similar characteristics and experiences to many women in prison, for instance concerning issues with addiction, the smaller sample size affects generalisations. Nonetheless, the in-depth insights achieved contribute to the extant literature, and may have relevance for mothers detained in prisons internationally.

Findings

Analysis of the data indicated how the five mother's narratives were closely married to their participation on a drugs rehabilitation programme during their current custodial sentence. Accordingly, the first section below provides the context of the mother's narratives by reviewing their 'Trajectories: abuse, addiction, motherhood and prison'. Following this, *three reasons for cautions* are proposed relating to 'structural obstacles', 'continued exposure to abuse' and 'ascribed reputations' found in the mother's lives and descriptions. This format was chosen to allow the reader to first appreciate the context of the mothers' pre-prison lives and penal experiences, before indicating how and why caution is required.

Trajectories: abuse, addiction, motherhood, and prison

Participation on the drugs rehabilitation programme for some mothers was a sentence requirement issued from the courts (Rochelle), whereas others opted to take part (Carly). The study did not intend to capture experiences of addiction programmes, but found this was a shared experience of the five mothers also reporting fractured family ties. This reflects previous work identifying relationships between gender, addiction, and imprisonment (Rumgay, 2004; Farrall et al, 2014). The trajectory into prison for all five mothers was associated to their drug use which they explained had developed as a coping mechanism following cruel treatment, including sexual, physical, emotional, and financial abuse by family members in their childhood, and from intimate partners during the teenage and adult lives. For example, Verity had been in a relationship with her partner, the father to their two children, since she was fifteen years of age. She disclosed how it was because of him that she had been introduced to heroin and relied upon it for many years. Verity felt trapped in the relationship after her sons were born, saying: *"there's no way I would have been able to take my kids and just leave because he would tell social services that I was on drugs and they would*

have got taken anyway". Later in the interview, she was more explicit about the nature of this abuse, indicating how: *"the kids Dad was trying to control me, he was violent"*.

As with Verity, the mother's accounts highlighted the intertwined nature of their abusive histories with their drug use and maternal role. Dependency on drugs had led to the removal of their children from their care. What followed the loss of custody of their children was a worsening of their personal circumstances, an increased reliance on drugs to cope, and their pathway into crime. This trajectory is consistent with research exploring the experiences of women in prison (Rumgay, 2004) and the pervasiveness of trauma (Bradley, 2017). It was the removal of Becca's daughter into foster care from hospital, and almost immediately after the birth^{vi}, that triggered her very quick and dangerous downward spiral.

"They took her from hospital ... within 6 months I had 11 charges and I was out of control ... I didn't care, I was out of control ... I think you kind of lose all hope when your kids go into care, you feel like you're not going to get them back and ... when you're dealing with a lot of other stuff as well, sometimes you do, you just feel like giving up" (Becca)

Factors generally associated with positive relational ties – trust, reciprocity, biography (Finch and Mason, 1993) – can be exceptionally precarious for people with experiences of abuse in the past (Farrall et al, 2014). This could be with regard to the availability, willingness, and ability to forge or maintain relationships as longer term relational scars can be attached to traumatic past experiences. However, despite these painful trajectories which include victimisation, there was a strong sense of hope voiced by the mothers for their future. Two areas of healing were identified as the focus for the mothers' motivation to change; first, with personal healing (a motivation for abstinence and recovery with drugs); and second, with familial healing (a motivation to rebuild relationships with their children and families).

Rochelle – *"Since coming to this prison and doing the drug rehab course, I still want to sort myself out*

Interviewer – *'What's motivating you to sort yourself out?*

Rochelle - *Me kids, just the life I was living, I'm hoping to go to secondary rehab so, to rehab outside anyway ... I just need to get back out there and get somewhere to live and start being a Mam again to them really"*

Sarah was on her seventh sentence and, much like Rochelle, was keen to participate on the drugs rehabilitation course in prison, and on release, as this programme had reignited her maternal feelings and renewed her confidence as a mother for a crime and drug free future.

