

Fathers in Jail: Preserving Fatherhood Identity

Dr. Warren G. Moyao

School of Criminal Justice and Public Safety, University of Baguio

E-mail: warrengalasmoyao@gmail.com

Abstract

Incarceration constrains the father's ability to fulfill his familial responsibilities. Incarcerated fathers should be recognized as having a responsibility to their children, wanting to be involved in their children's lives, and help make parenting decisions. Hence, the main objective of this qualitative study is to address issues on how incarcerated fathers could navigate fatherhood from behind bars. This study utilized the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). A purposive sample of 20 incarcerated fathers at Benguet Provincial Jail and La Trinidad District Jail participated in this study. Findings revealed that in order to preserve fatherhood identity, the incarcerated fathers took advantage of telephone or cellphone, Facebook Messenger, and Skype as a means of staying connected to their children. The incarcerated fathers still uphold a sense of caring for their children, which is supported by their faith in God and through prayers. Further, the fathers are looking for means to support their children financially by actively participating in livelihood programs. As voiced by the incarcerated fathers, more access to communication between them and their families will enable them to manage separation and maintain connections. Allowing them to interact and play with their children during visits will help maintain a sense of family connection and may reduce the trauma of separation. Lastly, the participants of this study suggested that there should be more livelihood activities that should be conducted inside the jail for them to earn money, and financially support their children.

Keywords: fatherhood identity; coping mechanisms; paternal incarceration; suspended fatherhood identity

1. Introduction

Many criminological, sociological, and psychological studies have addressed issues facing incarcerated parents. Studies of parenting in prison tend to focus on how programs can help incarcerated parents keep in contact with their children. Prior research suggests that once parents enter prison, their definitions of family and their roles as parents must be redefined (Benedict, 2009; Enos, 2001; Owen, 1998; Poehlmann, 2005b; Young and Reviere, 2006). Yet, the current body of literature has yet to fully explain what it means to “parent” from prison. Active parenting may be impossible in an objective sense, requiring parents seeking to stay active in the lives of their children to redefine what it means to take part in parenting.

Efforts to parent from prison can produce a variety of negative mental health outcomes for imprisonment (Arditti and Few, 2008; Poehlmann, 2005b; Wismont, 2000; Young and Reviere, 2006). Difficulties in getting children to visit or otherwise maintaining contact and relationships with children can be detrimental to the incarcerated parent emotionally and psychologically (Maruna et al., 2004). Parental incarceration has larger consequences for family life as a whole including stigma, marital strain, and the loss of family ties, particularly for minority families (Patillo et al., 2004; Western and Wildeman, 2009).

On the other hand, fathers and mothers evidently experience incarceration differently. Men are more likely to be incarcerated than women. The peak age of fatherhood is comparable to the peak age for criminal justice involvement for men from disadvantaged backgrounds (Woldoff and Washington, 2008). Incarcerated fathers are less likely to be involved in their children’s lives than are fathers who are not incarcerated, even prior to separation due to incarceration (Waldoff and Washington, 2008). Incarceration further severs those ties that did exist prior to incarceration (Eden, Nelson, and Paranal, 2004).

Having those effects of paternal incarceration to the family, fathers must still create their own role in prison as there are no clear social guidelines about how to manage and preserve paternal identity in this adverse environment (Clarke et al., 2005). Research has found that men’s descriptions of incarcerated fatherhood centered around feelings of helplessness, difficulties in being a ‘good father’, and falling into an ambiguous role without definition (Ardetti et al., 2005). An English

study discovered similarly unsettled and fragmented identities in respondents' appraisals of their roles as fathers across three different prison sites. For many of these men, fathering was an activity that took place 'out there' and 'not inside' prison (Clarke et al., 2005). One-quarter of the men reported deterioration in their perception of the closeness with their child whilst in prison.

If a father is unable to meet expectations of him whilst in prison, he may entirely change his behavior towards his children. For example, if a father feels that he is unable to play with his children, protect them, be there for them emotionally or support them financially he may prefer to avoid any contact with his children at all (Clarke et al., 2005). Whilst it is impossible to cease being a biological father, a father may decide to abandon or "give up" on this identity (Dyer, 2005). This can clearly be a hurtful process for his children.

In order to promote positive fatherhood in prisons and limit the negative impact of paternal imprisonment on children, it is paramount to understand the various barriers that may hinder positive father-child relationships being fostered from jail.

