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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Beth Allen Easterling entitled "Parenting Behind Bars: A Qualitative Study of Incarcerated Mothers." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Sociology.

Lois Presser, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Michelle Brown, Ben Feldmeyer, Elizabeth Johnson

Accepted for the Council:

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Parenting Behind Bars: A Qualitative Study of Incarcerated Mothers

A Dissertation Presented for
the Doctor of Philosophy
Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Beth Allen Easterling

August 2012

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Dedication

To the mothers at KCIW in appreciation for sharing their stories with me.

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I would like to thank Dr. Lois Presser for her guidance and support through the entire dissertation process and beyond. She is an outstanding dissertation chair and extraordinary mentor. Her consistent support and encouragement have helped me grow as a student, instructor, and researcher. I would also like to thank Dr. Michelle Brown, Dr. Ben Feldmeyer, and Dr. Elizabeth Johnson for serving as dissertation committee members and for all of the support and guidance they have provided me in all aspects of graduate school and career planning. I am also thankful for the entire faculty of the Department of Sociology for a rewarding experience and I extend a special thanks to Shirley Martin and Nancy Loftis for their assistance and smiles at every step of my journey here. I would like to thank my friend Dr. Gina Benedict who cheered me on and reminded me “you have to eat” the past few years. Her friendship and encouragement are priceless. I am infinitely grateful to my parents, Brenda and Dale Allen, who deeply instilled in me the value of education and the desire to help, not judge, others. They supported me, encouraged me, and helped give me the confidence to achieve my academic goals. I would also like to thank my grandma, Iris Allen, for always having faith in me and reminding me to have “patience, patience”—an extremely important virtue when writing a dissertation. Thank you to my husband, Joseph “Buzz” Easterling who has supported me in every angle of my life the past decade, in person and from afar. Without your encouragement, I would not be the person I am today. Thank you for teaching me to reach for my dreams. I extend extra-special thanks to my amazing daughter, Kaitlyn Iris Easterling, who patiently waited for playdates and snacks with a smile on her face while I camped out with my computer. Thank you for your sweet hugs, smiles, and encouragement. You are the reason I want to work to make the world a better place. I love you past the sun and back.

Abstract

Policies of mass incarceration have resulted in a dramatic increase in the prison population in the United States over the past few decades. The number and proportion of women who are incarcerated have vastly increased as a result. Despite increased interest among criminologists, a variety of questions remain as to how women experience incarceration. Most women who are incarcerated are mothers, but criminological literature has yet to fully explain how mothers fulfill their parenting roles or navigate motherhood while incarcerated. No dominant theoretical framework exists to explain the experiences of incarcerated mothers in relation to their mothering roles. This research addresses such limitations by exploring the question: How do incarcerated mothers negotiate motherhood from behind bars?

Data from this study come from qualitative interviews with 49 mothers (35 individually and 14 in group settings) serving time at the Kentucky Correctional Institute for Women. Findings suggest that incarcerated mothers experience ambiguous loss of children and the mother identity. They deal with that loss through coping strategies to preserve motherhood and by redefining the mother role. Policy recommendations and suggestions for future research based on findings are discussed.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Policies of mass incarceration in the United States have broad social impacts. Although it is the individual who is physically incarcerated, the reach of incarceration spans far beyond that individual to families, communities, businesses, and political institutions. Clear (2007b) outlines five levels of effects of mass incarceration: effects on democracy/social justice, institutional effects, effects on social relationships, effects on intimate relationships, and individual. Each of these levels impacts the family. And the families of those incarcerated face a multitude of unique challenges. From negative effects on marriage to financial difficulties to problems for children, the circumstances and needs of families of an incarcerated member are important objects of attention for research in sociology and criminology. Statistics mirror this necessity. The nation's prisons alone held 744,200 fathers and 65,600 mothers in 2008 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009).

With spikes in the incarcerated population, it was estimated that about 1.7 million children had an incarcerated parent in 2007 (Poehlmann, et al., 2010). By 2008, Nesmith and Ruhland (2008) estimated that approximately 10 million children had experienced parental incarceration at some point in their lives. Children who have had an incarcerated parent are more likely to be involved in delinquent activities (Bloom, et al., 2003; Clear, 2007a). Up to 50 percent of juveniles who are incarcerated have had an incarcerated parent (Reed and Reed, 1997). Further, adult children with an incarcerated mother are more likely to be incarcerated themselves (Dallaire, 2007). Specifically, Dallaire concluded from a study that included 1,427 incarcerated parents with an adult child that 21 percent of incarcerated mothers with adult children reported that their adult child was incarcerated, compared to 8.5 percent of fathers of adult children. During the 1990s, the number of children with an

incarcerated *mother* increased by nearly 100 percent. Since 1980, the proportion of female prisoners increased from just over 4 percent to nearly 7 percent in 2003 (Young and Reviere, 2006). The sheer magnitude of this problem is alarming. When considering the implications of creating cycles of crime within families, the importance of further study in this area is apparent (Reed and Reed, 1997).

Approximately three-fourths of female prisoners have at least one child (Richie, 2002). With the growing population of women in prison, most of them being mothers, it is estimated that over 300,000 minor children have a mother in jail or prison and most of these mothers (estimates ranging from two-thirds to three-fifths) are custodial parents living with their children prior to incarceration (Young and Reviere, 2006). Thus, children with incarcerated mothers are more likely to experience disruption in living arrangements than are children with an incarcerated father (Dallaire, 2007). Such stress on the children has the potential to bring stress and mental anguish on the incarcerated mother, worrying about her children's well-being from behind bars.

It is difficult to discern the independent effects of incarceration on families (Clear, 2007a) since many families experiencing incarceration face greater disadvantages than other segments of the population even before the parent is incarcerated (DeHart and Altschuler, 2009; Murray, 2007). Nearly 60 percent of women incarcerated in state prisons used drugs in the month leading up to the incident of their arrests and about half of these women were regular substance abusers. Further, sexual abuse, physical abuse, mental illness, repeat incarcerations, and poverty are common among inmates (Johnson and Waldfogel, 2004; Owen, 1998; Young and Reviere, 2006). Such social factors suggest that families dealing with incarceration have a history of relative disadvantage that spans beyond the incarceration event and period itself.

Many criminological, sociological, and psychological studies have addressed issues facing incarcerated parents (e.g. Arditti and Few, 2008; Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest, 2003; Boswell, 2002; Cecil, et al., 2008; Dallaire, 2007; Foster and Hagan, 2009; Greenberg, 2007; Johnson, 2006; Johnson and Waldfogel, 2002; Johnson and Waldfogel, 2004; Imber-Black, 2008; Miller, 2006; Murray, 2007; Murray and Farrington, 2005; Murray and Farrington, 2008; Nurse, 2004; Owen, 1998; Poehlmann, 2005a; Poehlmann, 2005b; Reed and Reed, 1997; Shamai and Kochal, 2008; Shedd, 2011; Wakefield and Wildeman, 2011; Western, Lopoo, and McLanahan, 2004). Studies of parenting in prison tend to focus on how programs can help incarcerated mothers keep 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, LeBel, and Lanier, 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, Weiman, and Western, 2004; Western and Wildeman, 2009).

Maternal incarceration is a unique case of parental incarceration (Dallaire, 2007). Clear (2007a) has suggested that mothers’ incarceration may affect children differently

compared to paternal incarceration, for example, more disruptive behavior and falling reading scores have been observed. More mothers than fathers are custodial parents prior to their incarceration, creating concerns for child placement during incarceration (Johnson, 2006; Johnson and Waldfogel, 2002). The mothers themselves experience guilt and other negative emotions and mental health problems when incarcerated (Arditti and Few, 2008; Imber-Black, 2008). Despite the negative consequences for mothers, many consider motherhood an impetus for survival and success during the incarceration period (Benedict, 2009; Shamai and Kochal, 2008).

The magnitude and depth of the problem suggest that incarcerated mothers require further study. We know little about the experience of incarcerated mothers in general or experiences of incarceration for mothers across racial, geographical, and economic backgrounds. Specifically, we do not know how women cope with being a mother in prison, how women parent from prison, or how mothers construct their identities *as* mothers while in prison. Further, no dominant theoretical framework exists from within which to study mothering in prison. More exploratory, qualitative research is necessary to shed more light on the prison experience for mothers, specifically related to the shift in mothering roles from the free world to life behind bars. This dissertation is an exploratory study that aims to provide a clearer picture of how mothers negotiate motherhood from prison and to provide a theoretical framework within which to study the experience of altering mothering roles from prison, with the hope of influencing policy and services targeting families experiencing incarceration.

I conducted qualitative interviews at Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women (KCIW) in PeeWee Valley, Kentucky, the only women's prison in the state¹. The institutional capacity of KCIW is 713, with an operational capacity of 691. During February 2011, the

¹ The Kentucky Department of Corrections (KDOC) was extremely helpful in facilitating my research. However, the findings presented are my own, and KDOC neither approves nor endorses them.

average population of KCIW was 672, the majority (85 percent) of inmates were white, and the median age was 34 years. At this time, 33 percent of inmates were incarcerated for violent crimes, 30 percent for drug-related offenses, 21 percent for fraud-related offenses, 13 percent for property crimes, and 3 percent for other/miscellaneous crimes. I interviewed a total of 49 women during February, March, and September, 2011. Thirty-five of these interviews were conducted one-on-one and the remaining 14 were conducted in two group interviews involving seven women each. All of the women were mothers who had experienced incarceration while their children were under the age of 18, though some of the mothers had adult children at the time of the interview. I posed questions and prompts aimed at clarifying what being a parent in prison meant for the mother, the child, and family life in general. My goal was to explore how mothers in prison understand and negotiate their roles as parents while incarcerated.

I relied heavily on feminist epistemology. Specifically, I worked from an assumption that viewing the social world from women's perspectives is of the utmost importance. Incarcerated women are likely to have experienced oppression, which allows them a unique perspective with which to understand both oppression and their oppressors (Millen, 1997; Owen, 1998). Also in line with feminist methods (see Owen, 1998, p. 23), I emphasized the importance of understanding the women's experiences from their own perspectives.

To establish rapport with the mothers participating in my study, I identified myself as a mother as soon as I introduced myself, also offering details on my personal life as a mother/student/researcher prior to asking the women anything about their personal lives. According to Girschick (1999), self-disclosure can be helpful in offsetting the imbalance of power, assisting in gathering information. I was aware that female inmates might feel submissive (Belknap, 2007) and chose to focus on similarities I had with the women (particularly motherhood) instead of differences that suggest my relative power (i.e.

education level, income level, family status, never having been incarcerated). These tactics were helpful in both building rapport and keeping the dialogue moving during my interviews. Next, I discuss some macro-level factors and the impact of incarceration on the family as background for my study and outline the chapters that follow.

Mass Incarceration

No discussion of the incarceration of American women, or of men for that matter, would be complete without recognition of America's reliance on incarceration, particularly over the past few decades. This reliance has increased the number and percentage of women behind bars and has changed the fabric of the prison population and beyond. The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world (Brewer and Heitzeg, 2008). After a rapid increase in the 1980s and 1990s, the imprisonment rate has grown at a slower pace (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009). Over 2 million people are incarcerated in the United States (Brewer and Heitzeg, 2008; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009). Poor, African American men have been disproportionately affected by this trend, as they are incarcerated at rates higher than other groups (Bobo and Thompson, 2006; Brewer and Heitzeg, 2008; Clear, 2007a; Gilmore, 2000; Nurse, 2004; Uggen and Manza, 2004; Wacquant, 2001; Wehrman, 2010; Western, 2007a, b; Western and Wildeman, 2009). While men make up the majority of prisoners in the United States, women have also been greatly affected by policies of mass incarceration.

The proportion of female prisoners in the United States has increased from just over 4 percent in 1980 to nearly 7 percent in 2003 (Young and Reviere, 2006). From 1980 to 1996, the number of prisoners per 100,000 of the United States population grew from 11 to 51 for women and 275 to 810 for men (Blumstein and Beck, 1999). Though women still represent a much smaller proportion of the overall prison population, the rate of

incarcerated women has grown more than that of men over the past few decades. Policies such as the war on drugs, mandatory incarceration, and minimum sentencing as well as “public discourse about crime designed to instill fear...and the ratings-driven media preoccupation with policing and arrests” (Reed and Reed, 1997, p. 152) have aided in the American incarceration binge, including its effects on women.

As Quinney (1970) states, “The modern prison is based on a paradox: it is designed to punish inmates and at the same time reform them by nonpunitive measures” (p. 177). Women overwhelmingly told me that programming within the prison is limited and that there are wait-lists for the “best” programs. I very often heard the phrase “hurry up and wait” from participants in my study. They expressed great frustration with the lack of programs and services, both for themselves and their families, indicating that they are being punished but not rehabilitated during their incarcerations. They said they would like their families to participate in programs to help, but were often unaware of how to go about finding these programs.

Various small-scale programs exist for families dealing with incarceration throughout the United States. (See Will, Cheney, and Easterling, 2005 for examples and descriptions of specific programs.) In general, some common goals of these programs include maintaining family ties while strengthening attachments between incarcerated parent and child, visiting or support groups to help build parenting skills, and a focus on the importance of family support programs for parental success in prison and upon release (Adalist-Estrin, 1995). I found information on one program, Extended Family, advertised in the visitation room of KCIW. According to its website, <http://extendedfamilysupport.org/>, this program is a non-profit organization whose goal is to provide a support system for prisoners’ families. Though the group was advertised in the Kentucky prison, I was unable to find an office in the state of Kentucky via the website. Women in my sample were overall

aware that more and more women were being incarcerated in recent years and that the “system” had not responded with increasing the number or quality of programs and services available to them.

The disadvantages for families related to imprisonment do not stop once the incarcerated parent is released. The cycle of removing-confining-returning individuals through the incarceration process can create social problems, including increased poverty, problems for public safety, and family disruption (Clear, 2007a, 2007b). “Because of the basic incompatibility of punishment and treatment, rehabilitating the offender within the punitive setting is either difficult, at best, or impossible” (Quinney, 1970, p. 178). Thus, parents who are incarcerated are not necessarily rehabilitated and, upon release, returning to family life is not always easy. Participants in my study were aware of this paradox as well as the cycle of imprisonment and many women had been incarcerated multiple times. Consistent with their discussions on the need for more services for women, participants overwhelmingly expressed awareness of macro-level social factors (including poverty, unemployment, patriarchy, and drug culture) impacting them individually and the need for gender-specific programming that includes other family members to combat such social problems. These macro-level factors have very real personal impacts on incarcerated individuals.

The general public accepts mass incarceration, including notions of idealized victims and menacing criminals; the latter drives the public’s fear of crime (Glassner, 1999; Simon, 2007). While popular opinion does influence the perpetuation of mass incarceration policies, it is important to recognize that the “popular opinion” that matters often excludes the opinions of the individuals and their families who are most directly affected by the laws and criminal justice system. Some women in my study suggested the need for more education for the general public on what it’s really like within a prison, especially for

families. During my initial presentations on each visit, women overwhelmingly expressed thankfulness for my study and conveyed their gratefulness for someone working to educate the public of the plight of women who are incarcerated. Many of these women seemed hopeful that public opinion might change, even on a small level, based on their participation in my research project.

Parental Incarceration

In the United States, approximately 2.8 million people were incarcerated at mid-year 2009 (Glaze, 2010), up from about 500,000 in 1980 and about 1.5 million in 1990 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009). The impact of mass incarceration spans far beyond the individual physically incarcerated. Certain groups have been more heavily affected by these policies than others with higher rates of incarceration, particularly poor African Americans with low education levels in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Brewer and Heitzeg, 2008, Clear, 2007a; Clear 2007b; Dallaire, 2007; Golden, 2005; Reed and Reed, 1997; Wakefield and Wildeman, 2011). For each individual incarcerated, loved ones are left behind. The adult family members of incarcerated individuals often experience marital and financial difficulties. Children of prisoners are prone to a host of negative consequences, including problems in school, psychological distress, and behavioral problems (Reed and Reed, 1997). Children who have had an incarcerated parent are more likely to get involved in the criminal justice system themselves (Bloom, et al., 2003; Clear, 2007a; Will, et al., 2005). Many children even experience personal guilt as a result of their parents' incarceration (Reed and Reed, 1997). Approximately 2 million children in the United States have a parent who is incarcerated (Clear, 2007a)—nearly 1 in every 40 children (Dallaire, 2007)

The social costs of mass incarceration are vast and disturbing, including harm to children and the perpetuating of inequality (Wakefield and Wildeman, 2011). Families

experiencing incarceration are often unknown in the public sense, as stigma and embarrassment can often lead families to hide the incarceration of a family member. Golden (2005) refers to families experiencing incarceration, specifically incarcerated mothers, as “disposable people: women who have transgressed their social roles and the children who remain invisible—the socially forsaken few want to consider” (p. xiii). Fritsch and Burkhead (1981) found that children whose parents are imprisoned are less likely to receive sympathy as compared to children experiencing other types of parental separations, such as death, divorce, or hospitalization. Incarceration is also less likely to bring families together than these other types of separation do.

The impact of incarceration on marital relationships, parent-child relationships, substance abuse problems, and mental illness need to be addressed on individual and large-scale levels (Hairsong, 2001). Programming has brought some positive outcomes for families experiencing incarceration (Sandifer, 2008; Will, et al., 2005) including higher levels of child development knowledge, reduced use of corporal punishment and increased awareness of empathetic awareness of children’s needs from parents (Sandifer, 2008), successful school performance, staying out of trouble, bonding with parents, and better communication between the incarcerated parent and children for caregivers (Will, et al., 2005). In the remainder of this chapter, I examine research on parental incarceration, the impact of incarceration on the family, and how mothers and fathers experience incarceration differently. I conclude that incarcerated mothers constitute a special case of parental incarceration, warranting further exploration.

Incarcerated Fathers. 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). Differentiating between

men's and women's prison experiences, Enos (2001) notes the following statistics to frame her study: 47 percent of women have other family members in prison as compared to 37 percent of men; 32 percent of women are incarcerated for violent offenses as compared to 47 percent of men; women serve an average sentence of 105 months as compared to 153 months for men; 75 percent of women are likely to be parents as compared to 64 percent of men. Even among parents, Enos notes differences in gender: 66 percent of mothers have children under the age of eighteen and 70 percent of mothers lived with their children before incarceration, as compared to 53 percent of fathers living with children prior to incarceration.

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). Estrangement from their children and the mothers of their children is common among fathers in prison (Nurse, 2001). Mothers will often not let children see their incarcerated fathers, further complicating the father-child relationship (Nurse, 2004). Incarcerated fathers, especially young incarcerated fathers, experience a host of negative social and financial consequences (Nurse, 2001) and leave additional financial hardship for family members left behind (Clear, 2007a), adding to the personal stress facing incarcerated fathers as well as further complicating and breaking ties and communication with family members on the beyond the prison walls. The penal system's focus on punishment for these young fathers often results in estrangement from mother and child while incarcerated as prison nature (which largely ignores the needs of fathers) can shape these relationships (Nurse, 2001). This focus on punishment fits in with the larger context of the policies of mass incarceration. Its negative consequences for families can have a domino effect on other family members.

Weak relationships between incarcerated fathers and their children are often the result of decreased contact based on the mother's decision (Nurse, 2004). Father absence from the lives of their children has been linked to increased risks for poverty, substance abuse, criminal involvement, developmental disruption, and a lack of respect for authority figures (Robbers, 2009). These problems do not necessarily stop, and can even be exacerbated, once a prisoner is released. Reentry policies do not necessarily resolve conflicts between criminal justice and social service policies, creating difficulties for parents upon release (Nurse, 2004). Robbers (2009) offers program suggestions for incarcerated fathers that encourage these men to stay active in the lives of their children have been posed as possible solutions to help foster better father-child relationships to alleviate these negative outcomes.

Incarcerated Mothers. The percentage of women in the prison population has greatly increased in recent decades. Women, specifically mothers, who are incarcerated face multiple hardships, including mental health problems, abuse, and lack of education and job skills prior to incarceration (Imber-Black, 2008). Most mothers who become incarcerated (approximately 75 percent) lived with their children prior to incarceration (Johnson and Waldfogel, 2002). These mothers often have intense distress at the initial separation from their children, though they are often eventually able to better balance their views and emotions over time. Still, more mental health services are needed for incarcerated mothers as they experience a great deal of stress throughout their incarceration (Poehlmann, 2005b). Mothers can feel lonely and confused from the isolation of incarceration (Imber-Black, 2008). Fewer child visits and negative feelings about family relationships result in rises in depression for incarcerated mothers. Mothers express the importance of contact, including visitation and frequent phone contact with older children (Poehlmann, 2005b). Active parenting during the incarceration period can help to reduce

other negative psychological consequences (Toch, 1975). Some mothers in prison consider motherhood their motive for survival, helping to alleviate negative outcomes for both parent and child (Benedict, 2009; Greenberg, 2007; Shamai and Kochal, 2008). When difficulties in relationships between mothers and their children's caregivers arise, less mother-child contact occurs, creating further distress for mothers (Poehlmann, 2005b). Separation from children can result in problems adjusting to life during incarceration, leading to additional feelings of helplessness, anger, guilt, fear of the loss of attachment, and rejection (Young and Reviere, 2006).

Other family-related issues facing women in prison arise when pregnant women enter prison. In 1999, the Department of Justice reported that approximately 5 percent of women entering prison were pregnant. Most often, newborns are separated from their incarcerated mothers almost immediately after birth. Reports indicate that not only are pregnant women's physical health needs not met in prison, but these women also suffer acute mental distress. Further, because of a lack of services, children born to incarcerated women are more likely to have poorer birth outcomes. Maternal distress, including feelings of grief, apprehension, and subjugation, is common among pregnant women and new mothers who are incarcerated and can also have negative outcomes for the unborn child (Wismont, 2000).

Children of Incarcerated Parents

Just as mothers and fathers experience incarceration differently, children also face unique challenges depending on which parent is incarcerated. With the growing population of women in prison, most of these women being mothers, it is estimated that more than 300,000 minor children have a mother in jail or prison. One of the main disruptions during a child's life when a mother becomes incarcerated pertains to change of living

arrangements. Most mothers (estimates ranging from two-thirds to three-fifths) are custodial parents living with their children prior to incarceration so when a mother is incarcerated in such circumstances, the child must shift living arrangements (Young and Reviere, 2006). Grandparents play a large role in taking care of children with incarcerated parents, but this group of children also makes up a large portion of those in nonrelative foster care (Johnson and Waldfogel, 2004). As risk factors increase, children are more likely to be living in foster or agency care (Johnson and Waldfogel, 2002). Children with incarcerated mothers who are unmarried nearly triple the odds that they will be living in non-parental care during incarceration (Johnson and Waldfogel, 2004).

Siegel (2011) interviewed 69 children of incarcerated mothers before, during, and after incarceration. She found that many of the incarcerated mothers had experienced social isolation even prior to incarceration. Siegel notes, “a central question that must be addressed is how much parental incarceration contributes to negative consequences among the children once other relevant risk factors are taken into account” (Siegel, 2011, p. 188). Indeed, this is a top concern and question among scholars attempting to explore the unique effects of incarceration on children (see Johnson and Easterling, 2012).

Children with incarcerated mothers may be at particular risk for a variety of negative outcomes. For example, having a mother in jail or prison seems to cause disruption of attachment (Dalliare, 2007), which can have increasingly negative effects if the disruption occurs in childhood (Johnson and Waldfogel, 2004). Children’s relationships with their caregivers while their parent(s) are incarcerated are crucial in the development of attachment (Johnson and Waldfogel, 2004). Children with incarcerated mothers tend to internalize emotions and “act in” in response to knowing that the parent is absent for a socially unacceptable reason (Fritsch and Burkhead, 1981).

In contrast to paternal incarceration, likely because of issues of living arrangements and attachments with the mother versus the father, maternal incarceration potentially creates more problems for the family, including a higher likelihood that the child will become incarcerated if the mother is incarcerated (Dallaire, 2007). Intergenerational crime may be more likely due to disruption in attachments. Poehlmann (2005a) suggests that sub-average cognitive functioning and cognitive delays are higher among children with incarcerated mothers. Such delays and deficiencies may be underlying roots of increased delinquency in this group.

