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# **DISRUPTED MOTHERING: NARRATIVES OF MOTHERS IN PRISON**

**Kelly Lockwood**

## **Abstract**

Imprisonment can severely alter, disrupt or even terminate mothering. Yet, often seen by society as giving up on or abandoning their children, women in prison tend to invoke less empathy or tolerance than women whose mothering is disrupted through other means, such as illness. Therefore, whilst many women in prison attach great significance to the role and responsibilities of motherhood, the restrictions of the prison environment impacting the ability to participate in mothering, compounded by a sense of guilt, failure, stigma, shame and role strain can pose a direct threat to the mothering identities of women in prison. Central to the research from which this chapter has developed was the challenge of making sense of the constructed meaning of motherhood for women in prison. Drawing on feminist narrative approaches, significance is placed not only on the content of stories but equally on the social role of the story told (Plummer, 1995). Three key and interrelated narratives are highlighted; 'Difficult Disclosures'; 'Double Edged Sword' and 'Who Cares'. This chapter concludes by considering the implications of the research for policy and practice and how through exploring the stories of mothers in prison we are able to hear about and value a diversity of mothers' lives, so these mothers do not have to inhabit the margins of motherhood.

## **Biography**

Kelly Lockwood is a Criminology Lecturer at the University of Salford, England. Her work focuses on feminist narrative methodologies, disrupted mothering and gender and the criminal justice system. Kelly is particularly interested in how motherhood is understood and experienced by women in prison.

## **Key words**

Mothering, imprisonment, prison, disrupted, narrative, feminism.

## INTRODUCTION

Women in prison in England and Wales are over represented by marginalised populations with multiple disadvantages and complex needs (NOMS, 2015). Calling for a drastic reduction in the numbers of women being incarcerated, campaigners have long argued that imprisonment is a disproportionate and ineffective response to the offending behavior of many women (Prison Reform Trust 2018). Despite this, over 13,000 women are received into custody annually in England and Wales, with around 4,000 women in prison at any one time (Prison Reform Trust, 2018). Owing to a lack of reliable information recorded, it is not known how many women in prison are mothers, however, estimates indicate this to be around 61% (Caddle and Crisp, 1997).

Imprisonment can severely alter, disrupt or even terminate mothering (Lockwood, 2017). However, often seen by society as giving up on or abandoning their children, women in prison tend to invoke less empathy or tolerance than women whose mothering is disrupted through other means, such as illness (Lockwood, 2017). Whilst feminist scholarship has facilitated the conceptual diversification of ‘mothering’, less attention has been paid to exploring how mothering is understood by those separated from their children (Lockwood, 2017). Although there is a small but growing body of research specifically focusing on mothering and imprisonment, limited consideration has been given to analysing what motherhood means for women in custody and how mothering identities are negotiated and constructed throughout their sentence.

The research from which this chapter has developed was based on the feminist narrative principles of bringing the stories of often marginalised groups to the centre of discussion; and specifically aimed to explore the constructed meaning of motherhood for women in prison. Methodologically, the research draws on feminist narrative approaches (Woodiwiss et al, 2017), based on the assumption that ‘it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand and make sense of the social world and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities’ (Somers, 1994, p. 606). When critical events, such as imprisonment occur, storytelling can enable mothers to actively shape, account for and make sense of their changing situations, roles and identities. However, what can be told of motherhood and mothering is culturally, politically and socially bound; consequently, women’s stories can be both facilitated and impeded by the narratives that are available at the time of telling (Woodiwiss et al, 2017). Therefore, it is important to attend to not only what is told, but also what is not told and what appears difficult to tell.

Focusing on the individual stories of mothers in prison, within this chapter I consider how women might come to tell the stories they do, whilst exploring the implications of and constraints placed on their storytelling. I present three interrelated narratives; ‘Difficult disclosures’; ‘Double edged sword’ and ‘Who cares?’ Drawing on these narratives, I suggest the need for additional support, including; information provided to mothers on how to talk to their children about their (impending) imprisonment; emotional support for mothers in relation to visitation; and additional support to effectively navigate complex relationships with those caring for their children.

### **STORYING MOTHERING AND IMPRISONMENT**

Both imprisoned women and men may be parents, however, it is argued that maternal incarceration can often be far more disruptive for mother and child, than when a father is sent to prison (Baldwin, 2017). Only 9% of children with a mother in prison are cared for by their father in comparison to 90% of children with an imprisoned father being cared for by their mother (Caddle and Crisp, 1997). Children of mothers in prison have an average of four different carers throughout their mothers’ sentence, are less likely to be able to remain in their own homes and are more likely to be taken into local authority care (Caddle and Crisp, 1997).