"This is the first time I've been clean in 9 years ... most of the time I've just gone to jail and walked out the gates and gone back to square one again ... this time I've been putting the effort in, I have been keeping clean, I want to go to rehab ... but

when I'm outside, cause I was in that big bubble of addiction, going out stealing and everything else, and the kids obviously went to live with my Mum [and] after that, that's what my life was all about, I don't know [it's] 'cause I've got feelings back that I do... I do miss them ... I mean it's sad that it's took for me to come back to jail like this" (Sarah)

Sarah's transition towards her maternal identity was evidenced through a reawakening of maternal "feelings" and was premised on the emotional aspects of motherhood since being 'clean'. Colman and Vander Laenen (2017) write that the relationship between recovery from drug-use and desistance has received little attention, though the former is generally focused on individual goals, whereas the latter on socially accepted goals. Interestingly, this maps onto the two areas of healing (personal and familial) identified in the mothers' narratives in this study. Feminist scholars (Bosworth, 1999; Howe, 1994) have proposed that imprisonment should be understood as an interplay between the personal and socio-penal sphere for women. Using this technique, what is curious is the blurring of personal and familial healing as reported by the mothers; as both indicate a desire to change based on enacting a particular maternal identity. For instance, when revisiting the quotations above, with more clarity it can be observed how the mothers' engagement in the prison-based drugs programme brought with it an emphasis on 'good' mothering activities and emotions. For Rochelle, '*sorting myself out*' meant living a life that concentrates on mothering roles and practices on release, and for Sarah, a rekindling of maternal feelings meant prioritising children over addiction and criminal activities. At the crux of these findings is the observation that the mothering 'practices' (Morgan, 1999) framed following the drugs rehabilitation programme bears resemblance to informal social controls previously found in penal institutions (Carlen, 1993, 1998).

It is important to remember that the point at which they were interviewed, most mothers had served multiple custodial sentences, had misused substances for several years, and had not lived with their children for some time. Their maternal self-identity did not directly align with those generally found in dominant social definitions of motherhood (Teather et al., 1997). By way of example, Verity admitted that "*I sort of did neglect them a bit*" whereas Becca explained that "*the only consistency my daughter has got is school*" owing to her disrupted home life. Underscoring disclosures such as these were emotions of blame, guilt, stigma, and self-depreciation; exemplifying the both the weight and impact of societal pressures on the mothers self-image. This is explained by Snyder (2009: 38) who wrote that imprisoned mothers may 'carry the burden of a criminal conviction and the violation of societal norms about what good women and mothers are supposed to be'.

While drug dependency reduces the likelihood of desistance (Rodermond et al, 2016), the mother's descriptions of their aspirations for recovery were centred on notions of 'good mothering' indicating how prison remain infused with paternalistic notions of womanhood. It is also possible that the maternal focus in penal interventions might reflect the more recent

priority afforded to relational ties for supporting resettlement for imprisoned women in policy rhetoric (Farmer, 2019). The critical examination that follows is not intended to suggest that the movement towards mothering is undesirable or unattainable for the five mothers. Rather, the following *three cautions* propose how an emphasis on relational interventions and ideologies wield the potential to silence or overlook the external conditions and relational contexts surrounding the mothers' lives. Without appropriate recognition, such an approach could derail the mothers hope and motivation for change, and weaken resettlement policies that too narrowly focus on the relational.