Siegel (2011) notes that children “do time” along with their incarcerated parents. As discussed, not only are these children often disadvantaged prior to incarceration, but this disadvantage grows in numerous ways once a parent is incarcerated. Particularly for children with incarcerated mothers, incarceration produces a new set of challenges, often including changing living arrangements, stigma, stress, and difficulties in communication. Children vary in their abilities to cope with such changes, often based on their relationship with and actions of their mothers before incarceration. For example, if the mother was largely absent and out of the house prior to incarceration, the child may be more likely to adapt to alternate living situations. Great emotional consequences ensue, whether it be from loss of attachment with the mother or because it highlights the relationship they never had to begin with (Siegel, 2011). In the chapters that follow, I critique Siegel’s approach to the discussion of the impact of incarceration on the family—particularly mothers. Where she focuses on the risk factors *other than* or *combined with* incarceration as being the focal point for disadvantage among families, I *highlight* incarceration as a concrete factor of disadvantage in the lives of incarcerated mothers, resulting in unique losses.

Siegel (2011) echoes the findings of other researchers, such as Golden (2005), suggesting that “the stigma accompanying a mother’s incarceration stems not only from the

same of having a mother who has acted in ways that defy conventional standards of motherhood and expectations of women more generally, but also from the profound sense of being outside the norm for children and their families” (Siegel, 2011, p. 148). The stigma of being/having an incarcerated mother can result in negative feelings for individuals and families. For the mother who is incarcerated, she may find this stigma an additional hindrance to performing her motherly roles and a catalyst for negative emotions. In the next section, I discuss the difficulties of “parenting in prison” for families experiencing incarceration.

In contrast to children with an incarcerated mother living without their father, most children with incarcerated fathers (approximately 78 percent) live with their mothers during their fathers’ incarceration (Johnson and Waldfogel, 2004). Though a disruption in living arrangements is not as likely when a father is incarcerated, a variety of negative consequences are found. Financial difficulties and concerns of public safety often plague a child and family after the father is incarcerated, and can even make these problems worse (Clear, 2007a; Wakefield and Wildeman, 2011). Much of this has to do with “place.” Communities experiencing high rates of incarceration often also experience concentrated disadvantage of poverty, infant mortality, teenage parents, high rates of high school dropouts, abuse, and juvenile delinquency. Residents of these communities are generally isolated in the political, social and economic sense and experience high rates of residential mobility, which has been suggested to further increase personal isolation. The high rates of incarceration these communities experience damages social networks and social capital, leading to social disorganization, thus hindering other forms of social control. The constant removal of parents, particularly fathers, increases the disadvantage of their children. In such neighborhoods, children are more likely to experience a lack of informal social

controls that discourage youth from criminal behavior, such as family disruption and low adult supervision (Clear, 2007a).

Paternal incarceration leads to a host of behavioral problems for children (Wildeman, 2010). These problems largely equate to further difficulties in school, problems finding employment, and even increase the likelihood of children becoming involved in crime, as well (Wakefield and Wildeman, 2011). Externalizing behaviors, such as aggression, are responses to paternal incarceration (Weissman and LaRue, 1998) but recent research suggests that internalizing behaviors, such as negative emotions, are also experienced by children experiencing paternal incarceration.

Also contrasting the experiences of maternal versus paternal incarceration for children, Wakefield and Wildeman (2011) have suggested that there are some positive effects of paternal incarceration for children. In some cases, a father, particularly older fathers, will use incarceration as a turning point, not only to desist from criminal activities but also to repair broken bonds with their children (Eden, et al., 2004). Further, if a father is incarcerated as a sex offender, for domestic abuse, or for a violent crime, children may benefit from the removal of the father. Still, the overall effect of paternal incarceration is likely to be negative for children, including increasing aggression, behavioral problems, and mental health problems (Wakefield and Wildeman, 2011). This tells us something not only about the effects of paternal incarceration on children but also something about the policies themselves: we are not exclusively removing the fathers who are causing harm to their children/families (i.e. domestic violence/violent offenders) where incarceration could benefit the family (and arguably public safety). Instead, policies of mass incarceration typically remove men with no history of violent conduct from family life, who offer at least some positive support to their children, are likely to have good relationships with their children, who are not necessarily aware of their criminal involvement, and contribute

financially to their families (Wakefield and Wildeman, 2011). Stereotypical views of incarcerated fathers as completely out-of-touch with their families are not universally upheld by research findings. Instead, Foster and Hagan (2009) find that approximately half of all incarcerated fathers to return to their families after incarceration.

Families experiencing incarceration face unique circumstances and disadvantages prior to incarceration. More and more children are experiencing parental incarceration, which places children in a unique social location. Stigma, lack of understanding, and lack of sympathy/support from others can all lead to magnified disadvantages, though an exact mechanism through which incarceration creates unique disadvantage has yet to be highlighted. Caregivers play integral roles in facilitating contact and maintain relationships between incarcerated parents and their children, and these caregivers can experience stresses and strains unique to managing these additional responsibilities. It can, then, be hypothesized that children with incarcerated parents must essentially “grow up” quickly, in the sense that they must learn to be more self-sufficient while carrying large, adult-like burdens of worrying about others in their lives. The social-psychological consequences of such individual changes in the context of parental incarceration are not largely explored in the current body of literature.

Empirical and theoretical criminological research often focuses on incarcerated men, yet this chapter has highlighted differences in family experiences when mothers vs. fathers are behind bars. Specifically, incarcerated *mothers* and their families experience different, arguably more significant, disruptions (Enos, 2001). The sheer demands of motherhood within society at large beg for further explorations. In my dissertation project I focus on how *incarceration* affects *mothers*. I have chosen to focus solely on *mothers* for this study for the following three reasons: (1) the lack of current research on incarcerated mothers; (2) the increased magnitude of maternal incarceration on family consequences;

and (3) the considerable societal pressures on mothers to assume certain roles, identities, and responsibilities. Mothering in prison creates a special case of incarceration as women are dealing not only with their personal struggles, but are also dealing intimately with struggles of their children and other family members while being subject to an unrealistic set of expectations of “mothering” by society.

Gaps in the Literature on Incarcerated Mothers

A theoretical framework for studying women’s experiences of mothering from prison has yet to be developed. The theory of ambiguous loss holds promise in this regard. This theory describes the uncertain loss that an individual feels when a family member is physically present but psychologically absent (i.e., in the case of Alzheimer’s disease) or the loss experienced when a family member is psychologically present but physically absent (i.e. in the case of divorce). Ambiguity and loss are experienced simultaneously and negative psychological symptoms (including depression, anxiety, and sleeping difficulties) occur (Boss 1999, 2004, 2006). An exhaustive literature search of ambiguous loss finds only a handful of research articles that mention parental incarceration in the context of ambiguous loss (Arditti, et al., 2003; Bocknek, Sanderson, and Britner (2009) Health and Human Services, 2008; Krupat, 2007; La Vigne, Davies, and Brazzell, 2008). In all but one of these articles, the general idea of ambiguous loss is presented to illustrate the ambiguous nature of separation due to parental incarceration without fully developing ambiguous loss as an overarching framework to explore the experiences of children of incarcerated parents. Only one article, by Bocknek and colleagues (2009), explicitly frames the prison experience for families within an ambiguous loss framework. The authors discuss high levels of stress and ambiguity of loss based on empirical study of children with incarcerated parents. They

note that ambiguous loss is one of many risk factors experienced by children with incarcerated parents.

My project explores the self-construction of motherhood by incarcerated mothers using ambiguous loss to explain their experiences. For example, one of the reasons mothers are unable to adequately fulfill parenting roles behind bars is because of the ambiguity of the loss they experience in regard to their children without a standard protocol for dealing with the loss or a treatment program available to deal with such loss. Role confusion along with physical and psychological disconnection from their children lead to difficulties in defining themselves as mothers. Thus, the women are also experiencing an ambiguous loss of themselves as mothers. Viewing the experiences of incarcerated mothers through a theoretical lens opens the door to a deeper understanding of how these women understand their situations. Mothers experience ambiguous loss of another individual, her child, but she also loses her identity as a mother. Ambiguous loss is about identity at least as much as it is about concrete absences.

Identity is an underlying theme in this project. Within criminology, studies of identity have largely been framed around labeling theory and specifically to clarify and predict how labeling affects identity, which affects recidivism. My research examines the (re)construction of motherhood as mothers navigate prison life, focusing on how mothers fulfill and perform the mother role. I am considering identity construction as an active process; the women I interviewed are agents in self-definition. Evident variation in how they constructed motherhood (see Chapter 6 on role shift) is validation that such self-definition is an active (versus uniform) process.

This project focuses on the loss and recreation of “motherhood” for incarcerated mothers. A benefit of utilizing the theory of ambiguous loss is that this theory informs treatment programs for individuals dealing with its effects. Thus, a better, more finely-

tuned understanding of the experience of being an incarcerated mother from within the ambiguous loss framework can aid in interventions geared toward alleviating the symptoms of ambiguous loss, improving parents' abilities to bond with children from prison, albeit in innovative and unconventional ways as compared to those in the free world.

This study moves beyond previous research in the following ways:

1. It explores parenting in prison from the mother's perspectives.
2. It describes specific coping mechanisms used by mothers in prison, viewing such coping mechanisms as active strategies that implicate claims about self.
3. It develops a typology of shifts in parenting roles for incarcerated mothers to better operationalize the term "parenting in prison."
4. It frames findings from within a theory of ambiguous loss, offering a new approach to the application of ambiguous loss theory as it concerns a loss of self-identity (motherhood) in addition to the loss of someone else (child).
5. It concerns an understudied population, even among incarcerated mothers: mostly white mothers from rural areas.

Findings can expand our understanding of the effects of incarceration in this understudied group and about families and incarceration. While it has been suggested that incarceration produces negative outcomes for families, we are still largely unaware of specific mechanisms that contribute to these negative outcomes. Better understanding the impact of incarceration on mothers gives us a lens into family life. Focusing on an understudied group allows for a better understanding of social and demographic factors' effects on the experience of incarceration.

As mentioned, “parenting in prison” is a term that is used in the current literature, yet is not fully defined. Previous studies (e.g. Berry and Eigenberg, 2003; Clark, 1995; Datesman and Cales, 1983; Enos, 2001; Ferraro and Moe, 2003; Snyder, Carlo, and Mullins, 2002) examine the phenomenon of being a parent in prison and focus on the need for visitation for parents to maintain bonds with their children during the incarceration process. The term “parenting in prison” is treated as though it has been operationalized, though no concrete definition exists. My dissertation project addresses such shortcomings by producing a description of how mothers navigate motherhood in prison from the incarcerated mothers’ perspectives. To achieve this, I explore the active negotiation of the mother role for incarcerated mothers in my study. “Mothering” becomes a socially constructed subjective concern that incarcerated women, as social constructionists, redefine to cope with the ambiguous loss from their children and of their identities as traditional mothers.

I have organized my dissertation as follows. In Chapter 2, I discuss the unique situation of mothering in prison: I explore motherhood as an idealistic social construction. Mothers entering prison face a situation of double jeopardy, of failing to live up to idealistic expectations of motherhood while also living life behind bars as a criminal, away from their children. Chapter 3 offers a theoretical synthesis of perspectives related to loss in prison. Drawing on ideas from classical works, such as *The Pains of Imprisonment* (Johnson and Toch, 1982), and contemporary empirical works (including Enos, 2001 and Owen, 1998), I explore how the modern prison experience constitutes an experience of loss by mothers. In Chapter 3, I introduce ambiguous loss as a framework within which to study and explain how incarcerated mothers experience and cope with loss. In Chapter 4 I provide an overview of the methodology used in this study, including descriptive data of my research site and participants. Chapters 5 through 7 reveal my three main findings: mothers

negotiate incarceration with difficulty (largely due to ambiguous loss), the difficulty is gendered (because of the social construction of motherhood), and mothers maintain agency in dealing with these difficulties (by creating stories that solidify their competencies as mothers). In Chapter 5 I share evidence that these mothers experience ambiguous loss. That experience exists to a very large extent in a loss of coveted identities. Mothers behind bars tell stories of their pre-to post experiences of being a mother in discernibly different ways, with a concentration on the shift in the mother role. In Chapter 6, I categorize my research participants as same mom, modified mom, and detached mom, based on how they (re)defined their mother roles while incarcerated. In Chapter 7 I present results suggesting that mothers behind bars negotiate ambiguous loss of mother positions through a variety of strategies to gain control over their role performances as mothers. Across strategies I identify themes of control over definitions of parenting, children, and self. Chapter 8 summarizes overall findings and contributions of this study, including policy implications and suggestions for future research.

In the chapters that follow I review the existing literature on incarcerated mothers, focusing on the gaps in this literature and begin filling those gaps with empirical evidence from my interviews with incarcerated mothers from Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women (KCIW). My study moves beyond the “typical” research on incarcerated women in the United States focusing on black women from urban areas, as KCIW (and my sample) is comprised of mostly white women from rural areas. My interviews with incarcerated mothers reveal that the term “parenting in prison” may actually be semantically inaccurate. Respondents revealed the *inability* to fully parent from prison and shared various inadequacies of the prison system in allowing the possibility to maintain mother-child bonds through the incarceration process. As previously mentioned, families dealing with incarceration are often invisible in the public sense. Incarcerated mothers also consider

themselves, according to my interviews, to be an invisible population. Through my dissertation, I provide visibility to these under-researched topics through the words and experiences of incarcerated mothers. These pages offer evidence that active parenting while incarcerated is not easily achieved and suggest that elements of ambiguous loss are at the root of this problem. Yet, I also showcase the active and creative strategies that inmates use to deal with such loss. My work focuses on the incarcerated mothers' perceptions of motherhood and how that perception is (re)created during the period of incarceration. I conclude with a picture of a social problem that spans far beyond the prison walls to families and communities. That picture highlights the importance of my findings for the sake of scholarly understanding, criminal justice policy, and social work practice.

Chapter 2

Constructions of Motherhood and Mothering in Prison

Introduction

Mothering from prison presents a unique set of challenges. Prior to incarceration, mothers are subject to gendered expectations related to mothering in general (Enos, 2001). Entering prison not only violates gender stereotypes, much as criminal behavior does, but also tarnishes the perception of being a “good” mother by hegemonic standards. Once in prison, mothers face a variety of challenges, including overcoming structural and familial obstacles to communicate with their children and navigating prison life in general, often requiring women to reconstruct their identities as mothers as they attempt parenting roles from behind bars (Enos, 2001). Incarcerated women meet unique struggles due to their gender and status as mothers both outside and inside of prison. In this chapter, I explore parenting from prison against a context of societal views of motherhood and how the unique situations of mothers in prison results in the experience of “double jeopardy.” I discuss the importance of how “motherhood” is constructed. I conclude that societal pressures on mothers combined with the harsh realities of prison life set the stage for a largely undefined loss unique to incarcerated mothers that includes both physical loss of their children and the psychological loss of the ability to mother in any conventional sense.

The Construction of Motherhood

The concept of “motherhood” is embedded within our culture. While little research has focused on constructing fatherhood (White, 1994), the social construction of motherhood has received more attention. Generally, within American society, mothering has been constructed as natural and universal. During the first half of the twentieth

century, the concept of the “ideal mother” emerged and motherhood became more than just a biological classification: it was a “noble calling” (Morash and Schram, 2002, p. 73). Glenn (1994) offers a working definition of mothering “as a historically and culturally variable relationship in which one individual nurtures and cares for another” (p. 3). Social contexts determine how mothering is carried out on an individual level. “Agency is central to an understanding of mothering as a social, rather than biological, construct” (Glenn, 1994, p. 3). Thus, in order to study and better understand motherhood, it is imperative that we look both at the social contexts and individual circumstances as well as responses to forming a personal identity of “mother.”

Glenn (1994) suggests that: “for most of the twentieth century an idealized model of motherhood, derived from the situation of the white, American, middle class, has been projected as universal. In this model, responsibility for mothering rests almost exclusively on one woman (the biological mother)” (p. 3). Enos (2001) broadens this discussion in her work on mothers in prison, suggesting that a hegemonic perception of mothering consists in the following ideas (p. 23):

1. Mothers are completely engaged with their priceless children and totally absorbed by this work;
2. Mothering takes priority over all other work and is the ultimate fulfillment for women;
3. Mothers are all-powerful and direct the development and future of their children, and a failure here will replace the future of children at risk;
4. Only certain caretakers—namely, biological or adoptive mothers—can “mother;”
5. Mothers face motherhood with adequate time and resources;
6. Mothers perform the emotional work necessary to maintain “happy” families;
7. With respect to mothering, race and class account for little.

Enos thus suggests that ideas on mothering discount the difficulties experienced by those women most likely to be incarcerated, those who already face social disadvantages and are members of minority groups. Achieving a standard of motherhood according to these ideas is difficult without the constraints of prison. Once incarcerated, mothers confront challenges of family life and struggle to mother, particularly according to such idealistic hegemonic standards. Specifically, incarcerated mothers are unable to be regularly engaged with their children, cannot make mothering a priority because of separation and prison restrictions, cannot adequately direct the development of their children while incarcerated, have extremely limited resources to devote to mothering behind bars, and cannot engage in activities to make their families happy on a regular basis.

The ideas listed above suggest that a hegemonic standard dictates people's expectations of what a mother *should* do and how she *should* go about doing it. Enos (2001) identifies elements of the dominant family ideology within the United States:

- (1) all family members co-reside in a single unit, (2) the family is headed by a male who provides essential economic support to the conjugal unit, (3) socialization of the family members into appropriate gender roles is essential..., (4) the interests of all family members are unitary and relations within the family are harmonious, and (5) families are economically self-sufficient, take care of their members, and are not dependent on the state or on extended family members... This dominant model of "the family" puts nonconforming families at a disadvantage, subjugating them to regulation and extensive social control (pp. 22-23).

As discussed in Chapter 1, families experiencing incarceration deviate from many of these ideals even prior to incarceration of a parent. Furthermore, once a parent is incarcerated,

some of the conditions Enos discusses are impossible, such as residing in a single home and being independent from the state or extended family members. Enos notes that families dealing with crises must develop new understandings and must employ a variety of coping strategies to deal with incarceration. This topic will be revisited in Chapters 3 (“Loss in Prison”) and 7 (“Coping with Ambiguous Loss”).

Patricia Hill Collins (1994) also argues that ideas about mothering are shaped by images of economically secure white women. The assumption of economic security and racial privilege suggest that mothers are individuals searching for personal autonomy, versus members of minority groups struggling for power. She suggests feminist theory needs to shift to include various voices in discussing motherhood in order to redefine motherhood to embrace differences. Similarly, Benjamin (1994) suggests that pervasive American ideologies provide an unrealistic definition of motherhood. “An ideology can let us see things, but it can also blind us, close our eyes to our own lived reality, our own experiences, our own bodies. The ideologies of patriarchy, technology, and capitalism gives us our vision of motherhood while they block our view, give us a language for some things while they silence us for others” (Benjamin, 1994, pp. 139-140). Incarcerated mothers are among those silenced in the discussion on motherhood.

Without the recognition of differences as Collins suggests and Benjamin alludes to, we remain constrained to discussions of motherhood based primarily on a single group of women. Ideologies color the social construction of motherhood, ignoring the realities of various groups of mothers within society. Incarcerated mothers are among those ignored or, when recognized, are greatly stigmatized for their deviation from the hegemonic standard of motherhood. Beckerman (1991) comments:

The female felon offends society’s idealized vision of women as all-caring, nurturing, and attentive to their children. She therefore poses a threat to the established social

order unlike that presumably posed by male felons. The female felon's criminal activities raise concerns about her ability to be a "good" mother (p. 172). Thus, incarcerated mothers are viewed as "unfit" mothers (Morash and Schram, 2002). The stigma associated with being an incarcerated mother contributes to the ability of members of society to look poorly on these women and negate their needs. In the next section, I discuss the relevance of this stigma for incarcerated mothers.

Stigma

Incarcerated mothers experience stigma due to their deviation from roles as traditional mothers. Morash and Schram (2002) suggest this experience of stigma is a gendered experience, with mothers being subject to more negative stigma than are fathers separated from children by incarceration. Two factors suggest the additional stigma for mothers: the fact that most incarcerated mothers were caregivers of their children prior to incarceration and because mothers are seen as nurturers of children by hegemonic standards. Thus, magnified stigma results from the combination of the separation and criminal activity, both defying standards of womanhood and motherhood in the idealistic sense. Stereotyped ideals of motherhood, as discussed above, contribute to this additional stigma for women.

Macro-level structural forces trickle down into micro-level stigmas that intimately impact the lives of incarcerated mothers. Golden (2005) provides a critical ethnographic account of how macro-level policies (e.g. the war on drugs) and institutions (e.g. prisons fueled by the prison-industrial complex) impact families experiencing incarceration. She interviewed 15 mothers in Chicago and New Mexico who had experienced incarceration along with 11 children of those mothers. Through case studies, Golden provides evidence and details of the stigma experienced by incarcerated mothers and their families. Moral

judgments of incarcerated mothers, she maintains, fill a social purpose—to draw attention away from oppression and expendability in order to justify policies and maintain power and privilege for those who enjoy such luxuries. Deviants give those in power a “them” to unify their “us.” Incarcerated mothers become excellent scapegoats for others who enjoy luxuries that make it unlikely they themselves will experience the realities of life behind bars. Not only are incarcerated mothers deviants, they are also “bad” mothers who do not conform to the hegemonic standards set forth for mothers.

Children of incarcerated mothers are impacted by such stigma and are socialized into a world of poverty, family disruptions, lack of social services, disorganized neighborhoods, violence, and unsatisfactory social networks on top of experiencing the harsh realities of having a mother in prison. Children can come to accept the disadvantage that is weaved through their lives as the “fault of their parents, their race, or their gender...The children of prisoners ‘read’ a daily narrative, which incriminates them, rather than a narrative that incriminates the savage inequities that mark their lives” (Golden, 2005, p. xxiv). Incarceration does not elicit support for the prisoners themselves. Further, stigma from identifying mothers as prisoners trickle down to children and result in little positive support for children with incarcerated mothers. Golden’s findings suggest the need for mothers to transform their identities in order to deal with the realities of incarceration and the prevalence of double jeopardy (discussed below) in terms of being a mother identified as a criminal and the stigma that carries for both themselves and their children.

Parents Behind Bars

“Parenting in prison” is a term used to describe the act of being a parent while incarcerated (Benedict, 2009; Clement, 1993; Enos, 2001; Sandifer, 2008; Snyder, et al, 2002). Active parenting may be impossible in the practical sense of performing caregiving

tasks because parents seeking to stay active in the lives of their children need to redefine what it means to take part in parenting because of the structural limitations of prisons. Few scholars have attempted to fully describe what “parenting” from prison actually involves.

Parenting from prison, for the purposes of this discussion, is defined as attempts to remain active in the lives of one’s children through the performance of roles typically associated with parenting in the free world during the period of incarceration. Attempts to parent from prison amidst structural and institutional barriers, such as physical separation, difficulties maintaining contact, and the absence of custodial rights, can result in a variety of negative mental health outcomes during imprisonment (Arditti and Few, 2008; Benedict, 2009; Maruna, et al., 2004). Simply trying to get one’s children to visit or otherwise trying to maintain contact and nurture relationships with children can be detrimental to the incarcerated parent emotionally and psychologically (Maruna, et al., 2008). Incarcerated mothers are often consumed by guilt (Arditti and Few, 2008; Benedict, 2009) and/or other negative feelings and emotions (Benedict, 2009), largely due to the loss of contact with their children. Larger consequences for family life as a whole include stigma, marriage problems, and the loss of family ties, particularly for minority families (Western and Wildeman, 2009).

While remaining active in parenting during the period of incarceration may be beneficial to parents, particularly mothers (Greenberg, 2007; Shamai and Kochal, 2008), the ability to do so is limited in prison. Parents seeking to stay active in their children’s lives during incarceration have limited ways to do so, requiring them to redefine their role as a parent. Role strain, defined as “the difficulty of fulfilling role demands” (Goode, 1960, p. 483), can result for incarcerated parents, as they are largely unable to fulfill traditional parenting roles (requiring physical contact and consistent interaction) from behind bars, potentially increasing psychological distress and the negative outcomes that come along with that distress.

Individuals who are disproportionately likely to become incarcerated, the majority of whom are parents (Enos, 2001), are also disproportionately disadvantaged in terms of unemployment, scarce financial resources, mental health problems, drug addiction and prior violent victimization (Bilchik, Seymour, and Kreishner, 2001; Imber-Black, 2008), making parenting difficult even before arrest and incarceration. Approximately 40 percent of incarcerated mothers have experienced sexual or physical abuse, approximately 33 percent have attempted suicide, approximately 20 percent experienced life as a ward of the state, nearly 20 percent have experienced homelessness in the year prior to incarceration, and over 20 percent have experienced mental illness (Golden, 2005; also see Bilchik, et al., 2001; Enos, 2001; Imber-Black, 2008). Once a parent enters prison, the whole family is impacted, changing family relationship dynamics. Parents must redefine their roles in family life as they become physically absent in the daily lives of their children and further disadvantages, such as increased stigma, home life disruption, and separation, define daily life for families left behind.