Owing to the comparatively low population of women prisoners, there are fewer prisons for women in England and Wales. Women are therefore generally held further away from their homes than men, making visitation more problematic (Prison Reform Trust, 2018). As a consequence, many women receive no, or irregular visits from their children throughout their sentence (Baldwin, 2017). Cost, strained relationships with carers and unsatisfactory visiting conditions have also been cited as barriers to contact (Raikes and Lockwood, 2011).

Research indicates that women in prison who are mothers in comparison to non-mothers have greater difficulties in adjusting to and coping with prison life (Loper and Tuerk, 2006). The emotional impact of separation from their children and challenges to negotiating mothering from custody, is also highlighted and evidenced in some of the existing research (Baldwin, 2017). However, it is important to acknowledge that for some women imprisonment can represent the opportunity for reform and to repair relationships fractured prior to custody, with their children and wider family (Lockwood, 2017).

The ability to tell recognisable and acceptable mothering stories remains a central feature of motherhood (Miller, 2017). However, women are not free to tell any mothering story; the articulation of stories is both informed and constrained by the dominant narratives available at the time of telling. These narratives are culturally, politically, socially and historically bound

and function to inform both what can and cannot be told of motherhood and mothering (Miller, 2017). Mothering narratives may be defined differently in particular societies or cultures, yet, there is a strong expectation to be a 'good' mother, however that may be storied and understood (Pederson, 2016). Western narratives of 'good mothering' are permeated with the moral imperatives associated with the ethics of care for children (May, 2008) and associations with self-sacrifice (Hays 1996; Lowe, 2016), shaping women's roles and identities as mothers. Those who have transgressed these expectations, such as mothers in prison, may find that they are denied access to dominant narratives or that they no longer apply them, leaving them narratively shipwrecked (Frank, 1995). The narration of mothers in prison may be further restricted by the situational context of imprisonment in which they have historically been characterised as 'bad, mad, sad or caring or neglectful mothers' (Gelsthorpe, 2004, p. 9). Consequently, narration may become trapped within contradictory gendered narratives. On the one hand, 'good mothering' narratives that are central to the reform of women prisoners are encouraged, constructing the teller as assertive, and independent. However, with an emphasis on women's gendered victimisation, women in prison are simultaneously constructed as having diminished confidence, autonomy and rationality (Carlen and Worrall, 2004).

## **THE STUDY**

Central to the studies on which this chapter is based was the challenge of making sense of the stories of mothers in prison, whilst analysing how available narratives may both facilitate and constrain storytelling. Two connected studies are drawn upon within this chapter; an ESRC funded study exploring the narratives of mothers in prison and a follow-up small-scale study, internally funded from the University of Salford, UK. Each study was grounded in feminist understandings of ethics (see Edwards and Mauthner, 2002), and was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the British Sociological Association (2017) and approved by the University Ethics Panel and (where appropriate) NOMS (National Offender Management Service).

Access was granted at two prisons, a regional probation trust and a local women's centre (a voluntary sector organisation supporting women following release from custody). Initial information sharing meetings were offered to potential participants; this created the opportunity to directly engage with mothers, provide information and enable questions to be asked before participation considered. In total, one-to-one interviews were carried out with 20 mothers, fourteen of whom were currently serving a prison sentence and six who had recently been released. The women were diverse in relation to age, ethnicity, numbers and ages of children,

length of sentence and contact with their children. All participants identified as mothers of biological children. The mothers had between 1 and 6 children, with children's ages ranging from infancy to adulthood. The mothers were serving sentences ranging from 2 weeks to seventeen years.

Interviews were facilitated via a series of prompts which encouraged mothers to narrate stories of before, during and beyond imprisonment. With the women's consent all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, lasting between 45 minutes and three hours. The Listening Guide was used to analyse the women's stories. As a feminist approach, the guide, 'holds at its core the idea of a relational ontology' that views 'human beings as embedded in a complex web of intimate and larger social relations' (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, p. 125). Through four sequential listenings, the Guide enables the researcher to attend to the multilayered communication of each woman's story (Forrest et al, 2015). The first reading is a reflexive reading of plot. Reading for 'I' statements, the second listens to 'how [the woman] speaks of [herself]' (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, pp. 27-8). Focusing on how the women talked about interpersonal relationships, the third reading recognises narrated subjects as intrinsically relational and as part of networks of relations (Mauthner & Doucet, 2008). Locating the women's stories 'within broader social, political, cultural and structural contexts' (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, p.132), the fourth reading attends to the link between 'micro-level narratives [and] macro-level processes and structures' (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008, p. 406).