2. Objectives

The main objective of this study is to address issues on how incarcerated fathers could navigate fatherhood from behind bars. It will specifically identify the mechanisms utilized by the incarcerated fathers to preserve their fatherhood identity. Moreover, through the voices of the incarcerated fathers that the measures that will fill their fathering gaps will be known. It is of a high probability that the results of the study will benefit incarcerated fathers in shifting their fathering roles from the free world to life behind metal curtains. Guided with effective research tools, the study is of great help in providing effective mechanisms that can be utilized by fathers to continue fathering while they are inside the jail.

3. Materials and Methods

This study utilized the qualitative approach through the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). A purposive sample of 20 incarcerated fathers at BPJ and LTDJ participated in the study. The incarcerated fathers as participants for this study were selected using the following inclusion criteria: 1) those who have at least one living child, which is defined in this study as any dependent biological or

adopted individual who is legally or physically considered to be a child of the father in prison ranging in age from 1-18 years; 2) were the primary caretaker of and have lived with their children prior to incarceration; 3) have been incarcerated for at least one (1) year; 4) understand and can write any of the following languages: English and Filipino; and 5) agree to participate in the study. Due to restrictions caused by the pandemic when it comes to conducting personal interviews, this study made use of survey with open-ended questions that were administered to the incarcerated fathers. Thematic analysis was utilized to expose the findings of this study.

4. Results and Discussions

The mechanisms utilized by the incarcerated fathers to preserve their fatherhood identity and the measures that will fill the fathering gaps as voiced by them were discovered.

Digital Parenting

The incarcerated fathers are allowed to use a telephone or cellphone, Facebook Messenger, and Skype as a means of staying connected to their children. These contacts allow them and children to share family experiences and participate in family rituals, e.g., birthday celebrations, religious observances, etc. and help them to remain emotionally attached. They help assure incarcerated parents that their children have not forgotten them and that their parents love and care about them.

They allow prisoners to see themselves, and to function, in socially acceptable roles rather than as prison numbers and institutionalized dependents. For instance, Participant John shared, *“I always call my children and my wife so I can guide them especially my experience here inside the jail as well as the experiences of my companions so I can guide my children.”* This was manifested also by Participant Enoch stating that *“By showing my support and imparting my love and care to them even do I’m behind bars. I always call them if I have the chance.”* Also, Participant Brando mentioned, *“When I call them, I teach them good manners and make them feel that I love them.”*

The “e-dalaw” (Filipino for visit) or electronic prison visit program, allows prisoners to communicate with their families and loved ones via Skype video chat. Since Internet access has been steadily penetrating all parts of the country, the e-visit service can be utilized even by family members living in very remote areas. Internet

cafes have popped up in remote provinces, providing people with access to affordable virtual technologies such as free video calls and online chat. Prison authorities say the new electronic prison visit system will ease inmates' loneliness and help them better reintegrate with society once they are released (Santos and Fuentes, 2011).

According to Fulcher (2013), a lack of contact not only negatively impacts family members but also adversely impacts inmates. Communications help inmates address the isolation that incarceration creates. For example, responding to a survey, a former inmate stated the importance of communications: *"Being in contact with my family grounded me. I knew I still had people who loved me. It kept spirits up knowing no one abandoned me, and kept up my connection with the outside world."*

In a similar study by Smallbone (2012), interviews with 64 Australian fathers in three prisons in South East Queensland, found that fathers were more likely to report problems in maintaining their relationship with their child if they had infrequent visits, infrequent phone calls or a problematic relationship with the caregiver of their child. Moreover, communications between incarcerated fathers and their family members can help alleviate many family relationship issues. The benefits extend to both the incarcerated fathers and their non-incarcerated family members. It was revealed that communication between the participants and their families provides the most concrete and visible strategy that families and prisoners use to manage separation and maintain connections. Participant Kits, for example, mentioned that *"As of now, I am purely on giving advice to my son through constant communication."*

In a similar study conducted by Dennison et al. (2013), many men found it difficult to be involved as a father from prison, which seemed to be related to both the nuances of the prison system and their interpersonal and parental skills as a father. Even so, 41 percent of fathers reported that they participated in parenting with at least one of their children during their imprisonment. This primarily involved participating in discipline and contributing to decision-making in concerning the child. This included discussing their child's well-being, school progress, or other activities with either the child or caregiver. For example, Participant Banjo stated that *"I feel attached as I always have a conversation with them asking them if they*

have problems and checking their developments like how are they doing with their studies.” In a similar experience, Participant Slasher voiced, “All I said to my eldest son when I call was to always be careful and he would always watch over his brother.”

A survey of inmates and their families identified some of the benefits from communications: Families who were able to talk on the phone were less likely to report experiencing separation or divorce from partners or spouses, damaged child-parent relationships, and sibling separation. Families who were able to stay in regular contact were also more likely to report that family relationships became stronger (Saneta Devuono-Powell et al., 2015).