Parental visitation has been central to the discussion of parenting in prison (i.e., Clement, 1993; Greenberg, 2007; Johnson, 2006; Poehlmann, 2005b; Sack and Seidler, 1978; Toch, 1975). In the past, researchers questioned whether or not parental visitation is beneficial or detrimental to a child whose parent is incarcerated (Sack and Seidler, 1978) while others noted that active parenting while in prison, involving visitation as an integral part, can help to reduce the negative psychological consequences of imprisonment (Toch, 1975). Parent-child interaction along with mental health services are important in helping to alleviate negative outcomes for incarcerated mothers (Greenberg, 2007; Poehlmann, 2005b). For example, Poehlmann (2005b) conducted qualitative interviews with 94 incarcerated mothers of children ages 2 to 7 and concluded that fewer child visits were associated with higher depressive symptoms and that mother-caregiver relationships are

an integral part in facilitating mother-child contact. The psychological well-being of both parent and child can be enhanced by visitation, helping to counter the loss of family ties through incarceration. Contact can help children better understand and work through emotions associated with the separation. It also appears to improve successful reintegration of parents upon release (Johnson, 2006).

Reed and Reed (1997) suggest that mothers are more likely than fathers to experience involuntary termination of parental rights. Approximately one-quarter of parents participating in therapeutic programs through the Center for Children with Incarcerated Parents in the 1990s lost parental rights. Further, the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA; P.L. 105-89) has resulted in a disconnection between what is expected of incarcerated parents and what they are actually able to do based on institutional restrictions. According to the ASFA, when a child has been in the care of the state for 15 of the 22 previous months, the state is required to petition for termination of parental rights (Johnson and Waldfogel, 2002, pp. 461-462). Such a policy adds to the difficulties of parenting during and after incarceration, particularly if family members are not taking care of an incarcerated parent's children, as restoration of parental rights after termination is often difficult. Parents considered mentally ill, who have mental retardation, or who are classified as homosexuals face significant legal barriers in maintaining parental rights, as well (Payne, 1977). Llewellyn and colleagues (2003) reviewed studies from Australia on this topic, noting that "court decisions are largely influenced by stereotypical beliefs about intellectual disability such that any deficiencies found, for example, in parenting behaviors will be considered permanent and not amenable to remediation" (Llewellyn, McConnell, and Ferronato, 2003, p. 249). Thus, once incarcerated, mothers are subject to additional legal considerations that have the potential to fuel termination of parental rights, which can affect the family beyond the incarceration period.

Minority mothers are disadvantaged by the criminal justice and child welfare systems, though research is inconsistent on the magnitude of the disadvantage. The National Black Child Development Institute (1989) found that approximately 12 to 18 percent of cases of parental rights termination in African American families occur among parents who have been incarcerated, suggesting a racial component in the loss of parental rights during incarceration (cited in Reed and Reed 1997). In a study specific to Hawaii, Brown and Bloom (2009) found that native Hawaiian mothers are more likely to have parental rights terminated than are white mothers. In short, particular disadvantage accrues to minority status when incarcerated, in terms of termination of parental rights. Yet, Enos (2001) suggests that African American and Latino families are more likely to rely on grandparents and other relatives to take care of children during incarceration, while white families usually rely on husbands and the foster care system, which may actually suggest a buffer (family care) against termination of parental rights for African American and Latino families

The studies cited above help to construct a picture of *what* happens to parents and families during incarceration. What is missing is a complete picture of *how* parents negotiate parenting during incarceration: parent-prisoners—mothers in particular—as agents. While we know that visitation is important, we are unaware of the exact tools and tactics incarcerated mothers use to parent while incarcerated.

I now turn to a discussion of two classic ethnographies of mothering from prison. *In the Mix: Struggle and Survival in a Women's Prison* by Barbara Owen (1998) and *Mothering from the Inside: Parenting in a Women's Prison* by Sandra Enos (2001) offer unique perspectives on the impact of incarceration on mothers and their families. Taken together, these studies offer empirical evidence of double jeopardy (the compounded effect of being subject to unrealistic expectations of mothers and further deviating from the dominant

standard of what a “good” mother should be by becoming incarcerated) discussed below. Owen and Enos show that prison life is closely connected to life on the outside. Societal pressures, including unrealistic expectations of motherhood, follow women into prison, thus shaping life there. Mothers’ reactions to incarceration are tied to expectations of motherhood and other elements of family life.

In the Mix

Barbara Owen (1998) provides a detailed look at the experience of incarceration for women in a California prison. She conducted individual and group interviews (with 294 women) and observations over a 3-year period at Central California Women’s Facility, the largest women’s prison in the world. She considers her work a “quasi-ethnography” as she was unable to become fully immersed--as required in a true ethnography--in the prison world due to institutional constraints. Owen used feminist methods to understand the experiences of the women from their own points of view. She describes the prison as a gendered institution and imprisonment as a gendered experience, detailing the physical navigation of the prison, personal relationships in and outside of prison, and the culture of women who are incarcerated.

Owen (1994) calls life in prison for women “the mix,” which is “characterized by a continuation of the behavior that led to imprisonment, a life revolving around drugs, intense, volatile, and often destructive relationships, and non-rule abiding behavior” (p. 3). Such behavior can come to characterize social life and relationships while incarcerated for women. While Owen’s participants are exclusively female, she comments on differences in men’s and women’s pathways to prison as well as differences in the prison experience itself. “Men do not share the same struggles with patriarchy or the pervasive sexual and personal oppression found in the lives of women” (p. 3). Lack of power and resources follow women

into prison, shaping daily life and struggles to form identity and navigate social relationships.

Owen (1998) did not exclusively study mothers. However, her study is relevant to mothering because the majority of incarcerated women, both in general and in her sample, are mothers. The core question of her study is “How do women in prison do time?” (p. 1). In her book she describes how females behind bars organize their time and create their social worlds; she concludes that this is a gendered experience. She explores two central themes of this experience: the importance of developing a “program” while in prison and the significance of personal relationships. Women are often seeking to avoid “the mix” in order to do their time and return to their families. Concerning personal relationships, Owen emphasizes the importance of the “play family.” A play family includes interpersonal satisfactions, networks of obligations, and a sense of belonging, fulfilling functions of the biological family that is not available to incarcerated women. The play family provides a sense of community that “tips, cliques, and gang structure provide for male prisoners” (p. 8). Dyadic relationships and play families also serve as ways to avoid the mix.

Significant to my study, Owen found that women’s lives largely revolved around their children, even when separated due to incarceration. She found that routinely “women would speak of the pain of being removed from their children and the tragedy of separation. The desire to ‘just be home with my kids’ and the need to ‘be a good mother’ were echoed in numerous interviews...By every indication, reunification with children is seen as the primary goal of prisoner mothers” (p. 121). For the purposes of my study, this component of identity is integral in determining *how* mothers achieve this goal while negotiating mother-child relationships and motherhood during the incarceration process. Children are a main focus of women both before and during incarceration. The relative importance of the mother-child relationship serves to shape prison culture, including the recognition of

intense grief experienced through the process of separating from children due to incarceration and sanctioning prisoners who have been convicted of harming children. In Owen's study, nearly all of the women interviewed expressed the extreme importance of children in their lives.

The gendered nature of prison places additional stigma on women behind bars. Owen (1998) considers the demonization of the female offender. Female offenders are marginalized on a variety of levels:

The offense profile...suggests that women commit survival crimes to earn money, feed a drug-dependent life, and escape brutalizing physical conditions and relationships. Rather than finding a new demon female offender...data suggest that women in prison have been marginalized from traditional roles, becoming castaways from conventional life...Most of the women interviewed in this study held quite traditional views of gender roles. They generally saw themselves as wives and mothers, not as newly liberated, viscous criminals (Owen, 1998, p. 11).

Incarcerated women still tend to hold "traditional" views of their place in society. And committing these crimes does not liberate, but rather further confines women to gender stereotypes.

Mothers in Owen's study discussed the need to be a "good mother." They expressed worry over their children during their separation and sought social support for the grief associated with being away from children. Despite the overwhelming sentiment of the importance of motherhood and reunification, "the emphasis on the importance of motherhood while incarcerated does not always reflect the reality of their lives outside prison" (Owen, 1998, p. 121). In Owen's study, less than one-third of the women who were sampled had lived with all of their children prior to incarceration. Approximately 10 percent lived with "some" of their children. More than one-quarter did not live with their

children in the year before coming to prison. Thus, though the majority of women idealize the possibilities of being in a mother-child home after incarceration, their lives before were not always suggestive of such a life being likely upon release.

Owen concludes that structural and institutional forces, both inside and outside of prison, shape the lives of incarcerated women. “Women in prison represent a very specific failure of conventional society—and public policy—to recognize the damage done to women through the oppression of patriarchy, economic marginalization, and the wider-reaching effects of such short-sighted and detrimental policies as the war on drugs and the overreliance on incarceration as social control” (Owen, 1998, p. 192). Despite such negative sentiments, Owen notes that these stories are not hopeless. Many of the women she interviewed survived prison along with more damaging life situations and have overcome obstacles even as the odds were stacked against them (p. 192). Owen’s work is an integral component to the scholarly research on incarcerated women. She bridges the outside world with the prison world to explain how women navigate prison life, concluding that much of this navigation revolves around motherhood and the pressures faced by incarcerated women are influenced by structural forces shaping gender roles and expectations both inside and outside of the prison. While Owen provides a thick description of prison culture for women, including the importance of children to mothers, this study does not attempt to explore or describe how mothers parent from prison.

Mothering from the Inside

Whereas Owen tells a story of women prisoners generally, Sandra Enos’ (2001) research looks specifically at mothering from prison. She used participant-observation and interviews conducted over a 3-year period in a Northeastern United States prison. Her central concerns were “understanding how inmate mothers construct motherhood while

incarcerated, how women manage motherhood while incarcerated, how living arrangements for children are determined, and how relationships between mothers and children are developed and maintained” (Enos, 2001, p. 2). She was especially concerned with the roles that race and ethnicity play in affecting the prison experience for women and their children.

Similar to Owen (1998), Enos (2001) focuses on the gendered nature of prison. Enos (2001) highlights five strategies that are central to managing motherhood while in prison. First, arranging and managing caretakers is important to give mothers a sense of security for their children while they are incarcerated. Second, mothers must demonstrate their abilities to be good mothers, largely because of the high standards expected of mothers by the dominant ideology. Third, mothers work to manage tasks of motherhood while separated while at the same time attempting to preserve their identities as mothers despite being unable to perform caregiving roles. Fourth, mothers must negotiate ownership of and rights to children. Sometimes, parental rights are taken away and a mother has no choice but to give up legal rights to their biological children. Other times, mothers make the decision as to who will be responsible for their children and which caregivers can make which decisions for those children. Fifth, incarcerated mothers must balance motherhood, crime, and drug abuse. In Chapter 3 (Loss in Prison: Concrete Pains and Unanchored Identities), I explore the concept of the flexibility of “motherhood” as incarcerated women grapple with the realities of their deviant behaviors, including drug addiction.

Mothers often struggle with consistent contact with their children while attempting to manage motherhood while incarcerated, making mothering increasingly difficult. Enos (2001) addresses the subject of visitation for incarcerated mothers. Incarcerated mothers vary in their connections to their roles as mothers, often based on mother-child

relationships prior to incarceration. However, increased visitation can serve to maintain bonds between incarcerated mothers and their children and can assist in making reunification more successful for families. Mirroring Owen's (1998) work, Enos suggests that some mothers' plans to live with children after incarceration are unrealistic. Further, Enos notes that the role that caregivers play in maintaining bonds (during and after incarceration) is important. Connected moms (likely to have been custodial parents prior to incarceration) are more likely to have supportive relations with caregivers, less likely to have substance abuse problems, and less likely to exhibit criminal behavior after release. According to Enos (2001), research is somewhat contradictory on inmate mothers' commitment to values associated with parenting. While some evidence supports a strong commitment to mothering, other research suggests confusion about motherhood and parenting abilities among incarcerated mothers. These mixed findings could stem from the variety of ages at which mothers take on that role. Arguably, women who become mothers at young ages have tended to rely heavily on others to care for their children from the start, weakening attachments to traditional mother roles (Enos, 2001).

The sociological perspective known as symbolic interactionism is central to Enos' exploration and explanation of identity (trans)formation for incarcerated mothers. "In the case of inmate mothers, we can identify motherhood as a position, inmate motherhood as a role, and the various ways inmate mothers manage motherhood while incarcerated as role performances. As inmate mothers manage motherhood in prison, they strive to construct and maintain mother positions and performance under considerable stress" (Enos, 2001, p. 34). Incarcerated mothers search for ways to cope with this stress, largely related to the five strategies for managing motherhood in prison that Enos highlights. In Chapters 6 and 7 I explore the negotiation of roles and role performances for incarcerated mothers.

Enos (2001) identifies four “career” trajectories of incarcerated mothers: motherhood accepted (mothering roles increasing through the incarceration process and after incarceration), motherhood terminated (mothering roles decreasing through incarceration and after incarceration), mother on leave (mothering roles decreasing during incarceration but increasing to pre-incarceration levels after incarceration), and sporadic and shared mothering (before, during, and after incarceration) (pp. 132-134). These trajectories reflect the different ways that incarcerated mothers attempt to perform mothering roles during and after incarceration. She finds various mothers base their adequacies as mothers differently, depending on how mothers view their crimes. For example, mothers who felt their crimes were undertaken to support the needs of the families found little contradiction between the behavior that led to incarceration and their ability to be a good mother. Where the women suffered with drug addiction while mothering, the idea of being a good mother meant making arrangements for other caregivers at the right times—such as when drugs were more important than mothering (Enos, 2001, pp. 130-131).

Enos (2001) states that race conditions the multiple identities held by incarcerated mothers. The women in Enos’ study balanced identities and tasks associated with being mothers, addicts, and criminals under various circumstances. For example, as drug addiction progressed or criminality became more intense, mothers were willing to delegate mothering responsibilities to others. They considered delegating itself as indicative of good mothering. Based on her findings, including her development of career trajectories, Enos concludes that incarcerated mothers are pressured to demonstrate that they are good mothers and the failure to do so can have negative consequences on the mothers’ futures with their children. Enos notes that not all incarcerated mothers will reunite with their children or step into roles as caretakers after incarceration.

Enos (2001) calls attention to marginality in society as it pertains to mothers and how such disadvantages are magnified once a mother is incarcerated. Being a mother is often a master status (see Hughes, 1945). Further, being a prisoner becomes a master status, impeding the ability to mother. In the next section, I discuss the “double jeopardy” experienced by incarcerated mothers. Once behind bars, mothers are subject to the exertion of power by the criminal justice system at the same time their identities as mothers are reconfigured and their master status as prisoner serves as a barrier to mothering. The power over their own lives and the lives of their children are minimized while they are immersed in a culture that paints them as criminals, unworthy and unable to take control over their own lives or care for their children.

Double Jeopardy

To understand mothering in prison, it is imperative that we recognize the expectations placed on mothers in general, such as those discussed previously. Then, we must consider those expectations against the practical and phenomenological experiences of incarcerated mothers, including the dramatic and drastic loss of power over their own lives as well as the lives of their children. What emerges is a picture of “double jeopardy.” Incarcerated mothers are viewed as a threat to “the moral conscience of the dominant group, and thus the social order, by failing to meet proscribed standards of ‘appropriate womanhood’” (Sharp and Eriksen, 2003, p. 121). Incarcerated mothers have violated gender stereotypes (i.e. by committing crime, statistically and ideologically taken to be “male” activity), shattered dominant expectations of motherhood (i.e., by physical separation and being unable to nurture) and are thus considered deviants by societal definitions. In prison, mothers are stripped of power and the ability to mother by conventional standards. Such forces – of unrealistic expectations on the outside of prison

added to those expectations and the loss of rights, power, and contact with children – combine to produce this double jeopardy.

Owen (1998) notes that incarcerated women are unable to fulfill their expected, traditional roles “Women in prisons...represent the double failures of conventional institutions: traditional life has failed these women as individuals and as important members of society—those who raise children and thus reproduce not only the members of its society but their behavior and life-chances as well” (p. 16). She observes two relevant dimensions of traditional expectations:

First, the promise of the status (and protection) of motherhood is not realized in the lives and experiences of women in prison...women on the margins are often dependent on the sex role socialization that assumes a middle-class, patriarchal view of the female role...Second, many of the women interviewed subscribe to the “prince Charming Myth” that a man will arrive to provide the care and support promised by the myth of motherhood...Motherhood is...praised in principle but not supported in practice (pp. 12-13).

Mothers are scrutinized prior to incarceration by being upheld unrealistic expectations of motherhood, particularly if they are lower class or minority. Then, they are scrutinized for deviating farther from societal expectations by becoming a criminal.

Structure, both inside and outside of prison, provides obvious constraints to incarcerated women. Owen (1998) notes that prison can actually be a safer place than the homes of incarcerated women’s lives prior to incarceration, due to the disadvantages and even dangerous living situations incarcerated women often experience prior to arrest. Structural constraints, including racism, sexism, decreased economic opportunities, and the lower status of women in society at large, limit access to conventional roles for incarcerated women. Incarcerated women are women who are marginalized by conventional society for

social, economic, and racial characteristics (Owen, 1998, p. 41). As previously discussed, these disadvantages experienced by women even prior to incarceration can lead to participation in criminal activities and also shape life during incarceration and beyond. “In examining their lives before prison three central issues specifically shape the study of prison culture for women: multiplicity of abuse in their pre-prison lives; family and personal relationships, particularly those relating to male partners and children; and spiraling marginality and subsequent criminality” (Owen, 1998, p. 41). Women who are most likely to be incarcerated have experienced disadvantages beyond unrealistic expectations of motherhood, including poverty, abuse, and male dominance, which can exacerbate these expectations. Such experiences are likely to hinder mothering ability long before incarceration. Once these women are incarcerated, the additional structural constraints limiting or prohibiting active mothering only add to this “spiraling marginality” and magnify the double jeopardy experienced by incarcerated mothers.

These unrealistic expectations of the “good mother” place women generally (at least those without the proper social and economic resources) at a disadvantage even before they are thrust into the structural hold of the criminal justice system. To fully understand the gravity of double jeopardy experienced by incarcerated mothers, we must grasp the socially constructed definition and elements of motherhood, including how mothers internalize motherhood expectations. Enos (2001) considers the socially constructed discussion of motherhood-as-natural. For incarcerated mothers, such expectations are obviously far out of reach. Nonetheless, incarcerated mothers are *still mothers* and, thus, subject to these standards. Mothers must work to reconstruct themselves as mothers during incarceration. In the same context as mothers differ in their efforts to construct themselves as good mothers in the free world, “inmate mothers will construct mothering in prison with a variety of ideas about what constitutes good mothering, along with an array of

strategies to accomplish this” (Enos, 2001, p. 27). Further, “inmate mothers are, by virtue of their imprisonment, living apart from their children and face a variety of challenges in constructing and maintaining identities and roles as mothers” (Enos, 2001, p. 33). As discussed previously on motherhood in general, unrealistic expectations of mothers in the United States are common. Incarcerated mothers are subject to “double jeopardy” in terms of those expectations compounded with the harsh realities of prison life.

As the structure of the prison cuts off the ability to make free choices or interact with family members and pushes the identity of “unworthy criminal” on mothers, incarcerated mothers must work on redefining themselves in order to cope with their new realities. In Chapter 3, I focus on these struggles of incarceration for mothers and the loss they experience. But it is important to note here that incarcerated mothers face unrealistic expectations (of being both a woman and mothers from behind bars). These unrealistic expectations of what women should be doing can produce feelings of helplessness alongside the inability to mother in the traditional sense.

Conclusion

This chapter has summarized the literature on motherhood in United States society, parenting in prison, and the double jeopardy that incarcerated mothers face. Parents struggle with contact and personal identity while in prison. Incarcerated mothers must struggle with deviating from conventional gender and moral norms while experiencing a significant reduction in power. Prior studies on incarcerated mothers stress the importance of children, consequences of stigma, and difficulties in self-identity.

Barbara Owen’s (1994) work in her book *In the Mix* provides a quasi-ethnographic description of how incarcerated women do their time. She concludes her book with noting her findings provide a good starting point to extend discussions on public policy where

marginalized women are concerned. Owen also emphasizes the importance of the mother identity in the lives of incarcerated women. In this project, I extend her work and conclusions to offer a more detailed account of how incarcerated *mothers* fulfill parenting roles.

Sandra Enos (2001) provides an account of how mothers form personal identities while incarcerated. She provides details on living arrangements for children with incarcerated mothers and develops trajectories of incarcerated mothers' "careers" in terms of their identities as mothers. Renny Golden (2005) expands this discussion with the concept of identity transformation. Where Enos focuses on the identity formation itself, in the remaining chapters, I focus on using the elements of that identity to describe the prison experience for incarcerated mothers and better operationalize what it means to parent in prison with a concentration on the mother role. In Chapter 6, I provide a typology of role shifts among incarcerated mothers to explain some of the same topics Enos explored in her motherhood trajectories. Whereas Enos' typology referred to mother career trajectories (from pre- to post-incarceration), I focus on the mother's own perceptions of mothering roles *during* incarceration. My sample is different from the sample used by Enos, as she utilized a heterogeneous racial population and my sample population is largely comprised of white women. Enos focused on racial differences in navigating prison life as mothers while simultaneously examining circumstances outside of the prison, such as how incarcerated mothers arrange childcare for their children and whether or not these mothers assume care-taking roles upon release from prison. My research exclusively examines the construction of motherhood from within the prison. Whereas Enos concentrated on the racial differences of managing motherhood between white women and other racial groups, I focus on roles and role performances as elements of identity among mothers in my sample.

Incarcerated mothers experience what I call “double jeopardy.” Even prior to incarceration, mothers are held to a set of motherhood standards that are largely unattainable by much of the population, particularly those who are most likely to be incarcerated. Once mothers enter the structural confines of prison, their powers and abilities to actively parent are diminished. However, as incarcerated mothers are still mothers, they are still expected (by society and by themselves) to perform as mothers, despite the difficulties of doing so behind bars.

Two major gaps in this literature remain, each of which this study will address. First, parenting in prison is not operationalized. While we have evidence of what parents who are incarcerated experience, we do not understand how parents fulfill parenting roles while incarcerated. Second, the current body of literature would benefit from more specific examination of how the unrealistic expectations of mothers are exacerbated through the incarceration process from the mothers’ perspectives. Issues of motherhood combined with subjugation in prison creates a unique type of loss for incarcerated mothers. In the next chapter, I review the literature on loss in prison and place that loss into a context specific to incarcerated mothers.

Chapter 3

Loss in Prison: Concrete Pains and Unanchored Identities

Introduction

Imprisonment places unique stresses on individuals (Toch, 1982). Sykes (1958) discusses the “Pains of Imprisonment” in the context of five main losses of those who are incarcerated: loss of liberty, loss of goods and services, deprivation of heterosexual relationships, loss of autonomy, and loss of security. The “total institution” characteristics of prison bring to light another loss for prisoners. “Total institutions are also incompatible with another crucial element of our society, the family” (Goffman, 1961, p. 11). In this chapter, I review stresses stemming from incarceration that produce a unique sense of loss for incarcerated mothers. Because the classic criminological studies of prison (i.e., Clemmer, 1940; Goffman, 1961; Sykes 1958; Toch, 1982) did not sample women, a variety of gender-specific losses were ignored in early work on the prison experience. My particular concern is, of course, with the gendered experience of mothering. Mothers behind bars must find ways to cope with the physical and psychological losses due to separation from their children. In addition, the classic studies largely ignored the identity challenges that both male and female prisoners face. Incarcerated mothers must redefine themselves *as* mothers. Given both the constraints of prison life and the problems of the recalled past and projected future on the ‘outside’, incarcerated mothers may redefine motherhood itself. I argue that the ambiguous loss perspective (see Boss, 1988, 1998, 2004, 2006) provides a framework within which to explore and explain these dilemmas facing incarcerated mothers, both material and phenomenological.

Coping with Deprivations in Prison

Classic studies of the prison experience report exclusively on men. Yet, these studies are instructive in laying the terrain concerning loss as a consequence of imprisonment. Sykes (1958) explores questions of control and equilibrium within prison. He adapts Merton's (1957) modes of adaptation to discuss how prisoners respond to various methods of control in prison—including psychological withdrawal, retreat, and rebellion. Crucial to Sykes' analysis is the idea that prisoners seek to alleviate the "pains of imprisonment." His research was conducted at New Jersey State Maximum Security Prison and he suggests that the prison itself is a social system, designed to create and maintain total control. Prisoners are stripped of their social capital and deprived of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, and security.