## **NARRATIVE FINDINGS**

### **Difficult disclosures**

Many parents/carers of children with a parent in prison are confronted with the immediate issue of how much information to share with their children. In this section I explore the stories told to either account for or conceal mothers' imprisonment. I analyse the wide range of narrative strategies developed and the way in which both disclosures and non-disclosures are constructed as being told to child[ren] in their best interests. I consider how these stories function as a way of doing 'good mothering' and explore the implications of their telling.

#### *Honesty as the best policy*

Many of the mothers who participated in the study suggested that 'honesty was the best policy' and told stories of how they had been open about their imprisonment with their children. Stories of disclosure were often constructed as responsible parenting and for some, began before

sentencing. Rita suggested being open with her children leading up to her trial helped prepare them for the possibility of her imprisonment; 'I was so honest with the kids ..., they were actually all right, because we talked about it all the time'. For Lisa, being transparent about her situation was important and facilitated her sense of being a 'good mother', with imprisonment serving as a lesson about the consequences of addiction: 'I'm glad that she's seeing what drugs have done to me, bringing me in and out of prison, ...it scares me, but she knows different'. In being 'open' Lisa is able to construct a narrative of recovery, repair and personal growth; Lisa suggests; 'the good thing is [her] Mummy will be clean when she comes out, so really, it done her good, and it has, cos if I hadn't of come to jail, I'd of probably been dead'. Such stories are able to reinterpret the negative associations with imprisonment and maternal separation and resist other potentially more demonising identities, providing both themselves and their children a script to live with/by in the present (Woodiwiss et al, 2017).

Many women constructed disclosing their imprisonment as doing 'good mothering'; yet, some stories indicated restricted autonomy over this decision. Sally was arrested in front of her daughter and therefore had limited control in how her consequent imprisonment was disclosed. Similarly, Kelly had initially tried to conceal her imprisonment, however, owing to her son's age and his level of awareness, a full disclosure was forced. Fear of disclosure from other sources such as media and peers could also force disclosure; as told by Penny: 'I couldn't have handled it if she'd have heard it from somebody else and then I think that would have been worse for her'. When imprisonment could not be concealed, mothers tended to take ownership of the disclosure, framing it positively. Penny knew her daughter could easily access information relating to her situation. Therefore, Penny had limited control of the disclosure, yet suggested it facilitated her ability to provide ongoing emotional support:

I've been very open ...I thought that was the best thing for her and in light of things it was the best thing for her because it did go in the papers and people at school knew, so she was fully prepared and fully supported.

As noted by Bemiller (2010) women's stories of mothering apart from their children can often shift dependent upon their agency in decisions made. As with Penny, if imprisoned parents can take ownership of the disclosure they may be more able to construct a story with which they can live.

Disclosures enabled imprisonment to be incorporated into the stories of the mothers and their children, facilitating ongoing dialogue. Yet, there was often a sense that this inclusion was temporal. Kelly and Rita spoke of their disclosures (even if forced), but both went on to indicate

that they did not anticipate their imprisonment forming part of future stories. In discussing her impending release Kelly suggested; 'I'm just gonna go home..., that's the end of it, let's put it behind us..., don't want to talk about it again'. Rita had already been released from custody prior to our interview and told of how; 'It's not talked about anymore because it's not important anymore'. The desire to exclude imprisonment from future stories once it has no physical presence in their lives, may indicate the pervasiveness of 'good mothering' narratives with a profound sense of incompatibility with imprisonment.

### *Secrecy in the best interests of the child*

Some mothers adopted a strategy of being open and honest with their children (even if partial or temporary), however, others decided to conceal their imprisonment from their children. Sometimes, elaborate stories were constructed, as highlighted by Lisa as she told of the explanation given to her young daughter in relation to her and her partner's first sentence; 'my mum told her that her dad was making chairs for the Queen and I was making tables for the Queen'. For others, their stories drew on past events to create a plausible story. Drawing on anticipated 'caring' roles associated with respectful womanhood (McRobbie, 2002), Louise told her children she was away 'looking after a friend'. Having previous periods of hospitalisation owing to mental health, Rose's children were told by her family that she was in hospital. For others, imprisonment was only partially disguised; Fi explained how she told her children that she had to go to a 'place' because she had 'been a bit naughty' and had a big bill to pay and that she had to 'work here [prison] 'till it's paid'.