Structural obstacles

The process of using motherhood as a motivator for change in the drugs rehabilitation programme runs the risk of unethically responsabilising the mothers by placing onus on them to enact choices and agency, and resist oppression, while navigating complicated structural environments. As Carlen and Worrall (2004:4) point out, prison 'may aggravate, rather than ameliorate, the psychological, economic and social factors' facing women (also Wright, 2017; Masson, 2019; Sharpe, 2015). The reality of these issues was felt by Carly. She had been to prison on several occasions and was candid about the challenges and lack of practical help that faced her post-custody. When asked about the kind of support she would like, she replied:

"Just help with housing, getting a job, like it's difficult 'cause you want to get a job but if you work more than 15 hours you get no benefits, but you have to work 2 weeks in advance or more sometimes more to get paid, so it's just, it's catch 22. I've got an appointment with careers and I'm going to see if they can help 'cause I really don't want to go out to reoffend" (Carly)

To be realistic in her attempts at bringing about change, Carly discussed the difficulties of securing payment for work alongside the inadequacy of a £46 discharge grant^{vii} which, it is worth noting, has not been subject to inflation, or changed, since 1996. The motivation for Carly was ascribed to future potential for enacting mothering practices; as financial stability meant she could provide a home into which her daughter might choose to live in the future.

"I want to be working [on release], like my daughter wants to come and live with me when she's old enough, which is in 3 years ... I don't want to be in this position in 3 years' time and having to say 'no' to my daughter if she's ready, I want to be able to provide for her and I want to have some sort of stable life where she could come if she wanted to" (Carly)

Continued support with recovery was commonly linked to performing mothering practices (Morgan, 1999) which further demonstrates the merging of motivations for personal and familial healing. For Verity, remaining free of substances was a requirement for increased contact with her children in long-term foster care by social services. She had secured three

months funding for a drugs rehabilitation programme in the community, but once this expired, there was no certainty of further support.

“The prison here is going to be sorting rehab out for me and they can only afford 3 months’ worth, but if I want to get, if I want to stay on for another 3 more months then I got to get the funding from somewhere else” (Verity)

Desistance scholars have acknowledged how during a prison sentence – and being removed from external influences – a renewed motivation for change can develop (Maruna, 2001). However, to operationalise change, the mothers reported a need for formal support which they also acknowledged was, quite paradoxically, lacking or uncertain. Concern about rehabilitation programmes post-release were shared by all five mothers and, with the funding landscape that is anticipated with the COVID-19 pandemic, there are likely more obstacles to accessing courses. Although much has been written about the gender-responsive approaches required for women in prison (Corston, 2007; Baldwin, 2015; Masson, 2019), the extent that appropriate support has been actioned is widely questioned. There is criticism regarding the application of promised change in the recent Female Offender Strategy (MoJ, 2018a) owing to funding deficits and resource allocation (Booth et al, 2018). While adherence to socially acceptable maternal identities may have been cultivated through the drugs rehabilitation programme, the findings here alongside recent desistance research (Farrall et al, 2010; Rodermond et al, 2016) indicates how the continued presence of structural issues could continue to undermine the mother’s attempts. In light of the dominant penal policy rhetoric heralding family and relational ties for resettlement purposes, it is important that current prison practices do not obfuscate, or remove, the availability of other necessary provisions. This caution is especially vital given that the relational ties available to the mothers were far from reliable or stable, as discussed below.

Continued exposure to abuse

This second caution provides a closer examination of the mothers’ relational circumstances enabling a fuller appreciation of complications that might arise from the mothers’ continued exposure to abuse. Women in prison are not protected from *all* forms of abuse while in custody. There is reduced risk of exposure to physical and sexual abuse from known perpetrators, for example from partners, for reasons associated to distance and opportunity. However, a recent, expanded definition of abuse includes methods which do not necessarily – or only – include physical violence. The proposed Domestic Abuse Bill (2019-2021) incorporates economic abuse and controlling and manipulative non-physical abuse. Some of the mothers in this study disclosed that they were negotiating challenging relationships because of a continued exposure to abusive people. These relationships could be classified as ‘toxic’ (Farmer, 2019), though the mothers’ accounts indicated how this static label may not account for their more complex nature. Two examples are explored to better demonstrate how this exposure brought about significant complications in the mothers’ relational lives.