Sykes (1958) suggests a variety of losses experienced by prisoners. The deprivations listed above serve to dehumanize the incarcerated. "In a very fundamental sense, a man perpetually locked by himself in a cage is no longer a man at all; rather, he is a semi-human object, an organism with a number" (Sykes, 1958). Deprivations both small and large effectively degrade the prisoner from within. Prisoners lose a variety of amenities that those in the free world take for granted, such as aesthetically pleasing surroundings. Indeed, their very existence is largely hidden from the outside world. This loss of visibility is yet another loss of the prison inmate.

According to Sykes (1958), prisoners are subject to various contradictions in daily life. For example, prisoners are not likely to deny the legitimacy of their incarceration while simultaneously recognizing that this legitimation does not translate into an intrinsic obligation to obey those in control. "The prisoner thus accepts the fact of his captivity at one level and rejects it on another" (Sykes, 1959, p. 48). Sykes frames this contradiction in terms of a flaw of the assumed supremacy of the prison's bureaucracy. However, it can also

be viewed as another deprivation for prisoners in terms of losing the “right” to avoid such conflicting messages. Sykes explains this phenomenon as a result of the extreme deprivations of prisoners. He notes, “It may be that when men are chronically deprived of liberty material goods and services, recreational opportunities and so on, the few pleasures that are granted take on a new importance and the threat of their withdrawal is a more powerful motive for conformity than those of us in the free community can realize” (Sykes, 1958, p. 50). Thus, the extreme use of deprivations motivates offenders to conform, suggesting a loss of personal choice and the further loss of personal freedom. Individuals can grow to devalue themselves as individuals and inner strength can weaken (Sykes, 1958, p. 79).

The deprivations experienced by inmates created unique stresses for the individual. Toch (1972) explores the interrelatedness of humans and their environment, suggesting that stress can challenge the ability to adapt to incarceration and that stress evolves from the pains of imprisonment. Toch also suggests complimentary deprivations of men in prison: activity and stimulus, privacy, contact, and autonomy/freedom. Each of these deprivations places additional stress on inmates. He suggests niches (elements of prison labeled by inmates to help alleviate stress) as coping mechanisms and notes that the most successful niches provide refuge without a great deal of labeling, enhancing reflexivity to improve the ability to deal with deprivations and the stresses they produce.

The literature on such losses and ways to cope for women is smaller than for men and tends to focus on the prison experience versus loss in prison. Prior to Giallombardo's (1966) work *Society of Women* (a response to Sykes' *Society of Captives* which focused exclusively on *women* in prison), scholarly empirical and theoretical research on prisons and prisoners had concentrated almost exclusively on men. Imprisonment is a gendered experience. That is, the experiences of prison life differ for males and females, as do the

subsequent losses. In general, adaptations to the deprivations of prison life differ for men and women. “The differences between male and female prison experiences are best understood within the context of structural and cultural influences, such as historical imbalances in priorities given to women’s prisons, differential cultural and societal expectations (prior to and during imprisonment), and theoretical perspectives that influence the treatment of male and female offenders” (Fox, 1982, p. 205-206). Upon entering prison, incarcerated women experience a gendered environment, albeit a different environment from the free world. Women must learn to conform to new gender-specific sets of rules, standards, and expectations.

Clemmer (1940) offered the concept of prisonization, or conforming to what is expected within prison culture. For women, this culture largely revolves around “the mix” (Owen 1998), behavior that led to incarceration, often revolving around drugs, abusive relationships, and deviant behavior. Investigating women inmates in a women’s prison in North Carolina, Jensen and Jones (1976) examined women’s adherence to an inmate code, comprised of five general rules: “(1) Do not divulge information, (2) Do not respect the staff, (3) Do not weaken, submit, or accept, (4) Refrain from quarrels with other inmates, and (5) Do not exploit fellow inmates” (p. 592). Based on quantitative analysis of data on 175 female inmates, they found similar trends to the prison experience for men in adhering to “the code,” including inmates in the middle of their prison careers adhering more closely to the code, the promotion of adherence to the code through group interaction, and relevant situational (i.e. contact with outsiders and staff, interaction with inmates, and program participation) and background variables (i.e. race, age, education, and legal status) in adherence to the code. Thus, consistent with Owen’s (1998) work, it seems that women inmates can accept or reject “the mix” or “the code” on multiple levels, with certain individual and social characteristics making adherence more or less likely. The structural

constraints of prison result in additional stresses and women struggle to cope with the realities of incarceration.

Loss and the Prison Experience for Women

The gendered prison experience for women can create uncertainty, confusion, and grief. Jose-Kampfner (1990) compares long-term prison sentences for women to terminally ill patients, as these female inmates must come to terms with what she calls their “existential death.” Dodge and Pogrebin (2001) interviewed 54 former female inmates to get a retrospective view of the costs of imprisonment for women. Their findings support difficulties in family life, close relationships, community life, stigma, establishment of social bonds, and internal and external shaming both during and after the incarceration process. The stigma for incarcerated women includes the perception that they are responsible for their fate and their losses, resulting in a lack of support or sympathy and, thus, a sense of physical and psychological isolation (Jose-Kampfner, 1990).

In prison, individuals must grapple with the loss of the outside world and create a new existence of life behind bars (Jose-Kampfner, 1990). Fox (1982) notes, “structural and cultural influences...contribute to the frustration of many women in confinement, [but] they do not directly induce stress. Stress appears to be highly dependent on the interaction of accumulated tension and situational influences” (p. 211). With retribution and deterrence as popular goals of imprisonment, the public holds a high threshold for pains inflicted on prisoners (Johnson and Toch, 1982). Fox (1982) suggests some common stress-producing situations for incarcerated women: pressures from perceptions of inconsistency in rules and their enforcement, lack of respect, and concerns about their children. As a result, incarcerated mothers uniquely experience a sense of loss in terms of their families and their identities.

Heffernan (1972) recognizes the stress of being separated from family during incarceration on women. The loss of one's family becomes a central struggle for incarcerated women. Developing prison families becomes important as a coping strategy for dealing with the pains of imprisonment. Women are generally the most content when they have family groups within the prison as they relate such connections and relationships to life outside of prison. As discussed in Chapter 2, Owen (1998) finds evidence of the importance of the play family within a women's prison in coping and avoiding "the mix" of prison life. Incarcerated mothers are subject to a variety of psychological consequences largely stemming from the loss of their children. They experience "depression, anxiety, and fears about their children's safety while they are apart. Concerns include fears about their inadequacies as parents and feelings of guilt stemming from what the mothers perceive as abandoning their children" (Snyder-Joy and Carlo, 1998, pp. 134-135). Mothers feel a sense of loss stemming from the recognition of their positions as mothers but being unable to perform traditional mothering roles during the incarceration period.

Though conditions have improved in women's prisons in terms of treatment and attention to physical needs, "the vast majority of women's prisons [in the 1970s and 1980s] remain modeled after institutions reflecting stereotyped sex roles and cultural expectations of caring and nurturing" (Fox, 1982, p. 208). Owen (1998) found that the loss of personal connections to family, particularly children, created a gendered environment for women in prison, resulting in the creation of pseudo-families to compensate for such losses. Fox (1982) and Owen (1998) suggest that these kinship networks are used to cope with the idleness of daily life and loss of close relationships within prison. These networks are similar to family units and offer comfort, the sharing of resources, and help during crises in adjustment. Such functions are outside the scope of services provided by the prison itself. Such coping mechanisms allow incarcerated women to adjust to life behind bars.

For women, the loss of actual family along with feelings of isolation and lack of support and sympathy can be a particularly difficult experience and process as women struggle to redefine themselves as women and mothers behind bars (Jose-Kampfner, 1990). The separation and feeling of loss for their children is a particularly stressful part of the prison experience for mothers. Studying women Bedford Hills Prison during the 1970s, Fox (1982) found that women in prison can experience stressful situations not shared by men: childbirth. Giving birth in prison or separating from children because of incarceration generates anxiety and guilt. This experience can also decrease the stress threshold of incarcerated mothers. Fox suggests that the solitude of prison along with any reference to their children in the free world gives rise to intense, painful feelings for incarcerated mothers. A chief concern among incarcerated mothers is that their children will cease to think of them as their mothers and/or their children are not being adequately cared for in their absence. Such concerns suggest the importance of negotiating motherhood from prison. At the center of this loss is the loss of identity of mother.

Identity Loss and (Re)Formation in Prison

Discussed at length in Chapter 2, “mother” is a multi-faceted role, which is complicated by imprisonment. Once incarcerated, regardless of the value and importance of motherhood for the incarcerated women, the identity of mother must change. Schimd and Jones (1991) describe “suspended identities” among first-time male felons. In total institutions, such as the prison, demands are placed on individuals to construct new identities. These new identities challenge pre-prison identities, before the men became “prisoners.” Particularly for first-time inmates, being incarcerated severely damages individual identities once the label of prisoner is set. However, the recognition of and

connection to a pre-prison identity may offer some protection against total identity transformation.

The prison identity, on the other hand, forges solidarity among inmates and allows them to better adapt to social realities of prison. Through the process of forming a prison identity, the men in Schmid and Jones' (1991) study were able to reassure themselves with the promise that they would return to their "old selves" again upon release. However, inmates were not able to fully suspend pre-prison identities while developing a temporary identity during incarceration. They suggest: "At the conclusion of his sentence, no inmate can ever fully revive his suspended identity; he cannot remain the same person he was before he came to prison." Nonetheless, the inmate's dedication to temporarily suspend pre-prison identity along with the promise and struggle to return to that identity "undoubtedly minimize the identity change that would otherwise have taken place" (Schmid and Jones, 1991, p. 428). Such a coping strategy can prove useful both during and after incarceration, particularly in offering hope of regaining a sense of pre-prison identity upon release.

Though Schmid and Jones' (1991) study is specific to men, research on incarcerated women suggests that females go through a similar process of identity transformation—suspending their pre-prison identities through the incarceration process with hopes of returning to those identities upon release (Enos, 2001, Owen, 1998). However, the characteristics of pre-prison identities and prison identities are different for women, as prison is a gendered experience. As discussed, motherhood is at the center of identities for many incarcerated mothers. Once incarcerated, women must face their performances as "good mothers" prior to incarceration while simultaneously grappling with the separation from their children. As many mothers may have been considered sub-par parents prior to incarceration if held to traditional societal standards and conventional definitions of

motherhood (i.e. Enos, 2001; Siegel, 2011), mothers may also be required to reconstruct their *pre*-prison identities in their own minds to cope with the realities of their situations while simultaneously working to navigate the prison experience practically and phenomenologically.

Regardless of the objective circumstances and mothering roles before prison, mothers do hold on to the ideal of motherhood while incarcerated (Enos, 2001; Morash and Schram, 2002; Owen, 1998). The identification with oneself as a mother is central to the identity of many incarcerated mothers and, regardless of the objective nature of pre-prison for mother and child, incarcerated mothers tend to idealize relationships with their children and focus on the happy memories they shared. Once incarcerated, women are faced with a significant amount of time to reflect on the consequences of their behaviors and the effects on their children. Those objective circumstances prior to incarceration coupled with the unavoidable separation during incarceration encourage compounded feelings of loss and failure, including the loss of motherhood. Incarcerated mothers may continue to “hold themselves to the standard set by ideal constructions of motherhood and feel inadequate in comparison” and are likely to be consumed by a significant amount of guilt from the loss of their children (Morash and Schram, 2002, p. 75). Losing the role as mother can be one of the most difficult elements of adjustment to incarceration (Hardesty, Hardwick, and Thompson, 1993).

Enos (2001) suggests:

Even when they [inmate mothers] perform tasks associated with “good mothering,” this does not guarantee that they can claim identities as “good mothers.” Mere performance of a role does not constitute identity....To develop identity as a “good mother” her performances must be evaluated and made something important of by

her audiences, including self, caretakers, child welfare officials, other mothers, and correctional staff (p. 34).

Thus, mothers are held to high standards of mother role performance by societal expectations. Once incarcerated, after arguably failing to live up to those standards while shattering gender norms (such as participating in deviant behavior and failing to effectively mother) prior to incarceration, mothers are under intense pressure to maintain, or possibly reconstruct, their positions as mothers. During incarceration, mothers are unable to fulfill typical duties as dictated by definitions of motherhood. They struggle to develop identities as good mothers, but this identity is not one that can be achieved in solitude. Mothers must convince not only themselves, but also a host of other personal friends/relatives and institutional acquaintances of their abilities to claim the identity of a good mother (Enos, 2001). Mothers in prison face these identity challenges at the same time that they struggle to deal with the physical and emotional loss of their children in various forms.

Josep-Kampfner (1990) provides detailed accounts of loss within prison for women by comparing long-term prison sentences for women to the pending death for terminally ill patients. She discusses the similarities in adaptation to long-term prison sentences and terminal illness diagnoses. She interviewed 70 women serving sentences of at least 10 years in prison and finds that they go through stages of adaptation to the grief they experience as a result of their prison sentences: denial, anger, depression, mourning, acceptance, and hope. Despite evidence that women in prison go through these processes as well as evidence to suggest that talking about their grief can help alleviate some of its negative consequences, Jose-Kampfner notes, "prison is not conducive to creating an environment where grief is an accepted part of the process that women inmates must go through to accept their existential death...Prison holds people 'out of their existence,' creating a separate existence from the outside as grief over the loss of that world takes

over” (pp. 110-111). In the next section, I argue that ambiguous loss theory provides an explanation for this unique type of grief.

Ambiguous Loss Theory

Ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 1999, 2004, 2006) describes the uncertain loss that an individual feels when a family member is physically present but psychologically absent (e.g. in the case of Alzheimer’s disease) or the loss experienced when a family member is psychologically present but physically absent (e.g. in the case of divorce). Ambiguity and loss are experienced simultaneously. Negative psychological symptoms including depression, anxiety, and sleeping difficulties are observed where ambiguous loss is sustained. These types of outcomes are also common among incarcerated parents and their children. The theory of ambiguous loss as presented by Boss (1999) provides a strong basis to aid in the understanding of incarceration-specific separation effects on families that exist within the literature yet lack a firm explanation. The familial foundation of the theory coupled with its central focus on uncertainty make this theory highly relevant in exploring the experiences of incarcerated mothers.

Scholars have begun to explore the usefulness of ambiguous loss theory in regard to growing up with incarcerated parents (see Arditti, et al., 2003; Bocknek, et al., 2009; Health and Human Services, 2008; Krupat, 2007; La Vigne, et al., 2008). Bocknek and colleagues (2009) specifically frame their findings with an ambiguous loss framework, suggesting that high levels of stress and the confusion of loss for incarcerated children are directly related to the experience of ambiguous loss. In assessing this framework for studying children with incarcerated parents, I find great potential for the explanatory value of the ambiguous loss framework to help explain the unique loss that incarcerated mothers experience in dealing with the loss of their children and the loss of the ability to mother. The ambiguity of the loss

of their children, such as not knowing the exact sentence length and, thus length of separation from their children, lack of information on children's well-being, lack of communication, and challenges to visitation, is largely what makes the incarceration period and beyond so challenging for mothers. Further, the loss of motherhood and the mother identity is an ambiguous loss. The social construction of motherhood itself is arguably ambiguous. Once women enter prison and face the double jeopardy described in Chapter 2, definitions of motherhood and roles as mothers drastically change. Incarcerated mothers not only experience ambiguous loss in terms of the physical separation from their children, but they also experience ambiguous loss in terms of their identities as mothers, as these identities become unanchored through the separation from their children and the negotiation of motherhood from behind bars.

As presented by Boss, ambiguous loss arises under two circumstances: when family members have the perception that a loved one is physically absent but psychologically present (i.e. a family member moving far away) and when a person is perceived as physically present but psychologically absent (i.e. Alzheimer's disease) (Boss, 1999, p. 8, 9). It is plausible to assume that these two kinds of ambiguous loss can be experienced simultaneously or separately at different times by an incarcerated mother in relation to her family, particularly her children, as well as her socially constructed role as mother. The mother is physically absent from the child's life, due to incarceration. Even when visitation is achieved, the mother is still mostly absent from the child's life, especially in a parental role. Further, the difficulties experienced even before the mother was incarcerated could leave her psychologically absent from the child's life even if he or she was largely physically present, such as addictions and mental illnesses. Once mothers are incarcerated, clearly their roles shift and they are largely absent from the child's life on a psychological level

without the possibility of routine physical contact necessary to fulfill traditional mothering roles.

The theory of ambiguous loss notes that those experiencing this loss are more likely to internalize stress, due to the lack of clear social support for their grief (Boss, 1999). Once a mother is sentenced to prison, this signals a long-term separation from family, largely disrupting “normal” family life while creating a host of unknowns for parent, child, and caregiver. The stigma attached to incarceration can also weaken social support (Siegel, 2011), resulting in solitude and confusion. Specifically, mothers become unanchored from their previous mothering roles and must renegotiate how to mother while reconstructing an identity as mother suitable for prison life. Also noted in ambiguous loss theory is that people experiencing this type of loss seek clarity, yet people experiencing ambiguous loss will often resist information even if it is available due to the fear of possible consequences from a greater understanding (Boss, 1999). Jose-Kampfner (1990) finds that in the anger stage of adaptation to prison life, the “anger may function to distance them [the incarcerated women] from the outside world. It is commonly believed in prison that holding on to the outside world makes the time harder to serve, i.e., you make it harder on yourself by trying to control what you can’t control” (p. 115). Ambiguous loss helps put this into context. Mothers may fear finding out what is going on with their children because they have lost the ability to intervene or help, so simply making the “choice” not to know what is going on may help alleviate some of those stresses of the loss. Mothers may not recognize this process or see this “choice” as a defense mechanism. But ambiguous loss theory suggests that the ambiguity of the loss obscures the meaning of the loss (both physically from their children and psychologically from motherhood), thus undermining the ability to grieve and cope through existing strategies.

Fundamental to the ambiguous loss framework is the idea that the family that exists in the minds of individuals is of the utmost importance, especially when family members are separated in an ambiguous way (Boss, 1999). For example, both mothers and children must redefine their ideas of their relationship once it is altered by incarceration while mothers must redefine motherhood identities. Children may come to think of someone else as “mom” during the mother’s incarceration. This can lead to an ambiguity in defining roles and relationships for mother, child, and caregiver, often creating a deep sense of loss for mothers who witness their children looking to someone else as “mom” (Siegel, 2011). The ambiguity of the loss of ties and redefinitions of identities and relationships can lead to confusion and grief.

Such recognition of the family that exists in an individual’s mind may also help explain the differences between maternal and paternal incarceration. For example, if the father was absent to begin with (i.e. living apart from the mother), the child’s and mother’s definition of the family was different than that of the “nuclear” family to begin with. But if mother and child live together prior to incarceration, that separation and loss will likely be experienced more intensely because of the drastic change in family life. The parent who is incarcerated must redefine their roles, expectations, and actions as a parent if they are going to participate in any level of “parenting” from behind bars. Further, the caregiver takes on additional responsibilities while the parent is absent and must also redefine his or her roles within the family, with the potential to directly impact both incarcerated mother and her children.

Boss (1999) also discusses the stressful and tormenting nature of loss that is ambiguous, noting that: “the very situations that people least understand stir their unconscious. Of all the losses experienced in personal relationships, ambiguous loss is the most devastating because it remains unclear, indeterminate...The uncertainty makes

ambiguous loss the most distressful of all losses, leading to symptoms that are not only painful but often missed or misdiagnosed” (pp. 5-6). These elements of the ambiguous loss framework fit directly into the current body of literature on incarcerated mothers, though such elements are never identified as ambiguous loss. Many families choose not to discuss maternal incarceration in any great detail, leaving parents, children, and caregivers without a full understanding of the nature of the incarceration for other family members. Thus, it is plausible to assume that some family members, including mothers, do not fully understand their own place within the larger family context and, as discussed, the family that exists in the mind is the most important. If an individual is confused about their place within a family before, during, or after maternal incarceration, it is further plausible to assume that the *loss* of that place is all the more confusing and stressful. As previously discussed, many mothers experience a variety of negative mental health outcomes (including depression, guilt, and difficulties defining themselves as mothers). Ambiguous loss theory would help explain these phenomena by recognizing the misunderstanding and uncertainty along with the stress and other psychological symptoms that may result from the loss of motherhood and abilities to actively participate in the daily lives of their children.

The daily living situation of an individual experiencing ambiguous loss can cause great problems both for the individual and other family members, largely due to the fact that the situation and circumstances surrounding the loss are out of the control of those experiencing the loss, hampering greatly the ability to cope and grieve. The perception of a loved one as present when they are physically gone or vice versa results in feelings of helplessness, making them more prone to depression, anxiety and problems within relationships (Boss, 1999). Clearly, these phenomena are major factors in the lives of families experiencing incarceration.

Boss (1999) discusses just how ambiguous loss fosters such depression, anxiety, and relationship conflicts:

First because the loss is confusing, people are baffled and immobilized. They don't know how to make sense of the situation. They can't problem-solve because they do not yet know whether the problem (the loss) is final or temporary...Second, the uncertainty prevents people from adjusting to the ambiguity of their loss by reorganizing the roles and rules of their relationship with the loved one, so that the couple or family relationship freezes in place...Third, people are denied the symbolic rituals that ordinarily support a clear loss—such as a funeral after a death in the family...Fourth, the absurdity of ambiguous loss reminds people that life is not always rational and just; consequently, those who witness it tend to withdraw rather than give neighborly support, as they would do in the case of a death in the family. Finally, because ambiguous loss is a loss that goes on and on, those who experience it...become physically and emotionally exhausted from the relentless uncertainty (Boss, 1999, pp. 7-8).

Ambiguous loss can help explain the experience of depression and anxiety for incarcerated mothers due to the loss of their children and their identity as mothers. This group of women can be confused, locked in a system of criminal justice without free contact with their children or those caring for their children. The ambiguity often associated with sentencing (not knowing if/when they will be up for parole, etc.) can lead incarcerated women to question not only the permanence of their incarceration, but also question whether an unknown length of time away from their children will destroy the possibility to reestablish a healthy bond. Such ambiguity can lead to difficulties in adjusting as uncertainties of family life in the free world hinder possibilities to actively parent and participate in daily lives with their children. One of the most pronounced features of

ambiguous loss for incarcerated mothers is that they are not afforded the symbolic rituals that assist in dealing with ordinary loss. The stigma of incarceration, the perceived failure as a mother by idealistic standards, and the structural constraints of prison do not allow for a typical grieving process to take place. Further, this loss *is* ambiguous due to uncertainties and the fact that both mother and child are still alive—so no clear, defined loss has taken place. Stigma can make a difficult situation uncomfortable for those experiencing and those perpetuating that stigma, discouraging support for incarcerated mothers dealing with this ambiguous loss. Finally, as Boss discusses, the ambiguous loss experienced by incarcerated mothers it goes on and on—it is indefinite. It is unlikely that prisoners know their exact date of release significantly ahead of time. Even when a prisoner is aware of a release date, uncertainty about details of reunification (including whether or not the child will accept them back into their lives, whether they will be living with their children, and whether or not their children have substituted someone as the mother in their lives) can fuel feelings of worry and potential loss. Such extended worry can be physically and emotionally exhausting.

Boss (1999) notes that the ambiguity of loss and the uncertainty of such circumstances suspend the grieving process. Discussed above, Jose-Kampfner (1990) compares the stages of grief for a terminal illness to the stages of loss for incarcerated women. Those stages are as follows: denial, anger, depression, mourning, acceptance, and hope. I argue that, although women incarcerated for long periods of time may adequately pass through these stages in terms of life in prison, it is not possible for incarcerated women to fully move through these stages of grief for their children or the loss of motherhood identities because the loss they are experiencing in this context is *ambiguous*. “Unlike death, an ambiguous loss may never allow people to achieve the detachment that is necessary for normal closure....It feels like a loss, but it is not *really* one” (Boss, 1999, p. 10-11). In Jose-

Kampfner's (1990) work on incarcerated women she notes, "The women describe prison life as unreal: 'In here—oh, how can I explain it? It's like an existence where nothing seems real.' Another inmate said 'in this place, you are standing outside your existence.' These women grieve for the loss of themselves and their outside world. Prison life places people out of their existential context, raising the question of whether it is possible to grieve in such an institution" (pp. 112-113). Arguably, these women are experiencing *ambiguous loss*, leaving them without conventional language with which to discuss their situations or to adequately grieve. Without having appropriate linguistic tools with which to explain one's situation, it becomes more difficult to deal with that situation. Besides, incarcerated mothers may not be given outlets to discuss their feelings or the situation while incarcerated, which can block the coping and grieving processes and exacerbate the issues of feeling out of control and misunderstanding by increasing a level of ambiguity. Ambiguous loss theory provides a reason why dealing with this loss seems to be a foreign and confusing experience—the women do not understand the loss they are experience because of its ambiguity. Further, ambiguous loss theory is not a framework generally discussed in lay society, so those experiencing it are often unaware of its existence, particularly in their individual lives.