Non-disclosures were multifaceted, however, consistent with disclosures, were often constructed as in the child's best interests. As noted by Baldwin (2017), some mothers chose not to disclose their imprisonment to their children in order to protect their innocence. Fi explained how her concealment was about constructing a story 'for their little heads to understand'. Equally, non-disclosure was often constructed as protecting child[ren] from anticipated consequences, including the real or perceived social stigma associated with imprisonment. This was a concern of Kelly who suggested;

all the mums are there at school..., and it's not that people don't give a shit, they're ignorant..., other people'll be taking about it..., everybody knows, alright you've sent me to prison but now you're punishing mi family.

As noted by Almund and Myers et al. (2003) imprisonment typically evokes social stigma; therefore, decisions not to disclose were often constructed as protecting their children



from the perceived scrutiny of others and therefore served as a mechanism for doing good mothering. In shielding their children, Baldwin (2017) suggests some mothers may have to absorb their child's anger at apparently 'choosing' to be apart from them. However, as noted by Lockwood and Raikes (2016), this may be preferable to risking their children's scrutiny and loss of their trust and respect if full disclosure was actualised.

Even when a disclosure had not been explicitly made, some mothers indicated that children often knew more than they alluded to, or there was an unspoken understanding. Concealing imprisonment from children often requires a co-constructed narrative by parents and those around them (often including the children themselves) to maintain the secret (Lockwood and Raikes 2016). Fi explained 'we've never actually said the word "prison".... but then added, 'I think they probably know'. Similarly, Rose suggested, "I do believe [son] knows where I am, but I think he chooses just to play along with "I'm in hospital"". Despite both mothers and their children colluding to conceal, honesty remained highly regarded by the mothers. Rose suggested, 'I think if he [son] was to ask me, I would tell him the truth, I don't want him to think that I lie to him'. Similarly, Fi suggested 'I think that has to be the thing..., you have to keep talking about it'. Yet, in not disclosing the circumstances of their absence, imprisonment fails to become an explicit part of the mothers' stories and therefore narration remains ambiguous. In living with such ambiguous stories, mothers told of being unable to talk honestly with their children which impeded their ability to support them in a way they would have preferred. Fi recalled how her daughter:

will sometimes say, "remember when you didn't speak to us for a time" and I think "I've got to tell her that it wasn't that I didn't want to speak to her, I couldn't".

Although non-disclosures often functioned to provide a story for each family to live with, the remaining uncertainty in narration often led to confusion, distress and ongoing anxiety (for both mother and child[ren]). Such uncertainty has been highlighted as negatively impacting upon the health and well-being of mothers throughout their sentence (Loper and Tuerk 2006) and leading to children's insecurity about their family network and its ability to support them (Bocknek et al. 2008). Frank (1995) has argued that such ambiguity and uncertainty needs to be worked through in order to heal and make sense of disruptions.

### **A double-edged sword**

Contact with their children for mothers in custody is considered to be central in the adjustment to prison life and upon rehabilitation, release and reunification (Enos, 2001; Loper

and Tuerk, 2006). Visitation can be longed for and valued as a means of maintaining mothering identities and preserving relationships with their children; yet, can equally be emotionally challenging, reinforcing feelings of guilt and shame, impacting women's confidence to 'mother' (Raikes and Lockwood, 2011). In this section I highlight the complex and conflicting nature of contact during imprisonment and the way in which mothering identities can be both reinforced and disrupted through visitation.

### *Maintaining contact*

Stories of arranging, managing, maximising and suspending contact was a significant strategy in reclaiming good mothering for women in prison. Recognising how fragmented her relationship with her children had become prior to imprisonment, Rose illustrates how visits helped to re-build relationships with her daughter, who was a baby at the time of her departure from the family home and with whom she had not seen for over a year; '[At first, she] wouldn't come to us..., she was really quiet, but she started coming every Friday..., she's loads better now'. For Celia, visits represented the opportunity to maintain a physical presence in her son's life to ensure that she was not 'just a voice at the other end of the phone'. Anne told of the way in which regular contact throughout her life sentence helped to maintain emotional bonds with her daughter; 'all we've ever had is communication..., I've not physically been there but I've emotionally been there all these years'. Emotional availability facilitated through contact was a significant means of illustrating that despite their restrictive circumstances, the mothers' role remained both valued and required.