First, Becca identified her mother as her abuser despite her also being her three year old daughter's long-term foster carer. Becca explained how during a previous prison sentence, her mother had accessed her bank account, and spent considerable sums of money leading her to exit prison with substantial debt. Becca was reluctant to permit her mother access to her bank account on her current sentence, but was under pressure to do so in return for contact with her daughter.

"On my last sentence she got me in a thousand pounds worth of debt, so on this sentence, because I refused to give her my bank card, because of the debt, she's stopped all contact [with my daughter] ... and she uses my daughter as a weapon to get money off me" (Becca)

Research concerning maternal imprisonment in the US (Enos, 2001; Barnes and Cunningham-Stringer, 2014; Tasca, 2016), indicated how mother-caregiver relationships, and especially the caregiver's role as gatekeeper, were prominent factors in shaping mother-child contact. Reasons for this gatekeeping were associated with the mothers' previous chaotic behaviours and criminalised activities, and the associated distrust that surrounded facilitating contact. However, for Becca, gatekeeping behaviour assumed a very different meaning; with contact premised on methods of manipulation and economic control. Becca was in a catch-22 situation; discontinuing contact with her mother could further jeopardise contact with her daughter, whereas providing access to her bank account facilitated contact, but was likely to negatively affect her financial stability post custody, and therefore her likelihood of regaining custody or overnight visits.

A second example where exposure to an abuser was on-going was described in Sarah's account as she discussed the challenges of managing relations between her mother (as caregiver to her four children), her eldest son, and his father. Complications occurred as the latter was also an abusive ex-partner, and someone who Sarah was also trying to gain some distance from during her current sentence, with the support of a practitioner in the Offender Manager Unit (OMU).

"My OMU worker is trying to get me away from [my ex-partner] 'cause I'm trying to get to a rehab clinic and obviously my ex used to beat me up so, at the moment because [my ex-partner] knows I'm in jail, at the moment, my ex-partner, he throws money at my eldest son a lot and my eldest son's very money-orientated. He needs his nice trainers; he wants money in his pocket to look bad^{viii} for going into town and things like that ... I'm trying to help Mum where I can, to stop [this]" (Sarah)

Sarah's ex-partner was permitted contact with her eldest son as part of a legal contact agreement drawn together by the family court. Therefore, while her ex-partner presented a continued risk to her, this conflicted with the contact agreement and how she viewed her position and responsibilities as a mother. Indeed, mothering practices are consistently

identified as the central focus for women in prison (Enos, 2001; Baldwin, 2015; Masson, 2019) and as a motivation for change in this study. Yet, the extent and nature of Sarah's overlapping commitments restricted her options; especially those relating to severing ties were her ex-partner. Understanding and managing such a tenuous set of relationships was difficult and required constant, careful (re)negotiation. Given findings concerning the intertwined nature of histories of abuse and drug dependency; continued exposure to her ex-partner had the potential to undermine Sarah's attempts at change.

What is learned from the above two examples is the need to recognise, accommodate, and adequately support the distinct relational ties that exist in women's lives – appreciating the dynamics and contradictions that can constitute them. Insufficient consideration of the relational environments that women may need to renegotiate to attain the socially acceptable maternal identities and practices underscoring motivators for change in, for instance the drugs rehabilitation programme, could put women in an exceptionally vulnerable situation. The accounts show how the implications are far-reaching, not only relating to their potential exposure to victimisation, but to other change processes, including; motherhood, finances, addiction, and engagement in crime. The hurdles reported could significantly – and very likely negatively - influence and shape the mothers current and future aspirations (Rodermond et al, 2016). These risks should be acknowledged and managed in resettlement policies and practices to ensure appropriate safeguarding and support is available, otherwise practices could betray and further harm mothers.