In families experiencing incarceration, the feeling of loss, even though a traditional loss may not exist by conventional definition, could be indicative of the need to redefine roles and relationships and the consequences that result. Again, the parent is not *truly* gone, but they are absent from their children's everyday life, making it feel like a great loss. However, this may not result in exclusively negative effects. Alternatively, it could allow for the possibility to rebuild broken bonds. These are questions that require some sort of empirical analysis within the larger ambiguous loss framework.

Family stress leading to family crisis is a precursor to the experience of ambiguous loss. Boss (1988) differentiates between family stress (change within and/or pressure on the family) and family crisis. "Family stress sometimes results in crisis. A family crisis is (a) a disturbance in the equilibrium that is so overwhelming, (b) a pressure that is so severe, or (c) a change that is so acute the family system is blocked, immobilized, and incapacitated...Family boundaries are no longer maintained, customary roles and tasks are no longer performed, and family members can no longer function at optimally levels, physically or psychologically" (p. 49). Arguably, families experiencing maternal incarceration (particularly if mothers lived with their children prior to incarceration) have crossed the threshold of family stress and have entered a family crisis situation. The indicators of family crisis Boss (1988) suggests are as follows: (a) inability of family members to perform usual roles and tasks, (b) inability to make decisions and solve problems, (c) inability to care for each other in the usual way, and (d) focus shifting from family to individual survival (p. 50). In addition to citing the elements of family crisis, Boss identifies indicators of family crisis: the inability of family members to perform typical roles and tasks; the inability to make decisions or solve problems; the inability to care for each other in the usual way; and a shift in focus from family to individual survival. When a family is in crisis, the structure of the family itself is broken, unable to support its members or maintain appropriate boundaries. Family members cannot take care of each other and may not even be able to take care of themselves. Boss notes that not all of these indicators need to be present in any one example for a family crisis to exist.

While not discussed in the context of ambiguous loss or Boss's family stress perspective specifically, Enos (2001) recognizes the crisis families experience during maternal incarceration and her analysis coincides with these indicators. Enos suggests that during such crises, "taken-for-granted understandings of obligations are challenges, and

new understandings are put into context and enacted” (p. 31). Such renegotiations of roles are evident in the transformation of identities and redefinition of roles. Similarly, incarcerated mothers are unable to make decisions and solve problems for their families in any conventional sense as they are physically separated and cannot freely and openly communicate with their family members. As such, caring for each other in the usual way is not possible. Women in prison must, by default, shift their focus for performing daily tasks from their family to themselves. Though the women may constantly think about their families, particularly their children, the solitude and responsibilities (e.g. jobs, being present for head counts, and being up/in bed on time) of prison force women to focus on individual survival.

Boss (2006) also discusses identity in the context of ambiguous loss, metaphorically using the word “prisoner” to refer to the individual separated from family due to ambiguous loss:

When loved ones are absent in body or mind, people understandably become confused about identity. One’s former status and roles no longer fit; confusion abounds... Knowing who we are in relation to partially absent or present family members requires cognitive and emotional reconstructions of roles, status, boundaries, and rituals... Ambiguous loss can cause the loss of identity for both patient and family member, for the imprisoned and those left behind. The trauma from the ambiguity disrupts everyone’s ability to think clearly about who they are and what they are expected to do. The relational dynamic leads to identity confusion. Symptoms may include uncertainty, indecision, inattention, and lack of concentration—symptoms that are often interpreted as signs of depression. In the case of ambiguous loss, these symptoms reflect a form of mental blocking that is

externally caused. The confusion about who one is or what role to play is not the fault of the client but rather stems from the ambiguous context (pp. 115-116). Thus, identity confusion is a large component, a symptom, of ambiguous loss. Boss's recognition of the integral role that identity plays in the experience of ambiguous loss combined with Schimd and Jones' work on prison identities combine to suggest that identity confusion and ambiguous loss are intimately related. On a theoretical level, the subjectivity and social construction of identities, the trauma that stems from ambiguous loss, and the gendered experience of prison life offer potential to explore the experiences of the incarcerated population, including incarcerated mothers, from an ambiguous loss framework.

Incarcerated Mothers: Roles and Identity

Roles are integral in the construction of identity. A social role is an expected way of acting for a given social position, in this case that of mother. Identity is a personal sense of who one is. The roles an individual fulfills shapes identity to the point that one's identity is *dependent* on the roles that individual fulfills. The process of social learning informs individuals how they should perform roles for the statuses they hold (Ashforth, 2001). Role performances are the actions individuals undertake to portray the statuses they hold (Enos, 2001). Research on incarcerated mothers (i.e. Enos, 2001; Owen, 1998) suggests that "mother" is a master status for mothers in prison. Thus, the identity of mother and the roles associated with that identity are integral in the lives of incarcerated mothers. As discussed in Chapter 2, mothers are subject to largely unrealistic standards of motherhood. Expectations of identity and the roles associated with that identity are derived from "common underlying frames of reference" (Burke and Reitzes, 1981, p. 84). Therefore,

incarcerated mothers may still adhere to those standards of motherhood despite being unable to fully fulfill the roles associated with “good” mothering.

As Enos (2001) finds, incarcerated mothers tell stories of mothering experiences to suggest their role performances fit the standards of a “good” mother by hegemonic standards, despite their criminal activities and subsequent incarcerations. Ashforth (2001) suggests that once an individual internalizes their connection to an identity, the connection to the roles attributed to that identity may persist even when active involvement in those roles is not longer occurring. As such, incarcerated mothers are able to hold on to more traditional roles associated with mothering, even when their situation does not allow them to mother in a traditional sense; this is achieved largely through telling stories of their mothering abilities. The ambiguity of the loss of traditional motherhood causes a variety of negative feelings and confusion. But the subjective nature of identity construction allows incarcerated mothers to mold their stories of motherhood to portray adequate role performances as mothers across time.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the nature of losses mothers experience while incarcerated. Upon incarceration, mothers lose their freedoms and their lives on the outside as they enter prison and experience a new set of rules and regulations, separate from their families. They must then transform their identities and related roles to fit prison life. Incarcerated mothers may find themselves working to convince themselves, other family members, friends, and members of the criminal justice community that they are—and were—“good” mothers. Through this experience, incarcerated mothers constantly struggle with a variety of losses, the concrete physical separation from their children and the unanchored loss of motherhood identity. Mothers seem to have a difficult time explaining the loss that they

feel. Without a concrete definition of the loss, coping can be difficult. Understanding the prison experience for incarcerated mothers in terms of ambiguous loss theory suggests new connections between the prison experience itself and its negative consequences (in terms of loss) for incarcerated mothers and their families. For families experiencing maternal incarceration, a variety of structural forces, including but not limited to the constraints of prison, exert pressure upon mothers and their families. Still, the ambiguous loss framework suggests the potential to control some elements, including definitions of self and projections of the future.

An ability to move beyond explanation toward a solution to help alleviate the problem it helps to explain is fundamental for any successful theoretical framework. Boss (1988) defines “a common language of family stress management that can be used by researchers, clinicians, and educators” (p. 20). Such common language can be utilized by a variety of individuals concerned with the negative consequences of maternal incarceration to better examine, explain, and develop interventions for families dealing with the imprisonment of a mother. The ambiguous loss framework, pending future research, has the potential to aid in the development of more relevant, successful programming for incarcerated mothers and their families.

In Chapter 2, I noted that my research builds on that of Owen (1998) and Enos (2001) in sample and focus. Additionally, this study builds on Owen’s and Enos’ findings and conclusions by offering a mechanism—a theory—to help explain the personal challenges faced by incarcerated mothers when attempting the act of mothering in prison. My dissertation utilizes ambiguous loss theory to frame findings on how mothers cope in ways to preserve motherhood in their own minds. In the next chapter, I detail my methods used for this project, including my feminist inspirations for my qualitative approach.

Chapter 4

Research Methods

This chapter describes the methodology used for my dissertation research. I used a qualitative approach to interview incarcerated mothers and analyze my results. Qualitative methods are optimal when researching sensitive topics of family life, in this case incarcerated women in a relatively unexplored area of criminology, and where actors' own perspectives are sought. My goal was to gain a better understanding of how incarcerated mothers negotiate motherhood from prison. Qualitative methods allow the researcher to become intimately involved in her research and to tap into realms of family life in greater detail than with quantitative methods.

Working exclusively with women, I found it imperative to utilize a methodology that recognized gender differences and focused on the female experience. My research is informed by feminist epistemology. I considered my interviews a collaborative communication process. Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillman-Healy (1997) suggest collaborate communication as an element of interactive interviewing to effectively gain an understanding of emotional topics. I used an open-ended interview style that allowed women participating in my study to speak freely and tell stories; I strived to actively listen to my participants. I avoided asking "why" questions, focusing on "how" women negotiated their roles as mothers while incarcerated. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) define this style (an abundance of open-ended questions, elicitation of stories, avoidance of "why" questions, and follow-ups using respondents' language) as the biographical-interpretive method. This method is useful in uncovering memories and exploring sensitive subjects for interviewees. Incarcerated mothers, as discussed below and explored in previous chapters, carry painful

memories and emotional turmoil from their unique situations as mothers living apart from their children. This method is designed to elicit stories from the interviewee's point of view, which was of the utmost importance to achieve my research goals. Below, I describe how my research was inspired by feminist methodology, how qualitative methods allowed me to effectively reach my target sample, and how I analyzed and gathered data for this project.

Feminist Inspirations

I relied heavily on feminist epistemology. That is, I worked from the assumption that viewing the world through a gendered lens is important to understand the lives of women. Incarcerated women have a unique perspective from which to discuss issues of gender, oppression, and their oppressors (Owen, 1998). Similar to Owen, I sought to understand the experiences of the women I was studying from their perspectives. Exploring feminist research, Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) argue that “feminists retain three elements in particular of scientific method: (1) the possibility of being able to differentiate between better-grounded and worse-grounded stories of gendered social existence; (2) a general commitment to reasoned argument (despite the problematic history of rationality); (3) the need to justify knowledge claims” (p. 165). However, these elements create challenges when claiming to fully illuminate social reality.

Elements of commitments to reasoned arguments and justification of knowledge claims as presented by Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) prove problematic because of stereotypical perceptions of *incarcerated* individuals. I moved forward attempting to find grounding in the stories my participants shared with me and compared my findings with valid, reliable previous research. However, in my target population of incarcerated mothers, the necessity to “justify knowledge” is shaky. Similar to Owen (1998), my goal was not to uncover objective truth or social reality, but rather to uncover the realities of

participants from their standpoint, which may or may not meet the criteria of a subjective standard such as the justification of knowledge. I chose to methodologically align with Owen (1998), though my study is limited compared to her broad, exploratory study, particularly in terms of time. I chose to adhere to the feminist ideal of the importance in documenting women's lives, understanding women's experiences from their standpoints, and conceptualizing the behavior of women as expressions of the social contexts in which they exist (see Owen, 1998, p. 23).

Describing the experiences of incarcerated mothers "in terms of the meanings and interpretation of the members under study" (Owen, 1998, p. 21) was essential to my research methodology. I borrow from Gilligan's (1993) assumption, "that the way people talk about their lives is of significance, that the language they use and the connections they make reveal the world they see and in which they act" (p. 2). My choice to approach the study qualitatively assisted in exposing the *voices* of my research participants to reveal how *they* negotiate their lives simultaneously as prisoners and mothers. I find such tactics productive in research on the prison experience and use them to compliment the feminist standards presented by Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) listed above.

The family is a private institution with social boundaries prohibiting outsiders from seeing the private life of family members. Qualitative researchers are challenged to enter the protected boundaries of families. However, the qualitative method allows researchers to build relationships with participants to build rapport and increase the likelihood of assessing "backstage" family experiences, potentially capturing emergent meanings (Daly, 1992). Thus, through qualitative methodology, I was able to produce a more intimate and detailed picture of how incarcerated mothers experience, define, and negotiate motherhood in prison.

Finally, I recognize my integral, active role as a researcher in this study. I adopt the idea of “critical realism” (see Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p. 4): “The research subject cannot be known except through another subject; in this case, the researcher.” Such an idea places what I consider to be additional responsibility on me as a researcher, but such methodological ideas are not without validation. For example, Presser (2008), in her work evaluating the narratives of violent men, views the qualitative interview process as a social transaction. Presser notes, “I am myself a contributor to or ‘co-producer’ of the narrative data. As they spoke, the men in my study were already incorporating the interview—all that it involved and signified—into their narratives. The fact of the interview and specifics of the interview exchange were significant experience for them. The interview shaped their life stories” (p. 8). In a similar fashion, my interviews and discussions with the incarcerated mothers who volunteered to participate in my study signify a social exchange. Though I was seeking to gain information from my participants, *I*, too was part of the interactions. Thus, the social transaction of the interviews (including my role in it) also shaped the stories they shared and became part of their stories and their journeys, which I seek to tell in this dissertation.

Sample

My sample of incarcerated mothers was obtained through convenience sampling, or selecting research participants based on their availability, at the Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women (KCIW) in Peewee Valley, Kentucky. This prison was chosen because a friend and colleague, Regina Benedict (see Benedict, 2009), had already established a positive working relationship with the institution through her dissertation research on older female inmates as a doctoral student in sociology/criminology at The University of Tennessee. Approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of

Tennessee was obtained in July, 2010. Shortly thereafter, I obtained consent from the Kentucky Department of Corrections (KDOC) to interview inmates at KCIW.

Kentucky Correctional Institution for women is the state's only prison for women. In Kentucky, the average annual change for women prisoners at the state or federal level was 9 percent. However, from 2009 to 2010, the change for this population dropped by nearly 7 percent (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011). The institutional capacity at KCIW is 713 with an operating capacity of 691. In February, 2011, the average daily population was 672. During that time, the median age was 34. Type of offense of inmates for the KCIW population was distributed as follows: 33 percent violent, 30 percent drug related, 21 percent fraud related, 13 percent property, and 3 percent miscellaneous.

The population of KCIW is unique, compared to many prisons in the United States. Not only is the population all female, but it also has a race distribution that deviates from many other prisons. Further, many of the women in my sample lived in rural areas prior to incarceration. While it can be assumed that the typical image of an incarcerated mother (based on Google searches and other popular media sources) is a minority mother from an urban area, the population of KCIW and the demographics of my research participants represent a different population. The portion of the population at KCIW that was white during this time was 85 percent, with 13 percent classified as African American and 2 percent classified as other races. Thirty-three of the mothers in my sample were white, 2 were African American, and 1 was Native American.

In 2010, the imprisonment rate (state and federal level) for African American, non-Hispanic females (133 per 100,000 African Americans) was nearly 3 times the rate of that for white, non-Hispanic females (47 per 100,000 white females) in the United States. At the end of 2010, approximately 46 percent of the nations female prisoners at the state of federal level was white, approximately 25 percent African American, and approximately 2 percent

Hispanic (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011). Thus, my sample overrepresented white inmates and underrepresented African American inmates by national standards. However, Kentucky's racial composition differs from that of the United States, which helps explain the racial composition of both KCIW and my sample. Kentucky's white population in 2010 was 88.9 percent, black population was 8 percent and American Indian population was .3 percent, compared with the national averages of 78.1 percent white, 13.1 percent black, and 1.2 percent American Indian (United States Census Bureau, 2012). While the homogeneous racial sample is discussed below as a potential limitation, it is also worthy of mention that this is an understudied, unique population of women inmates. Therefore, these results tap into a group of incarcerated mothers that is not widely studied or explored. An underlying theme in my research is the element of "whiteness" that silently pervades my study. While race is an important component of this study, it is not explicitly discussed throughout the dissertation (largely because I do not have a reference group with which to compare my results) but is an area of personal interest for future research.

A representative from KCIW worked with me to distribute information on my project (see Appendix B for the sign up sheet advertising my study). Over the course of three visits (eight total days) in February, March, and September, 2011, I interviewed 49 mothers who volunteered to participate in my study; 35 of these women were interviewed individually and 14 were interviewed in group settings (7 women in each group). I only obtained detailed personal (including crime) information on the women I interviewed individually, so as not to breach confidentiality in the group interviews (see Appendix A for pseudonyms and demographic information). I had the opportunity to interview four of these women twice in individual interviews. The mothers who participated in my study ranged in age from 24 to 51 and had 1 to 8 biological children. Twelve of the women I

interviewed on an individual basis were incarcerated on drug offenses; the remaining offenses were property-related (4), violent (7), fraud-related (10), and unknown (2).

All of the research participants in my study *volunteered* to participate. As presented in Appendix B, the study was advertised for mothers; KCIW titled the study “Motherhood Research.” A methodological note about this type of convenience sampling is in order. It is plausible to assume that all of the participants in my study had a personal reason for choosing to volunteer in a study on motherhood while those women who had biological or adopted children but chose not to participate in the study had reasons for choosing not to sign up, though it is beyond the scope of this analysis to speculate on these specific reasons. Generally speaking, it must be assumed that the selection process produces two implications in constructing my research sample. First, my sample did not include any women who may have children, but not consider themselves mothers. Second, while I do not know the specific reasons, there *are* reasons that mothers may have chosen not to sign up for my study because they did not want to talk about their experiences of being an incarcerated mother, potentially creating limitations for the range of responses and “types” of mothers included in my sample.

Data Gathering

Prior to my interviews, I gave a 20-minute presentation to the women who signed up to participate in my study. As discussed above via Hollway and Jefferson (2000) and Presser (2008), I found it imperative that I present myself as an active participant in this study. In my presentation, I offered some personal information about myself. I identified myself first and foremost as a mother, emphasizing the identity of mother as a master status that is an integral part of my study. Then, I detailed my experiences in research as a way to explain my interests and personal experiences in dealing with families and incarceration

(including working as an evaluator for a program designed to build bonds between incarcerated parents and their children). Once my presentation was complete, the women were free to sign up for a time-slot for interviews or choose not to participate in the study. Prior to beginning interviews, I jotted field notes on these experiences of my presentation itself and the time afterwards with the inmates.

Because of the overwhelming positive responses to the study and presentation, more women signed up than I had time to interview on my final visit in September, 2011. During that visit, I offered the option of group interviews as well. It was in the group settings of giving introductory presentations that I realized the value of talking to mothers in groups. Women were overwhelmingly positive about my study and had many comments on why they feel this type of research is important. Witnessing the women communicate with each other was valuable in getting a different perspective as the women responded to each other in a setting not available in individual interviews.

Incarcerated mothers signed a consent form approved by The University of Tennessee's Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix C), a consent form for KDOC, and a contact log for children and caregivers² before beginning the formal interviews. Individual interviews lasted an average of approximately 1 hour, but ranged between 20 minutes and 2 hours. The length of the interview largely depended on the participant's willingness to talk. I found some women very guarded and unwilling to engage in discussion. These women would generally answer questions very briefly and attempts to get the women to elaborate fell short. In these cases, I respected the women's rights to not

² Initially, I had hoped to also be able to interview the children of incarcerated mothers. My IRB approval included permission to interview children of incarcerated parents and the advertisement of my project to the women at KCIW (See Appendix B) included a willingness of mothers to provide contact information for their children and caregivers and permission to speak with their children. Mothers filled out a contact log for their children and caregivers and signed an IRB-approved consent form for me to speak with their children. Because of a low response rate from the caregivers for the incarcerated mothers' children, that data is not included in this project.

share and did not continue to push them. These interviews generally lasted less than one-half hour. Other women were very forthcoming in sharing information on their experiences in prison, particularly as a mother. Such interviews tended to run longer and I allowed the women to share their experiences and thoughts, in detail, that they felt were important. Sometimes, women would get off the topic of my study and I would work to redirect their discussions back to the experiences of being an incarcerated mother.

The two group interviews, comprised of seven women each, lasted approximately one hour each. Each group interview, I felt, could have been extended far beyond this point. But in each instance the women had prison responsibilities they had to meet. The first interview had to end for afternoon count, a time when all inmates must gather at a specific spot and be counted by prison authorities. The second interview had to end as the prison lunch hour was starting. If the women miss their lunch, they are unable to eat again before dinner. During these interviews, I did not encourage women to divulge specific information, as I did in individual interviews. However, some women were very open and forthcoming in their responses while others said very little. In this group dynamic, I noticed a considerable amount of “mentoring” of the older mothers to the younger mothers, consistent with Benedict’s findings (2009) on generativity of older female inmates.

Individual and group interviews differed in the dynamic of the interviews themselves. I did not ask personal, detailed questions in the group interviews so as to maintain an acceptable level of confidentiality among inmates. Instead, I asked general questions about motherhood, such as do you still feel like a mother and what does it mean to parent in prison. In the group settings, women largely discussed topics between themselves, as compared to the one-on-one conversations I shared with the mothers in the individual interviews. Sometimes, there was minor conflict among the women on parenting ideas in the group settings. For example, the older women would often suggest to the

younger mothers that even though they thought they were good parents, their parenting tactics that included drug use may have not actually been as positive as they thought. Mothers also differed on ideas of the amount of disclosure about their crimes to their children and whether or not incarcerated mothers should try to be “friends” with their children. The amount of participation among mothers in the group interviews varied. For example, in each group interview, there would be a couple of mothers who would speak a lot and a couple of mothers who spoke very little, if at all. I even heard one mother “participating” in a group interview tell another inmate she was not going to talk, she was only there to hear what the other mothers were saying. If I had additional time and resources, I would have enjoyed multiple, longer group interviews as they provided insight not only into the lives of mothering from behind bars, but also into how incarcerated mothers interact with each other.

I used open-ended questions in loosely structured interviews to discuss aspects of family life and “mothering” while in prison (see Appendix D for a complete list of questions and prompts). I allowed for more personal conversations in the individual interviews. Sample questions and prompts included: Describe your family. Do you have a sense of loss in prison? (If so), describe that loss. When was the last time you saw your children? What is your primary form of contact with your children? How is your relationship with your children’s caregiver(s)? How do you fulfill your roles as a mother while incarcerated? Do your children know where you are? Do your children tell others where you are? How do you explain your situation to your children? Do you view your children differently now that you are in prison? And what is the most difficult part of being a mother while you are in prison?

Electronic devices (including computers and recorders) are not allowed for research purposes at KCIW. Thus, I handwrote the women’s responses. I made additional notes

immediately following their departure from the interview and went over notes and expanded at the end of each interview day. I also arrived approximately a half an hour before and stayed about a half an hour after my interviews most days at the prison, balancing this time between the waiting room and the visitation room where I conducted most of my interviews. I used this time to engage in observation of “typical” prison happenings. I also used the time between interviews to take note of what was happening around me, as well. The first day of my first visit (February 2, 2011) I conducted interviews in a classroom. This location did not allow for a lot of observation as it was tucked away in the schoolhouse and secluded from any prisoner or staff interaction. However, all other days of the remaining interviews took place in the visitation room at KCIW. Various prison officials, inmates, and outside workers (e.g. people stocking vending machines and what appeared to be case workers) would enter this area throughout my time there. Sometimes there were meetings among inmates, prison officials, and/or outside agents, such as case workers or lawyers. Again, I jotted field notes on my observations. I transcribed all of these notes to an electronic copy as soon as possible.

Limitations

Similar to other doctoral students working within unique constraints (see Benedict, 2009), my study was limited by time. As a mother, wife, teacher, and student, I was working within the constraints of my family, school, and work life as well as financial constraints to complete this project. Also, KCIW did not allow me to conduct interviews on weekends, so all of my interviews took place during the week, when I had school and teaching obligations in Knoxville, TN. Thus, I was only able to spend a limited amount of time at the prison, allowing for only a limited amount of time with inmates in individual and group interviews. While a true biographical-interpretive method (see Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) with

interactive interviewing (see Ellis, et al., 1997) was my goal for interviewing participants in my study, my methodology was an “abbreviated” form of these methods due to time constraints. Such a limited amount of time did not allow for more “traditional” qualitative or ethnographic methods of establishing rapport and relationships with those you are researching. Instead, I had to work to make a good first impression with women in my presentations. Then, I had to work quickly to establish a relationship suitable for discussing intimate life details at the beginning of each interview. If I would have had more time and resources, the potential for multiple in-depth, lengthy interviews may have been possible. Though I was able to interview four of the participants in my study twice, a true biographical-interpretive method with an interactive component would have required multiple, lengthy interviews with the majority of my participants (Ellis, et al., 1997). However, given my personal constraints at the time, I had to work within relatively short interview periods to access information on mothering from prison.