The uniqueness of the mothering role is highlighted and constructed as irreplaceable, with the significance of their contribution emphasised. However, stories of emotional availability were often punctured as tensions emerged between the women's perceived emotional availability and their physical unavailability. Whilst Anne's story illustrates a consistent role of emotional support, her physical unavailability to her daughter remained challenging; as Anne spoke of a particularly difficult experience for her daughter, she suggested, 'I felt my hands were just tied, I felt sick'. Similarly, whilst Renata highlighted the significance of her emotional role, suggesting; '[only] I can give that feel, that proper mum', even in the proximity of visits, the magnitude of Renata's physical restrictions in relation to her children was highlighted;

My daughter, the little one..., she no see me after five, four months and when she see me she asking, "Mum, please can I have "dudu?", 'breast' ..., and I want to ask them can I give it her or not but ..., no I can't.

Despite highlighting the importance of their emotional availability to their children, their physical restrictions continued to pose a direct threat to their identity as good mothers.

### *Managing contact*

Despite constructing contact as a means of maintaining a connection with their children, visits were continually characterised as emotionally challenging. As with many women in the study, Louise constructed the prison service as incompetent in managing visits, which had a detrimental impact upon the quality of her time with her children;

they didn't give me a visiting slip, I were in the shower..., I were half undressed when they shout [me] to visits..., I've had like an hour took off, just from these lot not knowing what they're doing.

Louise goes on to illustrate how the ongoing uncertainties often left women feeling apprehensive prior to and during visits;

I get anxious and butterflies, you know before you go on the visit..., it's even worse when I'm going cos I know what's gonna come, ten minutes before and I'm looking at the clock.

The imposition of rules and regulations during contact led to further anxieties and frustrations. Clare told of being dissatisfied with the quality of contact, suggesting; 'I didn't like to be told that I wasn't allowed to take her to the toilet..., or like watching us, interacting together and playing together'. Similarly, Fi suggested; 'You can only hug for so long..., and they're watching constantly..., and you get so on edge about doing the wrong thing..., it's really hard'. An acute sense of powerlessness emerges within the mothers' stories. The restriction of what they are not 'allowed' to do; 'hug', 'take her to the toilet', are highlighted and implicating these restrictions as 'hard' indicates that they are counterintuitive to their sense of 'good mothering' and offer a constrained mothering experience.

In highlighting the difficulty of visits, the women demonstrated their continued emotional self-sacrifice for the sake of their children. Notions of caring, nurturing and self-sacrifice are central to constructions of good mothering (Hays, 1996). Many of the women talked of 'masking' during visitation to protect their children and families from their own pain, as noted by Anne; 'I tried not get upset on the visits..., mask my feelings to hide what was really going on, to pretend everything was OK'. This strategy of 'masking' demonstrated their commitment to good mothering by subverting their own needs for the sake of their children's.

Despite suggesting that emotions were ‘masked’ during visits, for some, visits represented repeat disruptions. Goodbyes were often constructed as the most painful part of visits, in that they brought to the forefront the anxieties of their initial separation; as detailed by Penny;

to have them there, and to have them gone again..., it’s like torture of when you’re separated from them in the first place ..., that’s what it’s like, you’re coming to prison all over again.

It is important to highlight not all women told stories of repeated distress. Having a relatively shorter sentence, Emma constructed visits positively and as a marker of time, suggesting that after each visit ‘I tell myself “that is one less visit until I go home”’. However, others, such as Penny, were left with an acute sense of loss, with repeated periods of grieving between visits. Dominant narratives of mothering often require women to demonstrate the ability to cope and subvert their own needs. Consequently, support was often not sought (either formal or informal) to cope with the emotional upset of visits.

### *Suspending contact*

For some mothers, imprisonment and mothering were constructed as irreconcilable. With many of the roles and responsibilities of mothering depleted through imprisonment, the only maternal decision remaining can often be the decision to maintain or pursue contact. As noted in the work of Baldwin (2017), some mothers adopted a protective mechanism of not allowing their children to visit them in prison, as illustrated by Penny; ‘I remember saying “there’s no way I’m having my kids in the prison”’. Motherhood is constructed as being held in high regard and is considered to be incompatible with imprisonment. Therefore, seeing or having their children in the prison was inconsistent with their notions of good mothering. Such stories were often reflecting on periods of transition, including sentencing or reception into prison. Consequently, for some, the decision to suspend was temporary and contact was restored once they had made sense of their situations. These stories serve to illustrate that decisions about contact were not made lightly but were complex negotiations. Penny draws upon the evaluations of her family to validate her eventual decision to maintain contact:

My Mum said I’m being selfish, she said “the children will adapt..., but if they just don’t see you, then that’s gonna be even worse for them than it is to see you in here” ..., so then I agreed that they could come..., and in light of it, it was the best thing really..., if I hadn’t seen them at all, that would have been really more hard for them.