Parenting through Faith and Prayers

Even if the incarcerated fathers experience hurting related to separation from their children, they still maintain a sense of caring for their children, which is supported by their faith in God and through prayers. Engaging in prayer and holding positive attitudes toward religion are empirically associated with personal wellbeing, health, and the relief of distress on the part of the incarcerated fathers. They believe that aside from talking to their children through phone or during visitation, they are still able to portray fatherhood by praying for their children’s safety.

In the case of Participant Mike, he said, *“I always pray that my children and my wife are all in good condition.”* This is matching with the statement of Participant Totoy that *“Even though I am far away from him, I can still portray fatherhood by praying that he is okay.”* As the study conducted by Krause (2003) reveals, one way in which older people help others is to pray for them. Because older people who pray for others are actively doing something on behalf of someone who is in need, praying for others may be construed as a type of social support. In the case of incarcerated parents, the only thing that they can do is to pray for their children and their caregivers.

Moreover, Sharp (2010) argues that praying to God is a form of informal social support that helps suppress negative emotions in several ways. Praying to God may make troubling situations seem less threatening. It seems reasonable to extend these insights by arguing that perceived threats are more likely to be diminished if people trust God and believe He will do what is best for them. The incarcerated

fathers feel helpless because their incarceration has deprived them to be a parent to their children in terms of physical presence. However, through faith in God and prayers, they were able to lift themselves and be good father. Participant Jay admitted, *“All I can do now is pray to God that they will not be in danger and that they will be blessed with what they need.”*

Likewise, past research has shown that there are emotional benefits to prayer, both personally and interpersonally. Generally, prayer helps individuals manage negative emotions (Sharp, 2010) and negative life events (Pargament et al., 1990; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998). For instance, Participant Mike mentioned, *“I want to see them but I have no contact with them so prayer strengthens me.”* Prayer is a significant mediator in the positive relationship between religiosity and a host of measures of psychological well-being, such as depression, anxiety, and self-esteem (Maltby, Lewis, & Day, 1999). In the book of Clear et al. (1992), it reads that prisoners can turn to religion for relief, as a kind of exculpatory acceptance of the workings of evil in the world, or as atonement and forgiveness.

Further, it can be observed from the responses of the incarcerated fathers that the Spiritual Program of the two jail institutions is effective in transforming the participants. The incarcerated fathers said that programs offered inside the jail are very helpful in turning them to become disciplined individuals making them productive and responsible for everything. One good example is interfaith which for them is one of the most helpful. Because of this, they learn to read the bible, even memorized verses, and improving and understanding how to become a better person in society, to the people around, and their families.

This is supported by a Jail Officer of BPJ who said that there are religious activities like bible study and fellowship being conducted by which the PDL fathers are sharing their fatherhood problems to the church leaders and from that, the leaders are giving pieces of advice and they are praying for one another. According to Dammer (2002), inmates are simply practicing their faith by worshipping God or a higher power. Inmates either grew up practicing a religion or joined a religion later in life (or developed the interest during incarceration). In many cases, inmates gain direction and meaning for their life from the practice of religion while in prison. They feel that God, or Yahweh, or Allah will provide a direction to go in life, one

that is better than their present psychological or physical condition. Religion also provides hope for the inmates - hope to reform from a life of crime, and a life of imprisonment. Some inmates even feel that being incarcerated is the "Will of God" and that full acceptance of this will is essential to being faithful in one's religious belief.

Along these lines, some inmates feel that practicing religion gives them a "peace of mind," which means having some level of personal contentment. Having this peace of mind helps inmates improve their well-being especially those serving long sentences.

Participation on Income Generating Activities

In most cases, fathers are the economic providers in the family and it is a way for them to portray their role as fathers. This is supported by Ayre et al. (2006) who postulated that men have been traditionally viewed in Western societies as economic providers for their children rather than as "nurturers". This may partly explain why these societies see it as more acceptable for imprisoned fathers to have less contact with their children than imprisoned mothers. Additionally, this economic role is seen by many men as fundamental to their role as a father. Participant Jay, for instance, believed that he still portrays his role as a father by sending financial support to his children. He stated that *"As a father in jail, I always feel like a father to my kids. It is because, from our livelihood here, I can still support them even with little financial for their basic needs."*

The participants are looking for means to support their children financially. They actively participate in livelihood programs for them to earn money that they could give to their children and their caregivers. For example, Participant Boy expressed, *"I want to provide for their material needs that's why I look for any job inside jail such as massaging so that I can somehow reach out to them."* Also, Participant Rollie shared, *"I participate in handicraft projects to avoid loneliness and to have my own income so that I can also save and send it to my children."*

According to a Jail Officer of BPJ, the PDLs are engaged in handicrafts making like tokens, wall clocks, and the likes which are sold outside the jail while some are made to order. On the other hand, a Jail Officer of LTDJ mentioned also

that PDLs are making paintings, rugs, pencil case, and others. There are some organizations and churches that help the PDLs sell their products.