The prohibition of video or audio recording devices for research purposes within KCIW was an additional limitation. While I attempted to write down everything the women shared with me, this was not always possible. Sometimes, women talked faster than I could write. Within my time constraints, I wanted the women to share as much as possible. Therefore, in many instances, I had to summarize what the women were saying rather than having the luxury of transcribing their words verbatim. The quotes I used in my results sections may be paraphrased, though I did my best to write down exact quotes I found to be significant at the moment of the interview. Upon later reflection and analysis, I recognize the value that an audio recorder would have had in writing my results.

Finally, a limitation of my study comes from within myself. Though I had been a part of qualitative research in the past, this was the first time I was so intimately involved. Never before had I been in a one-on-one interview with women both so similar and so

different than me sitting a few feet away. In every case, I shared motherhood with the women I interviewed. To me, being a mother is the pinnacle of my existence. Nothing in this world matters to me more than my daughter. While I share the biological experience of motherhood with the women in my study, we are so vastly different in our daily lives. After the interviews with the mothers in my study, I walked out of the prison, drove off in my car to my comfortable hotel, and spent quality time with my child and husband. This realization impacted me deeply. On multiple occasions, I sat across the table from a woman—a mother—sobbing over the loss she felt from being separated from her child. I heard stories of guilt, regret, and heartache. While some may argue this was at least in part a “show” (as we all put on shows in social encounters), the emotion I experienced was real—it was real to me. In some cases, I feel that my empathy for these women as mothers, regardless of their legal status, hindered my ability to dig deeper into their sorrow. I, myself, shut down because of my own emotions, particularly in my first few interviews.

Recognizing myself as an active participant in my study, I was later able to use some of my empathetic responses as a research tool. I allowed myself to open up to these women, in some cases admitting how I could not even image what they are going through. My emotional connection seemed to comfort the women, allowing them to open up a little bit more. Thus, through this experience, I think I grew as a researcher. Through the limitations of my first several interviews (which I think could have produced more information without my own insecurities), I adapted my approach to interviewing to allow myself to be that active participant I wanted to be.

Analysis

I assigned arbitrary pseudonyms to all of the women who participated in my study and transcribed over 100 pages of interview notes along with my field notes, but then I was

unsure of how to proceed with such a wealth of data. Luckily, I had recently completed a graduate course in Field Methods, so I literally went back to my notes and readings from that class to begin my analysis. Then, I spent a considerable amount of time reading and re-reading my notes, immersing myself in my recollections of the experiences.

When I felt that I had a good, broad sense of the results from my interviews and the experience in totality, I was ready to begin formal analysis. I relied heavily on Fetterman's (2010) suggestions for ethnographic research. First, as mentioned, I spent a lot of time thinking about my experiences. During my interviews, I spent a considerable amount of time reflecting and writing/typing my interview notes and field notes. Once I was ready for analysis, I isolated what I considered to be the most pertinent information from all of my collected data. I focused on the experience of mothering and how incarcerated mothers told me their stories of being a mother behind bars.

Fetterman (2010) suggests triangulation as an important, early step in analyzing qualitative data. As discussed in the previous chapters, I consistently compared my research findings with that of other researchers before me. I found that my research participants expressed similar sentiments as other scholars' (i.e. Owen and Enos) research participants. Through the process of immersing myself in reading and re-reading my notes and meditating about the experiences that were etched in my mind, I also found that my research participants did, in fact, express feelings, emotions, and experiences consistent with ambiguous loss. Over the course of my analysis, these consistencies remained. Having recently been involved in research on children with incarcerated parents as related to ambiguous loss theory, the idea of the incarcerated mother experiencing a similar loss was fresh in my mind through this process. Thus, this overarching theme crystallized (see Fetterman, 2010) and drove my continuing analysis.

I began to highlight patterns in the stories told by my research participants and took note of how they related to ambiguous loss. I used open coding to highlight themes and concepts throughout the interviews. Keeping my initial research purposes and goals in mind (to explore how incarcerated mothers understand and negotiate their mothering roles while incarcerated), I began identifying themes. Initially, I highlighted broad themes, including contact with children, family communication, loss, life before incarceration, future plans, parenting techniques, coping techniques, mother identity, structural constraints, being a good mom, and programming.

Through the open coding process, I was able to narrow the broad themes of my study that fit into my larger goals as related to ambiguous loss. At this stage, I identified the themes that became the main topics of my results chapters: ambiguous loss of children and identity, shifting the mother role, and stories of satisfactory mother role performances. Once these themes were identified, I continued the process of re-reading my interview notes and field notes, searching for detailed evidence of these themes, making notes and organizing my data thematically. I turn now to a discussion of the experience ambiguous loss for incarcerated mothers, a major theme in my analysis.

Chapter 5

Ambiguous Loss of Children and Identity

Introduction

Scholars have examined ambiguous loss as an experience facing children with incarcerated parents (see Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest, 2003; Bocknek, Sanderson, and Britner, 2009; Health and Human Services, 2008; Johnson and Easterling, 2012; Krupat, 2007; La Vigne, Davies, and Brazzell, 2008). To my knowledge, however, no research considers the experience of *inmates* in terms of ambiguous loss. In this chapter I provide empirical evidence, based on my dissertation research, for the experience of ambiguous loss among incarcerated mothers in my research sample. I first explore ambiguous loss as it has traditionally been applied, in terms of physical and psychological separation of mother from child. I also, subsequently, consider the experience of ambiguous loss as pertinent to shift in personal identity, in this case one's identity as a mother.

Family Crisis as a Precondition for Ambiguous Loss

Crucial to the experience of ambiguous loss is that of family stress, reviewed in Chapter 3. The incarcerated mothers I interviewed experience family stress so great that it spilled over into family crisis, an extreme form of family stress. They expressed concern over being separated from their children, largely because they could not be active in their children's lives on a daily basis. Mothers exhibited uneasiness that difficulties within the family would extend beyond the incarceration period. These concerns reflect the elements of family crisis, including overwhelming disturbance of equilibrium, severe pressure, and acute change. These crises prevented their family members from performing usual roles

and tasks, making decisions or solving problems, and caring for each other as usual. Thus, a shift in focus from family to individual survival results (Boss, 1988, pp. 49-50). While not the focus of this study, it is worth mentioning that some participants in my sample claimed to have experienced each of these elements of family crisis.

My research participants emphasized the crisis in the changes of the mother-child relationship, but also recognized the larger family system as changing due to their incarceration. Mothers in my sample referred to a host of other crisis experiences related to their incarceration, including changes in marital relationships because of incarceration, children living on their own under the age of eighteen, siblings having to take care of each other in their mother's absence, and problems of miscommunication among various family members leading to conflict. Taking a mother out of the home and away from her children disturbs the family equilibrium, invokes pressure, and results in dramatic change. Often, the focus shifts from the family to individual survival, particularly for incarcerated mothers as they must navigate prison life individually dedicate themselves to recovery, discussed in Chapter 6.

Ambiguous Loss: Depression and Anxiety

Family crisis can prompt the experience of ambiguous loss because of the extreme stress placed on individuals' absence of a clear, definite loss. Ambiguous loss produces depression and anxiety, which can spur relationship conflicts along with confusion over familial roles (Boss, 1999). A defining assumption of ambiguous loss theory is that losses are subjective. Accordingly, "the family that exists in people's minds is more important than the one recorded in the census taker's notebook, especially when family members are increasingly separated" (Boss, 1999, 3). Indeed, I observed that the way incarcerated

mothers perceived their families was of the utmost importance to the women in terms of their emotional responses than the actualities of daily family life that was. Boss (2006) also notes:

Loved ones who are physically absent are often kept psychologically present... What this means is that the more obvious physical structure often differs from the construction in one's mind, causing tension and stress in the family (p. 31).

No wonder that Owen (1998) finds that "the physical separation of imprisonment is often accompanied by emotional estrangement as well" (p. 123). My analysis shows that the gap between the physical and the psychological creates an experience of ambiguous loss for families experiencing incarceration. Guilt and shame were the emotional manifestations of a loss they had difficulties defining.

Guilt and Shame

Incarcerated mothers in my sample gave voice to a wide range of shame, negative feelings, and mental health problems, consistent with prior research (i.e. Arditti and Few, 2008; Benedict, 2009; Maruna, et al., 2004). For the purposes of my analyses, I define guilt as a remorseful feeling emerging from feelings of personal responsibility of wrongdoing. In the case of my research participants, the "wrongdoing" had more to do with leaving children than committing the "crime" that resulted in the incarceration. I define shame as the pain and dishonor that arises from this guilt. Though the two are intimately connected, participants in my study suggested that the two emotions, though similar, were separate and compounded to create anxiety and depression. Mothers expressed intense feelings of guilt for being incarcerated and admitted to experiencing depression and/or anxiety. They repeatedly talked about not being able to or not feeling like they have a right to discipline

their children because they are in prison, suggesting a sense of loss over mothering roles, even though they still held the status of mother. They talked about the pain associated with letting their children down multiple times and subjecting them to the stigma of having a mother in prison, suggesting shame.

A number of women expressed the notion that they continue to disappoint their children by repeatedly coming to jail and prison. Renee is a mother of two teenaged sons who has had no contact with her family since arriving at KCIW in approximately four months before our interview. She shared with me: "They're pretty used to me coming to jail...I understand there's a hurt factor...I let them down again." Similarly, Sara, a mother of two children ages 8 and 14, told me that she recently received a letter from her daughter telling Sara that she is "tired of her jailhouse talk." Sara remorsefully explained to me that she always says that she is going to do better things with her life while she is incarcerated but continuously gets arrested. She makes promises to her children while she is confined which she breaks after she gets out. She is saddened by the impact this pattern has had on her children, including a loss of trust.

Some respondents expressed guilt indirectly, such as Renee suggesting "I messed up really bad" when discussing her separation from her youngest son, leaving her uncertain of how he is doing without her, Kathleen pondering her "bad example" as a mother as a potential cause for one of her son's own incarceration, or Sara admitting that she does not always keep her promises to her children. Other women freely used the word "guilt" to describe their feelings. An example of the latter is Julie, a mother of two teenaged sons. Her 19 year-old son was getting ready to join the military. She talks of her pride in him and his achievements, but also discusses feeling bad for being incarcerated during his childhood. She told me, "My 19-year-old son is everything I want to be [for myself]...His love [for me] is so unconditional." She explained that she feels guilty because he loves her so much and he

has achieved success she wishes she could have achieved for herself. She also feels guilty that her mother loves her so much and has helped her along the way, despite her repeat incarcerations.

Another mother, Jill, said that she thinks she deserves the time she is spending incarcerated because of what a bad mother she has been to her 4 children, 2 of whom she has not had custody of since they were infants. I asked Jill what was most challenging about being an incarcerated mother. She shared: "For myself, letting go of what I have done....and forgiveness....letting go of how terrible of a job I did with them [her kids]." Jill explained that she feels better being incarcerated because she feels like it is punishing her for the bad job she did as a mother. She felt she deserved punishment for that, but not necessarily for her crimes, which included drug use and theft. She expressed how talking with me was freeing because she could tell her story and not feel as if I was judging her. Letting go of her guilt was beneficial in her recovery process, but it was a difficult hurdle to overcome. Tanya shared Jill's guilt and shame for being incarcerated and leaving her children. Tanya shared with me, "I used to be the one who would say 'how can you give your baby up?' Now I'm the one, not by choice, but sort of by choice." She took responsibility for her actions that resulted in her incarceration, but denied that her actions had anything to do with her love for her children. She felt guilty and shameful that she had "given up" her children by participating in activities that resulted in her incarceration. Yet, she was confused at how she could have gotten herself into this situation, since she loved her children so deeply.

For incarcerated mothers the ambiguous loss due to incarceration can compound the effects of painful pasts. Sharon, a mother of five who has been incarcerated for over a year and a half, experienced abuse at the hands of her male partner. Much of Sharon's guilt comes from involving her children in her abusive relationship as well from going to prison. She discussed abuse in her marriage prior to her separation and before her incarceration:

“The kids seen it and tried to protect me.” She said she felt guilty that the children thought they had to protect her, since she was the parent and should have been protecting them. Such conversations with participants in my study paint the picture that life was difficult prior to incarceration, but that incarceration has strained relationships with children and caused additional hardships on multiple levels for their families because of separation and the skewing of parenting roles. Sharon’s children have been placed in different homes since her incarceration. She said they feel betrayed. She told me she has guilty feelings and grieves over the loss of contact and the loss of the strong bond she once had with her children. She said that this guilt has resulted in feelings of depression and difficulties sleeping.

The shame, loss, and guilt that incarcerated mothers experience is as varied as are their personal backgrounds. The negative emotions come from my participants’ individual experiences with their families, including their children. Still, some consistencies emerged through my analyses. Women feel a loss of both children and their identities as mothers. They expressed the notion that the guilt they feel is tied to both losses; women feel guilty and grieve for the physical loss of their children and the psychological loss of motherhood—the inability to “be there” for their children for big events and typical, everyday happenings. I find these losses to be indicative of the experience of ambiguous loss, largely because women do not fully understand them and have difficulty expressing or defining the losses over which they grieve. Researching the mothers’ stories from an ambiguous loss perspective, I found meaning in their inability to fully express or define their losses: it was evidence of the ambiguous loss that they are experiencing and helped to explain their negative emotions. Boss (1999) notes, that ambiguous loss produces depression, anxiety and relationship conflicts because it is confusing, uncertain, not a clear loss, absurd, and indefinite. These elements make an individual feel helpless, which encourages negative

feelings such as depression and anxiety. Below, I explore each of these elements with examples from the mothers I interviewed to suggest that a major source of the depression and anxiety that incarcerated mothers feel comes from ambiguous loss.

Confusing Loss

The experience of ambiguous loss is confusing. People become immobilized because their situations do not make sense to them. They lose the ability to problem-solve, largely because of the uncertainty of the problems they are dealing with (Boss, 1999, p. 7). The women I interviewed expressed a great deal of confusion over the physical and psychological losses of their children, making them question their roles as mothers. They were often at a loss for words to fully describe what they were feeling. They wondered how their families carried on in their absence, whether or not their children would still view them as mothers, and how they could alter their behaviors in prison to be a better mother on the other side.

Nearly all of the women I interviewed identified difficulty communicating as a barrier to parenting, confusing the parent-child relationship. Clarissa told me that visits would “make all the difference in keeping the bond with your children.” She talked about how even when she is able to talk on the phone, the lack of physical contact and facial expressions make communication difficult. She viewed these integral for bonding and keeping open communication about her children’s lives. She told me: “It’s hard to trust somebody who’s not physically there.” Clarissa said that she does trust her kids, but the lack of contact still makes her worry that she is not getting the whole story about their day-to-day lives.

My research participants talked of confusion and worry concerning what is really happening in their families. They worried mostly about their children, but they also expressed concern for their caregivers and other family members and relationships among family members. Sheena said that her biggest challenge to parenting is the knowledge that her oldest child is taking her incarceration so hard, yet not knowing exactly what is happening on a daily basis. She wonders if her children are getting everything they need and worries about them experiencing stress. Her oldest daughter's father recently remarried and Sheena feared that her daughter does not feel wanted in his home as a result. Much of the worry from the mothers I interviewed comes from the unknown, the complex situations outside of prison that spur worry largely because mothers are confused about what is *actually* happening in their absence with no way to find out for sure.

Debra, a mother of three, expressed concern over changes in family dynamics. She said that she knows her family has been impacted not only by separation due to her incarceration, but also by her arrest and incarceration in general. The entire situation has resulted in confusion for various family members. Debra, herself, is confused over exactly how to parent as well as what will happen upon release. She said she feels that as her children get older they will have more questions and difficulties due to the fact that they experienced maternal incarceration, even after the incarceration period is behind them. Her children are likely confused about the details of Debra's incarceration, largely because they are too young to fully understand the circumstances surrounding her prison sentence. Debra said that she could not solve problems for her children as she could in the free world. She shared that, despite regular visits with her family: "It's hard to be a mom for two hours." She expressed confusion over her situation, stating: "You can't be a parent in prison. You can but you can't."

Difficulties with Adjustment

The uncertainty of ambiguous loss can encourage families to “freeze” their relationships, as they are unable to adjust. Individuals can become stuck in a period of time (real or imagined) where their perceptions family member’s roles and identities become static, unable to bend with changing circumstances. Families find it difficult to reorganize elements of their relationships with the loved one who is “lost.” Family members experiencing ambiguous loss often “hang on to the hope that things will return to the way they used to be” (Boss, 1999, pp. 7-8). Some of my participants were unable to let go of what their lives were like prior to incarceration. In Chapter 6, I discuss this phenomenon in more detail. Briefly, seven of the mothers I interviewed were unable to change their ideas of mothering despite the change in family structure and dynamics due to their incarceration. These mothers became frozen in a time prior to their incarceration but having to live with the reality of the changes that accompany incarceration. Such incoherence and uncertainty can lead to anxiety and depression.

Renee provides an apt example. She had had no contact with her family since she came to KCIW. She told me: “I write and I write and I write some more...nothing’s happened.” She says she is praying about the situation but she does not know what is going on. She was very emotional during our interview, crying at times, and told me how she feels sad and nervous because she does not know what is happening with her family. She said that when she writes she tells her youngest son it is okay to be mad at her but she wants him to forgive her. He is living with her sister and Renee does not know if her sister is even giving him the letters she sends. The uncertainty of having no idea what is happening in her absence is making her feel “crazy.”

Renee also discussed changing, uncertain relationships with her mother and sister (caregivers for her two sons). Referring to her mother, Renee told me that before she came to KCIW: "She had my back and I had hers." But since she came to KCIW, she has had no contact with her family at all, not even by phone or through letters. She has had a very difficult time accepting this change and the uncertainty of if or when she will be able to be in contact with her children and family again. She is unable to perform any of her roles or tasks as a mother, though she desperately wants to, because her family has not contacted her, despite her repeated pleas for communication through letters. Renee remained confused as to why her family was not contacting her. She said she was having problems adjusting to prison life largely because she could not communicate with her children.

Sheena said that before her incarceration (this is her first incarceration) she had never been away from her eight children. She was fortunate to be able to talk to her children on the phone and through letters, but she still expressed difficulties dealing with the uncertainty of how her children were doing on a daily basis. She said the separation was very stressful for her children and for her. Her children were separated, living in different homes. They were having difficulties in school and feeling depressed. Even though she is able to talk on the phone with them about every day, it is not the same as physically being in their lives every day. She said she did not know exactly what her children are going through and she is unsure of how to appropriately handle being separated from her children; both Sheena and her children have continued to have difficulties adjusting to living apart.

The uncertainty that the mothers feel is not likely to end with incarceration. Ellen, a mother of two, worried about going home to her children. She initially had difficulties adjusting to prison life and expected other difficulties adjusting to life in the free world again. Ellen was preparing to go home in a few months and she was nervous. She said

prison had been her life for so long and it is so different in prison that she is going to need time and assistance to reintegrate. The uncertainty of the free world is intimidating and she worried about how she will rebuild her relationships with her children and other family members. For other mothers, the unknown nature of the future is anxiety producing and inhibits their abilities to fully adjust. For example, Sandra told me the unknown was very difficult on her and her children. She said her kids think she is coming home sooner rather than later but she does not think she is coming home soon at all. But, really, no one knows exactly what is going to happen or when. The uncertainty of her release date makes the adjustment process difficult because none of the family members fully know what they should be adjusting to or how to adjust to it.

Both mothers who have regular contact with their family and mothers who have limited or no contact with their family pointed to the uncertainty of what is happening with their children as a major source of anxiety. Tamara, a mother of four, said she constantly worries about losing the bond with her children, wondering whether or not her kids are being taken care of appropriately, not knowing what her kids are thinking, and not knowing how the children are taking her incarceration. One of her daughters is in a foster home and she has no contact with the foster parents. The complete unknown about her daughter's life is stressful for Tamara. The uncertainty of what is happening with their children while they are incarcerated coupled with the uncertainty of how the family will react once they are released were great sources of tension for the mothers I interviewed. Mothers feel the loss of their children while they are incarcerated, but also fear the unknown loss that may be awaiting them after incarceration.

Rituals and Support Following Loss

Symbolic rituals often contribute to healing after a clear loss. For example, funerals after the death of a family member elicit support and signify closure. In ambiguous loss, families are denied such rituals, leaving the loss largely unverified and invalidated. Nothing is available for individuals experiencing ambiguous loss to let them know that their experiences and feelings are normal. Indeed, incarcerated individuals are even denied rituals for actual losses, rendering even these losses ambiguous. For example, Tanya shared with me how the day before our meeting she found out that a very close friend had recently died. She said she may never get the closure she needs because she had not recently seen her friend and she did not get to go to the funeral.

Further, “the absurdity of ambiguous loss reminds people that life is not always rational and just” and friends, acquaintances, and the community are more likely to withdraw instead of offer support (Boss, 1999, 8). For incarcerated mothers, these elements combine largely due to the stigma of incarceration for women, as discussed in Chapter 2. Incarceration is not likely to invoke sympathy and understanding. Mothers in my sample expressed depression and anxiety due to lack of support not only for themselves, but also for their children. The guilt and shame they experience is largely due to the mothers feeling like their children are being stigmatized because of their mother’s actions.

Research participants shared the worry of their children’s experiences of stigma and were upset over the stigma they face themselves. Clarissa said she was working hard to prove that she is a good person, but she feels like her efforts are in vain. She said, “Nothing you do to try and prove yourself works. You are still dubbed a criminal and bad.” Clarissa did not consider herself a bad person and hoped that others could view her and her children in a more positive light. Mothers repeatedly tried to convince me that they were not “true”

criminals and they were “good” people—especially good mothers. They reasoned that they do not get sympathy or support because people think they *deserve* to lose their children and the stigma of being incarcerated.

Some mothers shared specific examples of stigmatization. Jocelyn, incarcerated on drug charges, said her children did not have a chance for privacy or to get any support or sympathy because her crime was on the front page of the newspaper, so the whole community knew of her crime and stigmatized her family. A mother in a group interview told me that she lived in a small town and everyone knew of her incarceration. She said: “Our town was mean. People threw Cokes and a chili dog at my family at a high school football game.” She was visibly saddened by the negative treatment of her family, particularly her children. She did not want her family to suffer during her incarceration, but the public knowledge of her crime encouraged discrimination. Mothers were aware of their deviation from social norms in general, specifically in terms of gender norms for being a mother. They were distressed over lack of understanding from others and lack of support. They felt they had no control.

Sandra became emotional when she talked about the stigma she fears her children face in her absence. Crying, she told me: “Can you imagine what the kids say to my kids? I am worried they are mean to my kids because I am in prison. It is so much less heard of for a mom to be in prison—it’s more common for dads. I am their *mother*. The one that birthed you. And your *mother* is in prison. What does that make my kids? They did nothing wrong.” She sobbed over the thought of her children experiencing negative reactions from others because she felt she had deviated from what a mother should be doing, resulting in a lack of support for her family.

Indefinite Nature of Ambiguous Loss

Boss (1999) describes ambiguous loss as “a loss that goes on and on” (p. 8). Incarcerated mothers experience a lot of indefinites during their time behind bars. For example, they are often in prison for indefinite periods of time. While they are given a sentence, early release and various types of probation are often dangled in front of them as possibilities. However, the women never know if or when one of those early release options may become a possibility or a reality. Research participants described the anxiety they experience when they know the parole board will be meeting or while waiting to for a seat in a class required for probationary release. The prospect of indefinite separation from their children was a prominent concern. Even if released, many are required to go to a halfway house—allowing them more family contact but still prohibiting them from living with their children. Mothers expressed concern over not being able to tell their children that they will definitely be home on a specific date and worried that their younger children think that the mothers are actually choosing to stay behind bars. They feared that their children blame them for the indefinite nature of their separation and that this will push the children farther away from them.