Penny concludes that not seeing her children would be selfish and have detrimental consequences for their well-being. Allowing her children to enter the prison was constructed as abhorrent to Penny's understanding of good mothering, yet accusations of 'selfishness' also posed a significant threat. However, whilst Penny constructs her decision to maintain contact as in the best interests of her children, she relies on the evaluations of others to validate this.

For some, contact was suspended or significantly reduced throughout the duration of their sentence. Kelly spoke of not being able to 'cope' with the emotional turmoil and told of significantly reducing contact; 'It were just hurting me too much, seeing 'em..., I'd rather speak to 'em every night me, than having 'em coming in the prison..., that's my way'. Contesting existing mothering narratives that prioritise proximity and self-sacrifice (Hays, 1996), Kelly constructs visitation as inadequate and too painful. Consequently, contact is reduced until the normality of the role can be restored.

Clare also told of suspending contact, however, her story differed somewhat. After gaining legal support for visitation, Clare told of on-going difficulties with her daughter's father in maintaining contact;

I threatened that I was gonna go back to court and he said "well at least leave it until she's old enough to decide for herself", so..., I left it..., I gave him that chance..., see if she wanted to come and I kept writing to her.

Despite her constructed fight for contact, Clare's story illustrates a resignation to the improbability of continued visitation and her narrative shifts to one of 'suspending' contact. This shift in narration enables Clare to construct herself as an active agent; however, as with other women who suspended contact, this decision is often defensively orientated from a position of relative powerlessness in order to make sense of and positively (re)frame the limitations of their situation.

### **Who cares?**

The question of who will care for their children during their sentence is an immediate challenge presented to many mothers. Whilst some are able to maintain care of their children in one of the mother and baby units in England and Wales, for most, other people have to be incorporated into their children's care. Within this section I 'highlight the way in which stories of negotiating child-care provided an opportunity to demonstrate the fight for continued participation in their children's lives, yet equally illustrate an ongoing sense of powerlessness and exclusion from mothering.

### *Managing care*

Striving to be involved in the organisation and management of childcare, even if not directly responsible for its delivery, presented an opportunity to illustrate the commitment of women in prison to their mothering role. Aware of the likelihood of their imprisonment, both Rita and Celia spoke of how they used their time on bail to make preparations their children's care. However, in contrast, owing to the belief that they would not be sentenced to custody, others told of not making arrangements, as suggested by Anita;

I didn't make no plans to say who's going to have my son or what's going to happen, I just carried on with my life like, obviously thinking I won't [go to prison].

For some, there can be a reluctance to incorporate the possibility or probability of imprisonment into their story. Imprisonment can be constructed as a disproportionate (and therefore unlikely) response to their situation; whilst this enables women to narratively challenge the legitimacy of their sentence in order to maintain the construction of themselves as 'good mothers', it can leave them ill prepared for imprisonment. Consequently, some mothers told of negotiating their children's care in the immediacy of sentence or from the constraints of prison.

Frustration and a sense of uselessness characterised Anita's initial story of managing her son's care. Amid external fractions between her son's father, grandparents, aunt and family friend, Anita suggested;

there's nothing you can do..., you feel hopeless..., I can say whatever I want to say but at the end of the day whosoever is out there, they're going to do [what they want].

Anne also described a sense of exclusion over initial decisions regarding her daughter's care;

they had a kind of crisis family meeting, behind my back..., trying to decide what was best for [daughter], I felt a bit hurt by that cos I wasn't involved, I didn't even know it was going ahead.

As with many of the women who participated in this research, losing responsibility for or involvement in their children's care represented a significant threat to their mothering identity. Striving to maintain a role in their children's care served to mitigate the pain of imprisonment and ensure continued involvement in their children's life. Storying this challenge serves to illustrate that the mothers did not give up on their children, despite their separation. Anita told of how she fought to regain involvement in decisions relating to her son's care; 'I'm his Mother you know? And I said "you're not taking this away from me"'. When her daughter's care arrangements broke

down, Anne told of how she ensured her involvement in consequent decisions; ‘I was adamant that I wanted to be a part of them [decisions]..., no matter what, I was in prison but I was still at every key stage involved’.