Economic contributions may motivate nonresident fathers to be more involved with their children, and mothers may be more receptive to financially supportive fathers. Incarceration, however, fuels unemployment and child support arrears, eroding fathers' capacity to support their children (Geller et al., 2012; Holzer, 2009; Wakefield and Wildeman, 2013).

The negative effects of parental incarceration on child well-being are often traced to the economic insecurity of formerly incarcerated fathers. Research on child support has shown that father's financial contributions are linked to contact with children and improved wellbeing (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999; Nepomnyaschy, 2007).

5. Conclusion

Even if the incarcerated fathers experience emotional pain related to separation from their children, they still uphold a sense of love and care for their children, which is sustained by their faith in God and through prayers. Besides, their financial contributions coming from their participation in livelihood programs promote certainty that they could navigate fatherhood behind the jail.

Further, maintaining communication and physical interaction between the incarcerated fathers and their children offers the most effective measure that incarcerated fathers could use to manage separation and preserve father-child connections. Also, developing income-generating activities inside jail offers a chance for the fathers to work, earn money, and meet financial obligations to their family.

6. References

- Amato, P. R. & Gilbreth, J. G. (1999). Non-resident Fathers and Children's Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis. *The Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 61, No. 3, pp. 557 – 573
- Ardetti, J. A., Smock, S. A. & Parkman, T. S. (2005). *It's been hard to be a father: a qualitative exploration of incarcerated fatherhood*. Men's Studies Press.
- Ayre, L, Philbrick, K. & Reiss, M. (Eds.) (2006). *Children of Imprisoned Parents: European Perspectives on Good Practice (European Network for Children of Imprisoned Parents, EUROCHIPS)*
- Clarke L., O'Brien M., Day R. D., Godwin H., Connolly J., Hemmings J., et al.

- (2005). Fathering behind bars in English prisons: imprisoned fathers' identity and contact with their children. *Fathering*, 3 221–241.
- Clear, T. R. (2007b). The impacts of incarceration on public safety. *Social Research*, 74(2), 613-630.
- Dennison, S., Stewart, A. & Freiberg, K. (2013). A Prevalence Study of Children with Imprisoned Fathers: Annual and Lifetime Estimates. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 48: 339–62.
- Dyer, Wm. J. (2005). *Prison, fathers, and identity: a theory of how incarceration affects men's paternal identity*. Men's Study Press.
- Eden, K., Nelson, T. J., & Paranal, R. (2004). Fatherhood and incarceration as potential turning points in the criminal careers of unskilled men.
- Fuentes, A. & Santos, K. (2011). Philippines: Prisoners find their e-families. Accessed on August 23, 2020 from <http://www.ipsnews.net/2011/10/philippines-prisoners-find-their-e-families/>
- Geller, A., Cooper, C.E., Garfinkel, I., Schwartz-Soicher, O. & Mincy, R.B. (2012). Beyond absenteeism: Father incarceration and child development. *Demography*, 49:49–76.
- Holzer, H. J. (2009). Collateral costs: Effects of incarceration on employment and earnings among young workers. In: Raphael, S, Stoll, MA, editors *Do prisons make us safer? The benefits and costs of the prison boom*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Krause N. (2003). Praying for others, financial strain, and physical health status in late life. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 24:377–391.
- Maltby, J., Lewis, C. A., & Day, L. (1999). Religious orientation and psychological wellbeing: The role of the frequency of personal prayer. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 4(4), 363-378.
- Nepomnyaschy L. (2007). Child support and father-child contact: Testing reciprocal pathways. *Demography*, 44:93–112.
- Pargament, K. I., Smith, B. W., Koenig, H. G., & Perez, L. (1998). Patterns of positive and negative religious coping with major life stressors. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 37, 710–724.
- Poehlmann, J. (2005b). Incarcerated mothers' contact with children, perceived family

relationships, and depressive symptoms. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 19(3), 350- 357.

Sharp S. (2010). How does prayer help manage emotions? *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 73:417–437.

Wakefield, S. & Wildeman, C. (2013). *Children of the prison boom: mass incarceration and the future of American inequality*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press

Western, B., Lopoo, L. M., & McLanahan, S. (2004). Incarceration and the bonds between parents in fragile families. In Pattillo, M., Weiman, D., and Western, B. [Eds.] *Imprisoning America: The social effects of mass incarceration* (21-45). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

© GSJ