The indefinite nature of incarceration for incarcerated mothers leads to concerns that children will further detach from the mothers. For example, Carla told me she lives with the fear that her two young children will forget her, though her mother, caregiver for her children, tries to assure her that they know who she is. Carla does not know exactly when she will be home and does not have regular visits. But when her children visited her approximately 2 months before my interview with her, her youngest child (age 2) would not let Carla hold her. Mothers and grandmothers of young children shared Carla’s fear that the children would hardly know them as a result of their incarcerations, particularly the

long, but indefinite, time periods of separation. Tanya said that she is no longer scared that her children will forget who she is, but she is very worried that her grandchildren will not know her. She said it hurts her to think that might happen. Mothers of older children shifted their fears from their children not remembering them to fears of their children being hurt by their incarceration on multiple levels. It was common for mothers to express extreme guilt over being incarcerated and separated from their children, often multiple times, throwing their lives off balance and being unable to be a mother in the traditional sense.

Some of the older mothers who had been incarcerated multiple times offered that it was too late for them to make a positive difference for their own children and in their own families. They had accepted that their life behind bars was largely indefinite, but they were still not happy with it. Kathleen made light of her situation by telling me that she had been in and out of prison so many times for such a long period of time that her family has come to terms with the indefinite nature of their separation. She said: "My kids are like 'oh momma, you gonna be 80 when you get outta here.'" Kathleen was unsure of how long her current incarceration would last but she did hope that she would have time to bond with her granddaughter after release. But the indefinite nature of her repeated incarcerations created feelings of depression as she grew further and further away from her sons and worried she would never be able to have a close relationship with her granddaughter.

During my interview with Sandra, she emphasized the need to be out of prison and be with her kids: she was adamant that she could be punished in some other way than being separated from her children for an unknown period of time. She was upset that she did not know the exact length of time that she was going to be at KCIW. She told me: "They can't keep me here forever. One day I can see or touch them [my kids] again. I don't know when or the circumstances, don't know the time. It's the unknown factor that's so difficult to deal

with.” Such concerns over the indefinite nature of separation from their children were common sources of anxiety and depression among mothers at KCIW. They wanted desperately to get home to their children and were upset to be kept away from them indefinitely because of long sentences, the parole board, or being unable to get a place in a class required for release.

Ambiguous Loss: The Impact on Identity

Ambiguous loss can lead to depression and anxiety; it also encourages the confusion of one’s own identity, which can translate to additional negative feelings. My research participants shared that their identities as incarcerated mothers were compromised by incarceration, which then manifested itself in a variety of symptoms, including depression and anxiety as discussed above. The symptoms of identity confusion—uncertainty, indecision, inattention, and lack of concentration—closely parallel the symptoms of ambiguous loss, suggesting that the two are intimately related for prisoners.

All of the incarcerated mothers I interviewed held on to their identities as mothers, even if they had to reconstruct those identities while incarcerated. They reshaped their perceptions of motherhood, developed stories, and redefined roles to support their new identities. Incarcerated mothers *shift* their identities to cope with the loss of their ability to mother as they did in the free world. In this context, I offer an innovative perspective on ambiguous loss. Boss (2006) addresses the importance of identity in providing therapeutic interventions for ambiguous loss. I address a gap in both the literature on incarcerated mothers and in the theory of ambiguous loss. I find that identity shift occurs for incarcerated mothers (without therapeutic interventions) in order to deal with the ambiguous loss. Shifting identities helps mothers to better excuse and accept their

positions as mothers behind bars. It allows mothers to maintain a sense of motherhood while being absent from the daily lives of their children through redefinition of identity and roles.

My research participants insisted that, although the stress and sadness of being separated from their children was intense, being a mother was integral to their ability and motivation to survive the incarceration period and to be a better parent. The mothers I interviewed stressed the importance of holding on to motherhood to maintain self esteem and purpose in their lives. Motherhood was a common aspect of the women's overall identity through incarceration, unanimously serving as a master status for my research participants. During a group interview, I asked mothers if they still felt like mothers. One woman responded: "It's about the only thing they can't take away from us." Such a simple reply suggests the deep meaning "motherhood" holds for mothers dealing with incarceration. It also signifies power and defiance. Though they are separated from their children and most of their freedoms, the fact that they are still mothers drives them overcome the obstacles in front of them and defy at least some of the negative aspects of prison life.

I asked mothers how their views of being a mother changed due to their prison terms. Sandra told me that the removal from family life was difficult. Though she wanted to nurture her children any way she could, she said the nurturing aspect was lost in prison. Instead, she was in a harsh environment and most people did not have the same goals as she did. In the free world there are other mothers from school and the PTA meetings; there are common goals among mothers in the free world. But in prison, the only commonality people share is a harsh view of life without a lot of positivity. She said: "You think of moms as embracing, hugging, nurturing. This is not a nurturing environment...and there are no kids running around." Sandra told me that by incarcerating her, the criminal justice system

has “taken away the core of what I am, what I enjoyed being for years. I deserve to be here but it’s stripping away the identity of who I am.”

Bonnie was confused over her identity as a mother because of the difference between what she *felt* like she could do (like helping her children with problems) and what she could *actually* do. She said she could help her children with interpersonal problems, but she could not fulfill her mothering roles and that made her feel uneasy. Tanya expressed similar sentiments. When I asked her if she still felt like a mother she said: “I do, but not a very good one. I know I’m a mother. I love my kids with all my heart—and grandkids. But they’ve taken away my privilege of being with them.” When I asked her how her view of being a mother had changed over the period of incarceration, she said: “I get lost at times. Sometimes I see myself in the mirror and I’m like ‘who are you?’” Zola sums up common sentiments among the incarcerated mothers with whom I spoke. When I asked her if she still felt like a mother, she said: “In some situations, yes. Then again no because I’m not there with them. I feel it in my heart, but there is no contact or actions [to show them].”

The mothers in my sample conveyed an emptiness over the lack of parenting abilities and contact with their children. While they still felt like mothers, they often had difficulties finding daily evidence that their identities as mothers were grounded. For example, Sandra expressed emotional difficulties resulting from losing the ability to mother. She did not want to surrender any of her motherhood responsibilities even though she was incarcerated. She told me, sadly: “I miss being called mom. I miss hearing mom, mom, mom.” She told me that it is difficult for her to still feel like a mom and not be able to be in contact with her children. She said: “I love my kids. I love to touch and smell them. They are so cool. Those two people are just the best people on the planet...to be away from them, my soul is just empty....I want to be a mom again. So bad. I just want to be a mother...I miss that so bad.” Sandra went back and forth between expressing her strong feeling of being a

mother and not being able to adequately perform her motherly roles. She even specifically told me that she feels a loss from being a mom while she is in prison. Her comments and emotions mirrored other women in that she longed for the physical contact and the obvious signs that she is still a mother—touching her children and hearing them call her “mom.” A shift in identity was imperative for these mothers to navigate the loss of their children while still feeling so intimately connected to motherhood.

Additional Support for Ambiguous Loss of Children and Identity

The incarcerated mothers in my sample were separated from their children and their identities as mothers are confused and uncertain within the constraints of prison life. In terms of loss from their children, women were confused because the loss is ambiguous, not concrete. In terms of identity shift, the ambiguous loss of identity is difficult to describe, as “identity” is not a concrete entity. Thus, identity itself is difficult describe or discuss within our conversational language. When that identity, or the ability to adequately perform roles associated with that identity, is threatened or confused in an ambiguous nature, incarcerated mothers appear to *feel* the loss and its consequences, yet they do not have a vocabulary to adequately convey the precise nature of the loss they are feeling.

Collectively, the elements of ambiguous loss that produce anxiety and depression combine to create an experience of unexplainable loss for incarcerated mothers. Other factors, such as a lack of communication between mother and child, serve to exacerbate the loss, confusion, depression, and/or anxiety. For example, Renee told me she looks in the obituaries three times per week, searching for a reason why she has not heard from her family. She shared: “My chest is so every time—like a lump in my throat—when I look. Am I gonna find any of my people? It’s sickening that I do this, but I have no contact.... Some

people flip out in here and I've come real, real close." Renee was experiencing ambiguous loss. She had lost physical contact with her children, she had no communication with her family, and she was confused over her identity as a mother and the roles she wished to fill but could not. She assumed her family members were still alive, but because of the lack of contact, she was unsure of the status of her family outside of prison. Because her loss not a clear, concrete loss, and the loss is shadowed by the negative views of incarceration, she does not have the support, tools, or understanding to work through her grief.

Sandra also offered an example of the consequences of experiencing ambiguous loss. She could not fully explain her loss, but she knew she was experiencing something difficult, yet different than a clear loss. She told me: "I feel like somebody's dead. I feel dead inside. My soul's empty. I'm grieving. Even though you know they're not dead. Like when I knew my son was sick with a stomach bug. I broke down. He was crying for his mom. I needed to be there." Sandra recognized that she was deeply grieving over a loss that she considered to be as intense as death, yet it was not a death. She was confused as to why she felt this way, knowing that her children were actually alive but feeling such an intense loss and grief. Even when her children were sick, her negative emotions spiraled out of control. Because this loss is ambiguous, individuals, such as Sandra, do not have standard techniques with which to cope, resulting in confusion, depression, and anxiety that seem to be unresolvable.

In a group interview, I asked participants to discuss the biggest challenge to being a mother in prison. Unanimously, the women expressed loss of motherhood. The women answered with responses including: "No say in how your kids are raised; I'm not there to support them; Her dad is trying to control everything and I have no say because I'm not there; I'm helpless; You can't control what is said about you; No control over who the caregivers choose for the kids to be around." In the same interview, mothers expressed an intense sense of guilt and strain for being incarcerated and leaving their children. The

comments during that discussion included: “I feel like mom, but I can’t do anything; Spending so much time here, you feel like you don’t have the right to discipline, you have no authority; It’s a sad feeling—you want to pick up where you left off; I’m scared I’m going to miss so many things, like the first day of school.” These group sessions were very telling, as women would feed off of each other’s responses in a social setting. Collectively, mothers expressed confusion over the discrepancies between what they felt and what they wanted to do as mothers and what they could actually do and the ways the other people label/perceive them as mothers.

I asked mothers how they cope with their incarcerations. Their reactions also supported their experiences of ambiguous loss, because of their confusion, uncertainty, and difficulty explaining exactly what they were coping with in terms of their losses. For example, Tanya told me: “Try and act like it’s not real. It’s hard but I try to act like it’s not real. I don’t think I have coped with it. Does that make sense? I don’t want to cry, don’t want to talk about it. I try not to think about it...I worry constantly.” Despite her efforts to lessen the pain from the loss of her children, Tanya continued to be consumed by worry and be plagued by anxiety. I also asked some mothers specifically about the sense of loss they feel while they are in prison. Again, mothers had difficulties explaining the nature of the loss they feel. They grieve over their children and they grieve for themselves. They, themselves, feel lost. Bree even told me: “I’ve felt like I was dead and non-existent to the world.” The verbiage that mothers used to describe their largely unexplainable losses center around abstract themes, such as unreal death, non-reality, emptiness, invisibility, and a loss of self. Such themes are indicative of the *ambiguous* nature of the loss that they experience during incarceration.

Summary

My data show that incarcerated mothers experience family stress so intense it can be considered family crisis. In turn, family crisis engenders the experience of ambiguous loss and the negative feelings associated with that loss. My data further suggest that such ambiguous loss for incarcerated mothers is based on an uncertain separation from one's children as well as uncertain identity as others. In Chapter 6, I explore mother role shift for incarcerated mothers through their imprisonments.

Chapter 6

Role Shift: Navigating Ambiguous Loss

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the various ways in which incarcerated mothers in my sample told stories of their experiences of motherhood while behind bars. All of my research participants still considered themselves to hold the status of mother. Methodologically, the convenience sample likely resulted in selection bias. The title of my study, as advertised by Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women (KCIW), was “Motherhood Research.” Thus, women at KCIW who had children but did not consider themselves “mothers,” did not intend to participate in mothering roles, or who were unwilling to talk about their experiences as mothers for any reason were not likely to volunteer.

Stories to Maintain Motherhood

Despite a loss of motherhood identity due to incarceration (as suggested in Chapter 5), incarcerated mothers can find innovative ways to hold on to the mother role, through stories of their past, present, and future as mothers. My research participants reconstructed “motherhood” to fit the unique circumstances of prison life. By telling stories about their families and mothering capabilities, mothers (re)defined their roles during the incarceration period to hold onto a sense of motherhood, albeit in a changed form as compared to what they had in the free world. In other words, the mothers in my sample spoke of shifting their mother roles in order to mold motherhood itself to fit the confines of

prison life. In Chapter 5, I suggested that incarcerated mothers in my sample experience ambiguous loss of the mother identity. Identities are intimately dependent on the roles one fulfills in relation to those identities; roles can be considered the external components of identities (Burke and Tully, 1977). In this chapter I discuss mother *role shift* as an element of identity confusion, providing empirical evidence to substantiate the argument that incarcerated mothers experience an ambiguous loss of their mother identities, requiring them to redefine their roles as an element of their identities.

Though all incarcerated mothers in my sample still considered themselves to hold the status of mother, they told of their pre- and post-incarceration experiences of being a mother in three discernably different ways. I refer to self-constructions of the mother role as same mom, modified mom, and detached mom, discussed below. This typology refers to the ways in which my research participants (re)defined—shifted—mothering roles while incarcerated. Same moms do not change the definition of motherhood while incarcerated. They perceive a need to continue fulfilling all mothering roles while incarcerated, whether or not they can actually fulfill these roles. Modified moms recognize and accept a change in mothering roles while they are incarcerated. They tailor the definition of motherhood itself to fit the constraints of prison life. Detached moms also change the definition of motherhood, but differ from modified moms in that they largely abandon their mothering roles while incarcerated.

The stories told by my research participants convey their definitions of self over time. My results suggest that my research participants involve the past, present, and the future they hope to achieve as mothers in the creation and telling of their stories. As incarcerated mothers navigate prison life without their children, they actively work to reconstruct their mother roles; this reconstruction is possible because being a mother is a social construction, capable of change and redefinition (Boss, 2006). The uncertainty

surrounding ambiguous loss experienced by incarcerated mothers can lead to depression and anxiety, as discussed in Chapter 5. The construction of an idealistic version of oneself and the roles she fulfills can help alleviate some of this uncertainty. Yet, the variation in the stories told by the mothers in my study suggests that the shifting of the mother role, a part of identity formation, is a creative act.

Same Mom

Seven of the 35 research participants fall into “same mom” category. These mothers claim it is necessary to fulfill all or most of their “normal” mothering roles while they are incarcerated, even though they may not be able to do so. The main characteristic that I use to categorize mothers as same moms is that they do not redefine motherhood during their incarceration period. Of particular interest is that three of the mothers, Renee, Sharon, and Crystal, in this category did not live with all of their children prior to incarceration. Though our conversations, it became apparent that it was thus easier, in some cases, for these women to view their roles as mothers as unchanging, at least with some of their children.

Bonnie: Feeling the Same in a Different World. Some of the “same moms” expressed extreme discontent with their situations *because* they were unable to redefine motherhood while incarcerated. Bonnie is a mother of 3 and grandmother of 1, incarcerated on fraud charges. Prior to incarceration she was very close to all of her children. Her oldest children (ages 20 and 24) had moved out but they were still in close contact. Bonnie’s youngest daughter is 17 and has a 1-year-old baby, both of whom were living with her prior to her incarceration. Bonnie had not changed her perception of what her role should be as a mother during their separation. The disconnection between her perceptions of what she *should* be doing and what she is *actually* able to do proved stressful.

Bonnie told me: “I feel like I can still fix things for them, but if they have a problem, they can’t pick up the phone and call.” We discussed the tough situation of feeling like a mom but being unable to fulfill those roles.

Bonnie said she was lucky that she has so much contact with her children and realizes that many people “lose” their kids through the process of incarceration. She hopes to physically reconnect and become a better mother and grandmother to her children upon release. For the time being, however, she was distraught from feeling like she still needs to be active in their everyday lives, but was unable to do so. Bonnie expressed sadness and remorse for being separated from her children. Even though she could not redefine motherhood while incarcerated, she recognized that it was not possible to fulfill all of her roles. She attributed her ability to deal with such a tough situation on the social support of her family and her boyfriend.

Renee: Holding On Without Contact. Other mothers in the same mom category had more difficulties than Bonnie in grasping the reality of being unable to fulfill those mother roles, largely due to their lack of social support. Renee, a mother of two sons, ages 10 and 14, lost all contact with her family when she entered prison. She received regular visits at the county jail but has not had so much as a phone call or a letter (despite her frequent writing) since she came to KCIW. Even though Renee had no contact with her family, she still had not changed the idea of what it means to be a mother. It was extremely difficult for her to handle the lack of communication with her family and the inability to fulfill any mothering roles for her youngest son, in particular (she had not had custody of her oldest son for years). Renee did not *want* to change her perception of motherhood or her abilities to mother, even though she questions whether or not her decisions as a mother were “right” even before she entered prison. She admits to “smoking tree” and “getting too

fast out there,” which maybe contributed to her not being as “motherly” as she should have been prior to incarceration.

Renee was very emotional when talking about her youngest son, Chad. She was not so perturbed by the lack of contact with her oldest son, Simon, as she had not lived with him for a long time before her incarceration. She admits that she was not very close to Simon because she did not raise him. Therefore, it was not difficult to feel like the “same” mom to her oldest son. But she did live with her youngest son much of the time before she was incarcerated. She was very firm in explaining that even though Chad was living with her sister, Renee still maintained custody. She told me: “Everything in my life, in my mind, is Chad, Chad, Chad.” She said she had no outlet and no one to talk to about her grief about her loss of all contact with her son, particularly when she feels that nothing should have changed. She was searching for any way to get back in touch with her family so she could be a mother to her son.

I had the opportunity to interview Renee twice. She opened up even more during our second meeting. She seemed to be reaching out to me to help her get back in contact with her family; she wanted me to help tell her son how much she loves him and how much better of a mom she can be. I repeatedly explained that I was unable to take on that role in her life. But I still felt like she was trying to reach out to me, to get me on “her side.” She told me: “People talk shit about me. They talk shit about motherhood research [what KCIW named my study]. They say I’m wasting my time talking to you. But they don’t know you. They don’t know.” She seemed to view her “relationship” with me as evidence that she was changing her life to be a new, better person. She intended to completely change her social relationships she had prior to incarceration to help her be a better mother. She was struggling to find “proof” that she was capable and *would be* capable of fulfilling the mothering roles she cannot let go of, even while incarcerated.

Renee continued to open up and express her struggles with reconciling prison realities with her perception of what she should be doing as a mother. She was disgusted with mothers who were able to detach from her children. She told me:

Some of the girls in here are ungrateful bitches. They never talk about their kids. They are always talking about tricks or girlfriends or getting money. They are so ungrateful. But if I could just have one letter or one phone call...I would be grateful...The girls here don't even talk about their kids. Am I missing something here?

Renee's emotions fluctuated from anger at other women to grief over her lack of contact with her son Chad. She contrasted herself with the "bad" moms who did not even want to talk about their children, portraying herself as a better mom because she could not give up her motherhood, despite lack of contact with her children. She was extremely upset about the lack of contact with Chad and was unable to accept that she should have to give up mothering roles while incarcerated.

Renee's story highlights the lack of social contact with children as impediment to one's ability to redefine motherhood. She is stuck in a kind of purgatory, unable to reconcile the past, present, or future. Her difficulties in defining herself as "mother" are indicative of the ambiguous loss she feels. She is confused and unable to understand *why* her family has chosen to break ties with her. She is unsure of exactly what is happening to Chad on a daily basis, which is a source of great distress. For example, is someone else performing the mothering role that she feels she *should* be filling, even behind bars? Ambiguous loss theory notes that people experiencing this type of loss will seek clarity while simultaneously resisting information that could answer their questions due to the fear of the consequences of that knowledge (Boss, 1999). Renee repeatedly bounced from her mistakes to what she did/could do right for Chad. Mothers in the same mom category dealt largely with this

ambiguous loss by staying “stuck” in a specific time, whether it be an actual time period or a romanticized time period created in their mind, where they really were fulfilling dominant roles of motherhood. Boss notes that individuals experiencing ambiguous loss can become “frozen” in time. Same moms exemplify this characteristic of ambiguous loss.

Sharon: Frozen in Time. Sharon is a mother of 5 children by 5 different fathers; 4 of her children were under the age of 18. She also provides an example of becoming frozen in time as a same mom. When she talked about her mothering duties, she talked about them in the present tense, even though she had been at KCIW for over a year and had not seen her family in nearly a year and a half. She writes letters to her children but said that sometimes they do not receive them. She does not speak to them on the phone. When I asked her about parenting in prison, she replied: “I don’t whoop my kids. I do correct my kids.” By speaking of her children from whom she had been separated for an extended period of time as if she were with them at the moment of the interview, Sharon defined motherhood as unchanged for her.

Sharon also talked about knowing that her children love her, miss her, and grieve over their separation. She told me: “As a mother, I know how they feel.” She told me that her kids feel like they have to live with people they don’t know and that she should still be performing her motherly duties. Three of her minor children are with their fathers/step-mothers and one is in a group home. She said she grieves over the physical loss of her children as well as her lack of emotional contact with them. She was adamant that her kids need *both* of their parents. In our second interview, she said that even though she is not there she is still a parent; her kids already know her rules and boundaries and follow them even in her absence. She told me: “You’re a parent and no one can take that a way. You’re a mother—your child is part of you, out of your womb.” Such comments echo Enos’ (2001) findings that incarcerated mothers claim motherhood through both biological and social

ties. Sharon shared with me how difficult it was for her to be in prison because of the separation from her children. She told me that she had been locked up on suicide watch twice because she felt that she had no life without her kids. Being a mother is what defines her and she feels that she has not only been condemned on her charge, but she has been “stomped on, beaten, and had my heart ripped out of my chest” because the prison system has taken away her ability to mother as she said she feels like she still needs to be fulfill mothering roles while incarcerated.

Sandra: The Need to Hold On. Sandra is a “same mom” who became extremely emotional while talking with me about her two children, ages 9 and 18. Her husband cares for them while she is incarcerated. She writes her children often, talks to them on the phone, and also has some visits with them. She enjoys writing and talking, but visiting is difficult for her family. She spoke of the difficulties of visits: contact with her children reminds her of how things *should be* the same, yet they are not.

Sandra has not changed her perception of motherhood while incarcerated. She distinguished herself from mothers who think detaching from their children is acceptable and argued that maintaining her connection to her mother role is beneficial to her rehabilitation: “People who never have anything to do with their kids and someone else is taking care of their children—they say they want to see their kids but they will just come right back here.” Satisfied with her husband as caretaker of their children, she described maintaining the bond with her husband and her children so she will not end up back in prison. She told me that she was like a “momma kitten” with her children, indicating a high level of which she claimed is a crucial part of nurturing and being a good mother. She expressed that the longer she is gone, the more control she is going to lose over her 13-year-old daughter. Noting the difficulties of maintaining control while incarcerated, she offered as an example her wanting her husband to put her daughter on birth control pills,

yet realizing she cannot force him to do so. Sharon was adamant that if she could get out of prison everything would be okay with her family, because she still maintained some control: “I realize the role I played as a mother and how drastically me being gone has affected the kids. Now I could repair things, but it’s going to take longer. The damage becomes permanent that I don’t feel like I can repair it...My family needs me.” Sharon struggled to reconcile her limitations of incarceration with what she considered to be necessary roles as a mother.

Same moms expressed an intense feeling of necessity to fulfill all or most mothering roles while incarcerated and are unable or unwilling to redefine motherhood while incarcerated. They often claim they are the only individuals who can adequately care for their children and that caregivers are inferior, temporary substitutes. Same moms tell a tragic story in which they remain the same mothers, but their carceral circumstances thwart their ability to fulfill all that that role entails.

Modified Mom

Seventeen of the mothers interviewed individually fell in the “modified mom” category. These mothers change the definition of motherhood while incarcerated. Modified moms are challenged to determine exactly how to shift their roles while maintaining some sense of motherhood during the separation period from their children. A common, defining characteristic of modified moms is their decision to not take any part in disciplining their children while they are incarcerated, because they themselves “did something wrong” or for logistical reasons, such as limited contact with caregivers.

Debra: Support to Modify Roles. Debra is a mother with three children, ages 2, 10, and 11. Her children live with her husband and her parents. She gets regular visits from her family, including bonding visits with her youngest child. Bonding visits are only for very

young children and involve time in the chapel, rather than the visitation room. Debra said that she is very thankful she is so close to her husband and her parents, as they support her and help coordinate frequent visits.