Embracing this notion of the self as a fighter can lead to an increased sense of personal agency (Fisher and Goodley, 2007), however, this narrative strategy was not equally available to all. Renata, a foreign national prisoner, told of how after the arrest of both herself and her husband, her parents came to England to take care of her five children, but how her children were subsequently taken into local authority care. Renata was facing a long sentence and the uncertainty of her children’s care and what this meant for her long-term involvement in their lives was central to Renata’s story;

The social worker..., she say “sign the paper, I’m taking your children”..., I just not want to hear that I’m losing my children..., I be fight for them...I don’t know if I have the chance to have them back or not.

The removal of children into local authority care was constructed as a significant threat to women’s mothering identity, representing uncertainty about their participation in their children’s lives, both during and beyond imprisonment. Although, some women are able to construct agentic selves, this construction can be difficult to reconcile with the constraints and complexities of prison life in which mothering autonomy is restricted. For many women mothering issues remain beyond their control, reinstating a sense of powerlessness.

### *Managing relationships*

The quality of the relationships between the mothers and those caring for or facilitating the care of their children was significant in the mothers’ stories of imprisonment. Many patterns of care were established; women told of their children being in the care of grandparents, siblings, extended family, close family friends, local authority, with some children having multiple carers throughout their sentence. Some women told of positive relationships with the carers of their children; telling of supportive networks can enable mothers to frame their children’s care positively and reassure the listener (and themselves) that their children were well supported, as indicated by Fi; ‘[Friend’s] been absolutely brilliant., making sure they’re doing alright..., she won’t do for hers if she can’t do for mine’. Fi went on to tell of how her friend ensured she remained involved in decisions about her children; ‘we have these discussions about what they can [do], what they should do’. However, the nuances and complexities of changing roles often became apparent in the mothers’ stories. After a discussion of whether her son should be allowed access to social media, Fi explained;

It's like you have to pass on..., all the responsibility to her, you know, because I feel really unsure about my making decisions about, as far as they're concerned because you're in here and I have to say to her, "well it's up to you".

Appreciation of the effort and continued commitment of their children's carers can lead women to be tentative in their role, lacking confidence to assert themselves as mothers.

When children were able to be cared for by their fathers, women often constructed this as the best option. Kelly suggested;

[the children's dad] had to like step in straight away..., I didn't want their schools changing, I didn't want them sleeping in different beds, I didn't want them to be going home to a different home..., everything's still normal, they haven't had to change nothing, just Mum's out of the picture at the moment.

Celia was also happy that her son was cared for by his father; 'I am happy and I'm grateful that he [partner] was there and that [son] weren't disrupted any more than what he was'. However, reflecting on release, Celia suggested; 'I don't see how I'm going to slot back in..., I think I feel that I've been made redundant in that sense'. Therefore, despite women often drawing great comfort from paternal care, it sometimes also represented a more permanent threat to the continuity of their mothering roles and identities.

Paternal care was constructed as particularly challenging when the relationship between parents was fractured. Penny told of how the controlling behavior of her partner transcended custody, 'he started getting really nasty and accusing me of sleeping with prison officers and all sorts of things'. Penny went on to tell of the break-down of their relationship and the consequent challenges faced in maintaining access to her children; '[partner] used to bring my mum and the children up every week to see me..., then I left him..., then he started stopping me seeing [them]'. Penny suggested that at times she felt selfish for pursuing contact. Consequently, Penny's narrative alternated between one in which she fought to maintain contact to one in which she was resigned to not seeing her children. However, both of these stories were constructed around encouraging the well-being of her children and therefore served to maintain her sense of good mothering in the moment of telling.

Several mothers spoke of how their chaotic lives prior to custody had led to the break-down of relationships, with a lack of trust from those caring for their children. Suzette spoke of the difficult relationship with her mother and how this inhibited involvement in her daughter's life; 'Mi Mum's bluntly refused to bring her [daughter]..., [she's] just being spiteful..., cos she



dun't like me at moment'. Rose had been separated from her children with limited contact prior to prison and her children's father was reluctant to reinstate access; 'I phone[d] [children's father]..., he hung up on us straightaway'. Consequently, demonstrating commitment to change was central to many women's stories, as illustrated by Rose;

every week I would write or send a card to them without failure..., gradually I was allowed to phone..., eventually [children's father] agreed to come up and see us..., I don't think he could believe how well I looked.