Ascribed reputations

This third caution continues to consider relational hurdles for the mothers by exploring the context in which these were being negotiated given that they reported that many of their family and relational ties were significantly fractured. Recognising how history plays a central role in the way self-identities and relationships can be constructed (Morgan, 2011) might shed light on the reasons for this. Already mentioned is the way in which children's caregivers act as 'gatekeepers' of mother-child contact during maternal imprisonment, and this research indicated that mother-child contact was supported to a lesser degree when the mother had been imprisoned before (Barnes and Cunningham-Stringer, 2014) and to a higher degree when the mother had been primary caregiver (Turanovic *et al*, 2012). The five mothers from the current study fall into the first category which provides some explanation for the mother-child contact restrictions in place for them. It might be the mother's divergence from social traditions that had them entering prison occupying a 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963). As Sarah suggests, her mother's disappointment in her choice of actions was the reason for her determining the level of mother-child contact.

"Mum didn't want anything to do with me, she let me, allowed me to speak to the kids and like I could have the kids, speak to the kids once a week through her ... I think my Mum's just disappointed in me because since [social services intervention] I should have been going in and out, and jumping over

hoops and bounds to have my children back and instead I've chose the criminal way" (Sarah)

As with Sarah, all mothers reported not having had prison visits from their children. These findings are consistent with previous evidence that indicates a small uptake of visits for women in prison (HMIP, 2019). Carly explains how her auntie, as caregiver to her eldest daughter, would not support Carly's daughters' intention to visit her in prison because she held negative images of her. This was based on prior behaviour.

Carly: *"[My Auntie], she gets upset, but she lets that get in the way of her opinions if that makes sense?"*

Interviewer: *In what way?*

Carly: *Like with my daughter coming to see me, she doesn't want to help, she doesn't want to know, she doesn't want to get involved ... she doesn't think my daughter should come ... she's harbouring things, using them. She's just very, I could do well for the next 2 years and she would still hold it against me. My family are like that in a way, they harbour things, they keep things against people and once they've got a disliking to someone they are likely to stay that way."*

What these findings show is the importance of knowing the relational context the mothers must navigate when conceptualising for forms of relational 'support' for purposes of resettlement in policy and practice. From desistance research it is known that relationships have various benefits and limitations to mothers seeking change (Rodermond et al, 2016). Yet, policy proposes the identification of 'healthy' and 'toxic' relationships (Farmer, 2019) which may not do justice to complex set of relationships that encompass the mother's social world, including the repercussions of having a 'spoiled identity' for the mothers' futures. Goffman (1963) writes that the discovery of a spoiled identity by an individual does not only impact their reaction to the stigmatised person within a current situation, but also influences their future treatment; as termed a "reputation" (p.84). The above extracts show how the mothers' relationships were laden with on-going challenges that could shape, or hinder, their attempts to rebuild or improve relationships. How this also conflicts with the mothers' attempts to resume or re-engage with their maternal identities and role following the drugs rehabilitation process is a necessary consideration; as resuming mothering practices could prove more difficult in light of this relational terrain. This concern is documented in Sarah's reflections as she discussed the precarity surrounding her future should she struggle to remain drug and crime free.

"I think Mum's just a bit worried 'cause she's heard all the promises, she's heard all the 'I'm gonna do alright' and 'I'm not going to do this again' and it's always fallen back again. And I just don't think, I think she feels that if I get that far, that I go to [a drug] rehab and I try to fight for the kids and they come back, what will

happen to the kids if it all falls apart again? I just got to build up a lot of trust; I've ruined all my trust and respect from my Mum" (Sarah)

As with Sarah, having a history of failed attempts at change influenced the involvement that Rochelle was permitted in her children's lives. She feared the situation would only worsen if history were to repeat itself on her release from her current sentence.