Rebuilding relationships with the carers of their children can be a means of repairing disrupted mothering identities. These stories are often framed by a narrative of reform, telling of the attempts to repair the self and motherhood through imprisonment. Rose told of how she was eventually able to see her children; 'he'd changed his mind..., they could come and see us'. In highlighting the eventual support from those caring for their children, mothers are able to draw on the evaluation of others to identify themselves as 'worthy', with a positive sense of self derived from their subsequent rehabilitative success.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

In times of critical events (such as imprisonment), storytelling is both anticipated and necessary (Frank, 1995). For mothers sentenced to custody, the construction and reconstruction of stories enables the (re)negotiation of changing roles and identities. However, not any story is free to be told; stories are informed and constrained by the availability of dominant narratives. Exploring the way in which narratives are adopted, negotiated and rejected within the storytelling of mothers in prison, within this chapter I focused on three key and interrelated issues.

'Difficult disclosures' explores the stories told to children to either account for or conceal their mothers' imprisonment. Organisations working to support prisoners and their children in the UK, largely concur that age appropriate honesty is the best approach (Families Outside, 2012). However, as indicated by mothers in this study, stories to account for imprisonment are multifaceted and more likely to be partial and/or ambiguous than a full disclosure or complete concealment. The negative impacts of a diversity of these stories was highlighted, and mothers told of apprehension and uncertainty about how to address the issue of their imprisonment with their children. Early intervention may be needed providing mothers information on how to talk to their children about their (impending) imprisonment. Although support is available, it can be limited and inconsistent and more awareness raising may be required to ensure guidance and support is accessed when needed (Lockwood and Raikes,

2016). Equally, available information is often aimed at children's carers and more information is required that specifically supports the imprisoned parent in how to talk to their children and encourages their involvement in the decision regarding how and what to tell their children.

'Double Edged Sword' highlights how contact in the form of visitation was constructed as both longed for and a source of distress. Mothers indicated that overly punitive and restrictive environments often led to more negative visit experiences. The need for enhanced visiting arrangements has previously been identified in existing research (Jones & Wainaina-Wozna, 2013). Indeed, excellent initiatives have been implemented (see Raikes and Lockwood, 2011), yet can be inconsistent across the estate. However, the emotionality told of before, during and after visits, indicates the further need for emotional support for mothers in relation to visitation. The expectation for mothers to show resiliency, strength and determination (Lockwood, 2017) may inhibit the seeking or accepting of support. Therefore, it is equally important to ensure that not only is emotional support available, but that women feel worthy and able to access it. Often credible and acceptable sources of support (Einat, 2017), peer mentors may be ideally placed to provide such support.

'Who cares?' illustrates how childcare is an immediate challenge presented to many mothers in prison. Stories of arranging care provided an opportunity to demonstrate continued participation in mothering. However, restrictions of the prison environment can lead to a sense of exclusion in decisions made. The UN General Assembly, United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (2010) indicates that when passing a custodial sentence, the availability of appropriate provision of childcare should be considered. However, many mothers indicated that limited consideration was given to their familial circumstances at sentencing and they were left negotiating child-care from the constraints of prison. Consistent with Minson et al (2015), this chapter highlights the need for sentence deferral options to enable women to make childcare arrangements prior to custody. However, of equal significance was women's relationship with the carers of their children; constructed as both supportive and inhibiting, these relationships were central to women's ability to participate in their children's lives. Therefore, professional support may be needed to effectively navigate these complex relationships. Whilst family support is available in many prisons, a lack of strategic guidance or prioritisation of family work can result in limited resources directed to support this work.

Listening to the stories of mothers in prison enables us to consider policy and practice implications to work toward improved outcomes for both mothers and their children. However,

it equally helps us to understand the pervasiveness of dominant narratives which, whilst sometimes facilitative, can equally impede storytelling. Storying mothering and imprisonment requires considerable discursive and emotional labour and illustrates that even in the most limiting environments women are able to negotiate the complexity of existing narratives to construct positive mothering identities. It remains imperative that future research continues to explore the factors that constrain as well as liberate the possibilities for mothers in prison, through storytelling, to construct different identities and therefore live different lives, to ensure they no longer have to occupy mothering from the margins.

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