"You're just powerless over doing or saying anything, like if I start wanting to discuss things with the children's Dad, he just, he wouldn't, he thinks I have no right 'cause [last time I was released from prison] I got my own house but I ended up like using drugs again and drinking and I was like having irregular contact with the kids ... I couldn't like hold it down and then I ended up back on the gear again and then I got this sentence not long after that" (Rochelle)

These accounts shed light on the challenges facing mothers whose relational histories do not possess the trust, reciprocity, and biographies required as building blocks for positive relational ties. Their past 'practices' (Morgan, 1999) make their forthcoming 'practices' uncertain and risky in ways that could seek to undermine their attempts enacting at socially defined mothering practices whilst pursuing drug and crime free futures. However, while the ascription of a 'reputation' had potentially damaging consequences for the mothers, this study did not engage directly with their relatives or significant others. In the absence of their perspectives, it is not appropriate or ethical for assumptions to be made concerning what role families *ought* to assume, or what behaviours *should* be enacted (see Codd, 2008 for further critical discussions).

Desistance scholars have indicated how the change process not only includes social capital as a mechanism for support, but also as a site that recognises, accepts and identifies the person's changed identity (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009; Weaver, 2015). Responsibility for change rests with both the individual seeking change and members of their social network; as investment is needed from both sides. How this might operate in practice is far from straightforward in the lives of mothers presenting fractured histories and challenging relational circumstances. Evidence from this study indicates why caution is necessary in the presence, and with the persistence, of a reputation for mothers, and why a greater awareness of these relational complexities is needed in resettlement policies.

Concluding comments

Many scholars have identified the paternalism in penal institutions that house women across time and place (Carlen, 1998; Bosworth, 1999). This article has continued this analysis via a critical examination of the lived experiences and perceptions of five mothers in one prison serving England and Wales. The data was subject to several iterations of analysis and viewed using the theoretical lens of 'family practices' (Morgan, 1999) whereby relationships are

considered (re)active and negotiated. In doing so, it drew attention to the priority afforded to relational ties in recent penal interventions and resettlement policies, and proposed *three reasons for caution* because of 'structural obstacles', 'continued exposure to abuse' and 'ascribed reputations'. Such a format has a number of benefits. First, it provided an overview of the mothers' 'trajectories' to enable the reader a fuller understanding of their positionality, including the associated relationship between gender, addiction, victimisation, and crime. Second, by detailing the way in which the mother's participation on a prison-based drugs rehabilitation programme instilled 'good mothering' aspirations, questions were raised about penal interventions infused with informal social controls. By way of example, the mother's descriptions about their futures showed a blurring of personal healing (abstinence from drugs) with familial healing (rebuilding of relational ties) which are usually distinct pathways of recovery and desistance (Colman and Vander Laenen, 2017). Finally, the cautions make visible some of the contradictions, complexities, and concerns of these socio-penal practices by reflexively considering the achievability of ideologically acceptable maternal identities and practices in the context of the mothers' lives.

The mothers themselves identified challenges with housing, employment and finances, and addiction reporting practical frustrations that accompanied previously failed attempts at bringing about change to their lives. Research has shown how unsuccessful past efforts on desistance journeys can lead to feelings of insecurity and create further vulnerability (Shildrick et al., 2012; Rodermond et al, 2016). The 'responsibilisation' agenda (Garland, 2001) deposits pressure on the individual to change (Garland, 2001), but for the five mothers, it was clear how some transformations were outside of their control; including the discharge grant. Their inability to navigate around this brought with it potential to further damage and destabilise. Previous research has consistently found that the social environments that women must navigate on exiting prison are equally, if not more, difficult than before (Carlen and Worrall, 2004). This explains why the mothers were acutely aware of the need for formal support to aid their endeavours to change (Rodermond et al, 2016; Österman, 2018). By shifting responsibility to women, and co-opting motherhood as a conduit for change, questions are raised about the degree to which this approach is achievable and, therefore, ethical. Despite the State's recent rush to emphasise the prominence of 'family ties' for resettlement, these new insights demonstrate why the focus on the relational aspects of women's lives must not block or remove access to other forms of much-needed external, practical support.

The requirement for formal support was also more apparent in light of the mothers' interpersonal lives, which showed the presence of difficult and oppressive relationships in their past and present lives. Desistance literature indicates that crime free futures require individuals to retire from environments that cultivate victimisation (Farrall et al, 2014), but in this study it was shown how maternal practices were paradoxically mapped around continued exposure to abusive people. Likewise, the unwavering presence of stigma (Goffman, 1963) via an 'ascribed reputations' was identified in multiple mother-caregiver relationships. Past

identities were constructed during past practices (including drug use and offending) which, according to Farrall et al (2014), need time to be redefined by others and for the acceptance of new identities. These findings signal a need for resettlement policies to better acknowledge how past and present relationships will shape and influence how mothers *can* form, engage with, and establish future relationships. For women with children, this includes aspects and availability of their maternal lives, identities and practices. Penal approaches that continue to ascribe meaning to motherhood without sufficient understanding of the context of the mother's relational lives, run the very real risk of causing further victimisation, and fracturing already delicate family ties. Aligning more closely with trauma-informed practices and evidence from the desistance literature might better take into account the links between pre-existing trauma and relationships, and ensure a more nuanced approach to working with women.

The agency and optimism shared by the mothers in this study support Crewe et al (2017) findings that women might push back against the demands of penal power despite prisons being places perpetuating gendered inequalities and victimisations (Moore and Scraton, 2014). What the three cautions in this study indicate - most importantly - is that the infusing of informal social controls into penal interventions and penal policy has the potential to further harm mothers. The structural and relational landscapes of their lives may not permit, support, or enable them to effectively embed the mothering practices and identities that provided motivation for personal and familial healing. As the mothers identified themselves; their positionality could become all the more vulnerable and unstable, and this could jeopardise their progress. Contradicting the rationale for focussing on relationships in resettlement policies, the damage that this brings might undermine mother's attempts at crime and drug free futures. By encouraging caution, it is hoped that the article has shown the complex and dynamic set of circumstances that constitute the lives of some mothers in prison and reinforced the need for more personalised, nuanced resettlement policies, theories, and penal practices.

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Table 1: Demographics of mothers

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	No. of children	Age of children	Living arrangements	Prior prison sentences
Sarah	28	White British	4	11, 7, 4, 3	All children with maternal grandmother who had special guardianship order	Yes – 6
Becca	27	White British	1	3	Daughter with maternal grandmother as a temporary foster carer	Yes - 1
Verity	26	White British	2	9, 7	Both children in long-term foster care	No
Carly	27	White British	2	12, 4	Eldest daughter with maternal auntie. Youngest daughter adopted.	Yes – 7
Rochelle	32	White British	3	14, 10, 7	All children with biological father.	Yes - 2

ⁱ There are no female prisons in Wales. The 12 female prisons in England house both English and Welsh women.

ⁱⁱ Conversely, other findings from the study have highlighted the ways that family contact might be supported (Booth, 2018; 2020a) and how mothers and caregivers go to great lengths to facilitate this contact (Booth, 2020b).

ⁱⁱⁱ A movement slip is a piece of paper printed by the prison and handed to the prisoner detailing where the prisoner is allowed to move to/from at a particular time/day in the prison regime.

^{iv} Manually means that index cards and mind-maps were used to sort, review and define themes that arose within the participants' narratives, including contradictions.

^v Including discussions about the data and associated issues concerning family ties for mothers in prison with academic friends of the author; Dr Isla Masson, Dr Jason Warr and Lucy Baldwin.

^{vi} It is outside the remit of the article to consider the decisions or processes in these social welfare decisions.

^{vii} A discharge grant is a fixed sum of money that a prisoner can receive on release from prison to assist them with financial matters until benefits and/or paid work is organised.

^{viii} In this context, the term 'bad' is referring to her son wanting to look cool/trendy.