Debra said that she is still able to fulfill some aspects of her role as a mother, but not as many as she would like to. Debra told me that it is not fair to discipline her children while she was incarcerated. Indicative of “the re-writing” of the modified mom’s self-story, Debra shared: “You can’t be a parent in prison. You can but you can’t. You can because you can listen, but you can’t because you have to fall back on the caregiver—the caregiver has a lot of power and plays the roles in their daily lives...It’s hard to be a mom for two hours.” Debra said she tries to do more listening and “cutting up” with her kids than anything else. She said she hopes to be able to jump back into her more traditional mothering role upon release and recognizes that her visits and bonding time will be beneficial. Still, she notes that there will be difficult times even after she leaves prison. She wants counseling for the whole family when she gets out of prison because she is sure there will be persistent issues with her kids. For now, she has downgraded her role as a mother to listen and be a sometime companion, without disciplining them or being especially active in their everyday lives.

Patricia: Power of the Caregivers. Patricia offers another example of a mother who has redefined her role as a mother while incarcerated by focusing on allowing caregivers to fulfill many parenting roles in her absence. She is a mother of two sons, ages 8 and 13; this is her second incarceration for drug charges. She lived with both of her children prior to incarceration. While she is away her oldest son’s father is taking care of both of her children. Like Debra, Patricia does not attempt to discipline while she is incarcerated. Instead, she tries to talk her children through tough situations, but only if they choose to share those situations with her. She shared some specific instances of how

she does not tell them right from wrong, like when her oldest son was smoking and she felt that she could not tell him to stop. She said, instead, she offers her sons the opportunity to correct themselves independently. Because of her situation, she said she is not able to “jump on them” because she herself ended up in prison. She said that the caregiver should be correcting them and she hopes he is. Patricia does not tell the caregiver what to do while she is incarcerated, though she did when her children visited him prior to her incarceration.

Patricia stated that she had to change her role as mother because other people are in charge of many of the parenting responsibilities while she is away. The man who is serving as caregiver has a “new woman” and Patricia said that her sons do not like her or respect her: they do not feel like they have to listen to her because she is not their mother. Patricia tells her sons this new woman deserves their respect. She wishes that she could communicate more with her sons’ caregivers. She told me she only received three letters in 3 years and no phone calls at all. She talked of how good the Kids’ Day program is at the prison, but she said that the caregiver will not let the kids participate but she does not know why. Patricia felt like it should be up to both parents to make those decisions. Since the caregivers maintain limited contact with her, she is at a loss to negotiate such things.

Though Patricia had redefined what it meant to be a parent while in prison, she was having difficulties figuring out exactly how to do that and furthermore how she will negotiate her mothering role once she gets out of prison. She told me that she will try to start figuring out how to parent again while she is still incarcerated: she will “try to set up goals and stuff...like school, their favorite color, favorite food, likes, dislikes, favorite toy, sports movies. I will ask so I have a good idea what to do and what to expect when I get out.” Talking to her kids was key to this plan for change.

Tanya: Generations of Separation. Tanya has had to redefine her roles as a mother *and* a grandmother since she has been incarcerated. She had been at KCIW

approximately 9 months at the time of our interview. She spoke of the different roles she now plays in the lives of her children and grandchildren. She said she has to accept that she can no longer control things in the daily lives of her family as she once did. Tanya told me she is consumed with worry and focused, in the interview, on the change in roles.

Tanya has two daughters, ages 16 (Alicia) and 18 (Tara), and each daughter has a child of her own, ages 2 and 1 respectively. Prior to incarceration, Alicia and the 2-year-old were both living with Tanya. Now Alicia has her own apartment, which Tanya said, if she were home, she would not be on her own. As she modifies her mothering role while in prison, she spoke of having to accept such changes. Tanya's family lives 398 miles from the prison and she does not get visits often, about once per month. She talks on the phone often, mostly to Alicia.

I asked Tanya specifically what was challenging about being a parent in prison. She referenced issues of discipline, but in a different way than the other mothers with whom I spoke. She concentrated on not wanting her 2-year-old granddaughter to be disciplined when she is not there. Tanya told me: "I worry about them constantly. Especially with the grandbaby. I catch myself telling my daughter not to make the baby cry—telling her not to discipline. It hurts to see them cry. It's worse since I've been here because I don't know if they are okay or why they are crying—my first response is 'What did you do to her?' Because I can't see her. I don't know." Tanya recognized that there is a disconnection between what she *wants* to be able to do as a mother and a grandmother and what is *possible* from prison. Despite the fact that she still wishes she could fulfill roles such as taking care of Alicia and her child, she said she recognizes that she must let go of some roles because of the distance between them. She realizes that she needs to let Alicia parent on her own while Tanya is in prison.

Tanya has not only changed her ideas of mothering roles while she is incarcerated, she has changed her whole perception of what she is going to do even when prison life is behind her. She says the experience of incarceration has taught her to appreciate her children and grandchildren even more than she did before. As a result, she does not want to have to do the tough mothering—like disciplining. Instead, she wants to concentrate on spoiling her children and grandchildren to make up for lost time. She still talks of herself as a mother and a grandmother, but she talks about all of the changes she has made and will make upon release.

Marie: Innovative Parenting. Marie differed from the other mothers in my sample in two ways: she was pregnant and she was a county inmate being housed at KCIW because of crowding problems. Her due date was approximately 2 months away at the time of our meeting (she was hoping to be released from jail/prison within a couple of weeks) and she also had a 10-year-old son. She did not talk very much about her pregnancy or her unborn child, other than to tell me that she was having a boy and that it is tough being pregnant while incarcerated. She spoke mostly about her 10-year-old son. He is staying with her mother; Marie signed over legal rights of her son to her mother in 2009. His father has been in prison his whole life but was recently released. Marie told me that county inmates are not allowed to participate in the KCIW programs, not even the parenting classes despite the fact that she wants to work on her parenting skills while she is at KCIW. Since she could not take the classes, she went to the library and checked out a book. She said the name of the book was “something like ‘The Mother you Want to Be’ or ‘The Mother you are Supposed to Be’” and it had questions at the end. She answered them and then sent the questions to her son through the mail for him to answer and she told him to be honest. They were able to communicate about her situation through that correspondence. She told me that just being

able to talk to him is helpful. She wants to work on having more open communication with her son while incarcerated to keep her bond with him.

Marie has searched for innovative ways to parent while incarcerated, including through the aforementioned “discussion” based on the parenting book. Yet, she has also modified her parenting, for example by allowing her mother more freedom and control over her son’s life. Her relationship with her mother has been troubled in the past, which she said she does not want that to negatively affect her son. Marie told me she has not asked her mother for any help while she has been incarcerated. For example, she did not ask her mother to pay her bond to get her out before Christmas, even though she thinks her mother would have paid it. She was worried that she would argue with her mother if she went home and she did not want to do that in front of her son and take the chance of ruining her son’s Christmas.

Though Marie had a somewhat non-traditional relationship with her son prior to incarceration, since her mother has legal custody, she has still had to redefine her mother role while incarcerated. Prior to being in jail/prison, she was still active in the daily happenings for her son; her mother allowed her some responsibility as a mother. Now that she is away, she has had to redefine what it means to parent, even from her previous, non-traditional role. She has decided that she will not try to interfere with her mother’s rules for her son. She has also decided that it is best not to ask her mother for help herself, as it could jeopardize her son’s happiness. Despite the change in roles, Marie still considers herself a mother, just a modified version of the mother she is in the free world.

To summarize, modified moms take the position that they can perform some roles as mothers, but those roles change while they are incarcerated. Certain contradictions follow this shift in roles, which stem from ambiguous loss these mothers are experiencing. To deal with ambiguous loss, modified moms change the way they define their families and

their roles as mothers within those families. As with family crisis (discussed in Chapter 5), boundaries within the family can no longer be maintained and customary roles and tasks can no longer be performed: modified mothers recognize this shift. For modified moms, motherhood itself must change during incarceration. They search for and hold on to any way to perform some parenting roles while incarcerated. The process of redefining *how* to hold on to motherhood during incarceration and then putting those tactics in to practice is an ongoing process.

Detached Mom

Eleven of the mothers I interviewed individually were of the “detached mom” type. These mothers fulfill minimal or no mothering roles during incarceration and change their definition of motherhood to support this inaction. They cite a variety of reasons for their detachment: their children are grown; it is too difficult to think about their children from behind bars; the need to focus on their own recovery; and the inability to actively parent while incarcerated. Interestingly, only one mother in this category lived with all of her children prior to incarceration. The mothers in this group also cited difficulties in parenting prior to incarceration because of separation from their children, in contrast to the mothers who did not live with their children in the same mom category who still felt like mothers who could perform their mothering roles while incarcerated. My interviews with detached moms, on average, were shorter than the interviews with the other categories of mothers, most likely because my questions centered around mothering and these women did not consider themselves to fulfill many, or any, mothering roles while incarcerated. Nonetheless, all detached moms still considered themselves mothers.

Jane: A History of Incarceration. Jane is a 51 year-old mother of one 33 year-old son. She told me she had been incarcerated a total of four times, beginning in 1986, though

some of her later comments suggested that she may have had an even longer incarceration history. At the time of our interview, she had been at KCIW for nearly 1 year with about 13 years left on her current sentence. Jane's son was serving his second incarceration. The last time she saw her son was approximately 2 years prior. They were in the same jail and had the same court date; they only saw each other in passing. Now, her main form of communication is in the form of letters. She writes her son a few times per week. Jane told me that her son followed in her footsteps; he has been incarcerated most of the time since his 18th birthday and he was frequently in trouble with the law in his youth. Because of his behavior and Jane's troubles, her son was placed in a group home until he turned eighteen.

Jane's relationship with her son had a level of detachment for many years. She did not live with him consistently when he was a child because of her incarceration and his placement in a group home. Since her son turned 18 he and Jane were only out of jail or prison at the same time for about 6 months. She had some contact with him but not very much. When I asked her what she thought pushed her son to follow in her path, Jane told me: "Maybe the attention I wasn't giving him. I was always incarcerated or on drugs and alcohol. He was acting out for attention." She said the first time she was incarcerated her son did not even know what was happening because he was too young. The second time, when he was about 7 years old, he understood and was allowed to come to the Kids' Day at KCIW. She said she had no help or support with her son when he was younger and had not participated in any programs for family at the prison since Kids' Day when her son was young.

Whereas Jane spoke of having detached from fulfilling parenting roles beginning when her son was a child, she steadfastly considered herself to still be his mother. I asked her if she had any advice for mothers with young children, reflecting on her past experiences. She said: "Try to lead a nicer, gooder—good life. You are setting an example

for kids, I think. A lot of kids want to be like their mom or dad...and it's not always good."

Jane believed that her failure to fulfill the traditional duties of mother, either because of incarceration, drug use, or their separation when her son was in a group home, did not keep her son from looking up to her as a role model. She would like improve her relationship with her son, but at present remains detached from him as a mother, communicating only through letters and attempting friendship above all.

Holly: Personal Priorities. Holly is a mother of two children, ages 11 and 14. She writes her children and they write her back on a regular basis. Her brother and sister-in-law take care of her children while she was incarcerated. Holly cannot talk to her children on the phone because the caregivers will not let her. Holly's family says that she can talk to her children after she fully achieves sobriety. Holly's parents, who have a good relationship with her brother and sister-in-law, are also against her speaking to her children while incarcerated. Holly says that her parents still treat her like she is 10 and she recognizes that she is not especially mature. Holly said she understands she needs to work on her own growth including her recovery from drug addiction before she takes on more of a mothering role to her children.

I asked Holly about parenting in prison. She does not feel that parents can or should attempt to parent from prison. Holly is serving time for her fourth incarceration, this time on drug charges, and reflected on her previous experiences as a mother behind bars. She shared:

People try to parent from prison and it's just not effective. When I first went to prison, 10 years ago, my kids were younger. A lot of other moms try to parent from here. I tried to tell my husband to do this and that and how to fix my kids' hair that first time. But at the time, I had my priorities mixed up. In lieu of working on my

drug addiction, I focused on what was going on at home. It robbed my kids' father of the opportunity to be a father.

Now, she is focusing on recovery and allowing her children's caregivers to do the daily parenting.

Holly's children will not live with her immediately following her incarceration. They will continue to stay with her brother and sister-in-law while she continues to work on staying sober in the free world. Holly expressed that she was content with that situation. She told me her kids' situation was unique compared to most children with incarcerated mothers. They live in a nice neighborhood and go to private school. No one else whom they interact with has an incarcerated parent, nor are many people in the neighborhood divorced: "I did not come from a family where this type of thing happened. No one else abuses drugs. And my parents are still together."

Holly is currently detached from her children, but still considers herself a mother. She hopes to get counseling both individually and as a family when she gets out of prison. Through counseling and taking reunification with her children slowly, she hopes to be a better mother who will not return to prison.

Jill: Working for a Better Future. Similar to Holly, Jill is focusing on her recovery so that she can be a better parent in the future. Jill has 4 children by 4 different men, 2 girls (ages 10 and 8) and two teenage boys. Her older daughter was 2 and the younger was 6 months old the last time she saw them, 8 years ago. She said since then she has been locked up or high, but she always loved them and she continues to think about them every day. They are with their fathers and she has no contact with them. She does have contact with her sons, but she does not fulfill any type of mothering role with them while she is incarcerated.

Jill had not lived with her children prior to this incarceration so she was used to withdrawal from the typical mothering role. But Jill was extremely insistent that she *is* still their mother. While she regrets involving her kids in her mistakes and feels dealing with her addiction would have been easier without her kids, there is a reason that they are in her life—to push her to be a better person: she is “ready for virtue instead of vices.” Jill wants to be a good example for her children and rebuild the bond with them. In order to be a better mother, first, she said, she has to forgive herself. When I asked her what was the most challenging part of being an incarcerated mother, Jill shared:

For myself, letting go of what I’ve done. And forgiveness. Letting go of how terrible of a job I did with them [the kids]. But I love them. I have four kids by four different men—it comes with the lifestyle... I abused drugs. Not my children... I sleep better at night knowing I’ve done this time [in prison]. It’s a done deal. I’ve enrolled in school... My regrets are motivating.

Jill also shared how hard it is to not know what is going on with her older son since he is in foster care but she has come to believe that things just have to be that way for now. She told me: “Rome wasn’t built in a day. It’s going to take time for me to make full change and for others to know, see it, and believe it.” In the meantime, she wants to leave the past behind and turn into the mother she wants to be. She reasoned: “Everything has to change. Even the way we talk.” She wants to be in the lives of all of her children again. She told me that because she continues to work on overcoming her drug addiction, “good things will happen.”

A major source of stress is having her son in state custody, but Jill says she is working to fully recover so the social worker in charge of him will know that she really has changed. She knows that is going to be difficult because it is hard to believe she can be a good mother since she has been in and out of jail and prison so much. But she says she is

still going to work really hard to prove that she is capable of being a good mother. She shared: “I can’t wait to say one day, ‘you know what, social worker? You can go do your work somewhere else. We don’t need you anymore.’” But for the time being, Jill said she is content being detached from her children, knowing better things are possible in the future if she focuses on her own recovery. She said that in order to change for the better, she must let others take on the responsibility of taking care of her children while she is getting better.

Bree: A Focus on Recovery. Bree shared another story of detaching from mothering roles to focus on recovery. She has been at KCIW for 5 years of her 14-year sentence. She has three children who are all over the age of 18. Bree had a strong relationship with all of her children before her incarceration. She was very soft-spoken as she shared her experiences as an incarcerated mother. When she was first incarcerated, her children were still minors. Her son, however, was the only one who lived with her. Her two daughters were already married so they lived with their husbands and children. Her son went into state care. Bree did not want to ask her mother to take custody of him because she was worried it would be too much for her to handle.

Bree told me: “If you get caught up in free-world drama, it knocks you down.” She says she feels disconnected in prison—she recognizes that she really is disconnected and she is working to embrace that reality and build her life around that, since she has such a long sentence. She said every mother has to find the right balance for herself, but for her, she thinks separating herself from the free world is necessary—and it might help other mothers, too. She told me that she sees other inmates calling home every day and she thinks that makes things worse because no matter how much you talk on the phone, you are not really in your family’s life while in prison. In addition to it being difficult on the women, she said she knows it is hard on the families on the outside.

Bree told me she was working on her own recovery. She said she thinks being honest with herself is the way to do that. She has learned a lot during her time at KCIW and says she would like to help other mothers who have been in prison. When I asked her what she would share with mothers first arriving in prison, she said:

You have to really take a look at yourself and dig deep. It's hard. But you have to be honest with yourself. Believe everything happens for a reason. This is to wake me up and take a harder, deeper look at myself. Look at things in the world that were important to me... Positive nature is what I would share. Girls ask how to deal with this—it's a work in progress. It took me 18 months to start to figure that out.

People want to send you to a psychiatrist to put you on an antidepressant. I don't need drugs to deal with reality. I see young girls and I know what they are doing. I was an RN before—I know. I think it could help for people to find positive parts of this instead of dwelling on the negative.

Part of that negative that she referred to is the separation from your kids. She called it “disconnection.” It is inevitable when you are incarcerated. She told me that her first 18 months she was incarcerated she tried to be a mom in the free world. She said: “But I liked to have drove myself silly” trying to do that. Because, in reality, when you get off the phone, you are still in prison and they are still in the free world. She admits that it is tough to accept this disconnection, but using that time to work on herself—to deal with her addiction and how that addiction hurt other people—is important if she is going to be good to her children on the other side of incarceration. In order to focus on yourself, Bree suggests, letting go of what you cannot control on the outside, including trying to be the mother you were before incarceration.

Carla and Jocelyn: Out of Sight, Out of Mind. Detached moms commonly cited the pain of thinking about what they cannot do as parents as motivation to detach from their

mother role during incarceration. Carla and Jocelyn, both mothers of two children, find that thinking too much about their children and/or attempting to be active parents in their children's lives impedes their recoveries and makes the time apart even more difficult. Carla told me that even when the caregivers send pictures of her kids, she puts them away and tries to block out thinking about them. She told me: "It's sick. I think it's sick to think like that—to try and block your kids out. But if you think about what's going on outside of here, it will drive you nuts!" Jocelyn echoes these ideas: she said "out-of-sight, out-of-mind" is easier when it comes to her kids. Yet, Jocelyn still wrote her children weekly to combat her fears that her children might come to think she has forgotten about them. Jocelyn said she fully intends to jump into her mother role after incarceration, thinking about what she is unable to do for her children because of her incarceration is just too painful. She told me that detaching from her children is a coping mechanism; it keeps her from sitting around and crying all day because of the loss and the pain it produces.

In summary, detached moms participate in minimal or no parenting while they are incarcerated, but they still consider "mother" as a master status (Hughes, 1945). As the stories above illustrate, these mothers often struggled against the idea that they cannot parent—but, eventually, they did arrive at the position that parenting is not possible during incarceration. Claire sums up a major theme for detached moms: "I don't see how you can parent in prison when you don't have a child to parent to." Detached moms, like Jill and Bree, made the choice to work on their recovery instead of focusing on parenting their children, which they viewed as necessary to become *better* mothers.

My findings on detached moms support Owen's (1998) ideas that incarcerated women are often torn between dealing with their individual circumstances in prison and responsibilities to families in the free world. Strong connections to the outside world can complicate daily life for incarcerated mothers. Detached mothers expressed the same pain

and grief over the loss of their children and their identities as mothers as do other types of mothers. Yet, they deal with it by focusing on themselves and not worrying themselves, or attempting to minimize worry, about what is happening outside of prison. Dealing with parenting responsibilities impedes their recovery. Detached moms also exemplify a specific element of family crisis: they are experiencing a shift in focus from the family to the individual. Most of these mothers were active, in some form, in at least some of their children's lives prior to incarceration. Having entered prison, they shifted their focus away from family.

Summary

In this chapter, I extend my earlier discussion of ambiguous loss with a typology of mothering definitions, based on the mother role. Mothers express a sense of loss and guilt related to the loss of their children and their abilities to mother. They (re)create conceptions of motherhood to deal with that ambiguous loss. In this quest, mothers tell stories of how they mother from prison, based on how they have (re)defined their roles as mother. Each category of mother tackles the realities of ambiguous loss in a unique way. In the next chapter, I build on these findings by exploring the main, specific coping strategies incarcerated mothers from these categories use to preserve motherhood amidst ambiguous loss.

Chapter 7

Coping With Ambiguous Loss: Controlling Role Performances

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the various coping strategies my research participants used to preserve the perception of adequate role performances as good mothers. Whereas the focus of Chapter 6 was *role shift*, the focus of this chapter is proving motherhood with evidence of *satisfactory role performances*. Enos (2001) borrows that distinction from Erving Goffman to distinguish the mother *role* that encompasses the standard activities for motherhood by societal standards from the *role performances*, which are undertaken to enact the mother role. For incarcerated mothers, role performances, or stories about those performances, allow mothers manage or prove motherhood even while absent from the daily lives of their children. The ambiguity of the loss of motherhood among inmates allows for creativity in their performances as mothers. My research participants used the coping strategies discussed in this chapter to hold onto and gain control of motherhood while incarcerated.

Enos (2001) also suggests that mothers claim motherhood through a variety of coping mechanisms during incarceration, citing biological connections, mother-child relationships, and by suggesting that only a mother can adequately take care of her children. The 25 mothers in her study worked to balance crime, drugs, and motherhood by professing identities they thought suggestive of being good mother. In this chapter, I add to Enos' results and my findings in Chapters 5 and 6 by describing specific ways the incarcerated mothers in my sample coped with ambiguous loss to hold on to motherhood, even when roles associated with being a mother were shifted due to incarceration: (1) the

idea of mature and smart children, (2) the idea that people and deeds are separable, (3) problematizing motherhood by changing its meaning, and (4) turning to religion. With the exception of redefining motherhood, which was not utilized by same moms, participants from all categories of mothers discussed in Chapter 6 (same mom, modified mom, detached mom) utilized all of these coping mechanisms, albeit in different ways.

The coping strategies used by my research participants suggest a paradoxical sense of control and lack of control in their lives. Women take control by socially constructing definitions of their children (mature/smart), themselves (separating deviant deeds from themselves as good mothers), and the institution of motherhood (changing the definition of what it means to mother), which fit their needs to preserve motherhood while incarcerated. In addition, some women used a very different tactic that suggests the recognition of a lack of control over their fate, religion. Through religion they found a “positive” reason to relinquish control over their fates as individual mothers. Below, I first cite evidence that my research participants lacked control in their lives, before and during incarceration. I then explore each of the coping mechanisms, providing examples for ways in which incarcerated mothers used these strategies to preserve their claims to motherhood by taking control, socially constructing definitions of children, themselves, and motherhood and relinquishing control to a higher power.

Lack of Control

My research participants expressed a lack of control in their lives over drug use/abuse, abuse by men or other family members, and in the confines of prison. All of these elements of a lack of control in their lives were discussed in a negative connotation and were beyond the realm of being able to adequately stop the negative consequences from each. Some of my research participants shared with me their experiences of abuse

(physically, sexually, or emotionally) by their own parents and/or the men in their lives. Many had lived childhoods and adult lives plagued by poverty. Many of the women in my sample were incarcerated on drug charges. Many had family histories of drugs. For example, Jill talked about her mother and grandmother being addicted to heroin (as she was)—both her mother and her grandmother overdosed, 20 years apart. Her mother actually overdosed while incarcerated. She explained that her husband and his family members had also all been in prison. She recognized how family history plays a role in how she constructed her own life. Jill said: “My family life was horrible growing up, and you see how I turned out.” She noted she had no control over her difficult past, but by doing better things now, she might be able to gain control over her future, including being able to reunite with her children.

Incarcerated mothers commonly experienced abuse and neglect by their own parents. Women disclosed a variety of physical, mental, and sexual abuse from parents and other family members growing up as well as by men in their lives. Brandy was an extreme case whose life encompassed each of these experiences. Brandy has two children; she is missing her two front teeth. She explained to me how her parents were very neglectful when she was young and then put her up for adoption at age 11. She was never adopted and grew up in the foster care system. She still knows who her parents are, but they have not been a part of her life. She also admitted that she had made “poor decisions” (drug use) that landed her in prison. I asked her if she thought that her problems with her parents had anything to do with her bad decisions, to which she responded: “My life and growing up...my uncle raped me. My dad abused me. I’ve been neglected my whole life...Now I have abandonment issues...Now I’m an adult and I know right from wrong but it’s all still a part of me.” She went on to explain how she has had many abusive relationships. Brandy told me that her ex-boyfriend knocked out her two front teeth when he was drunk. She looked

down and her voice lowered, as if she was ashamed to tell me that she has no insurance and no money, but she knows she needs to get them fixed. Brandy did tell me that she was not going to give up on living a better life, but still expressed difficulties gaining control over her life because of a difficult past.

As discussed in Chapter 2, incarcerated mothers face a situation of double jeopardy. These mothers are upheld to unrealistic standards of motherhood in general, often amidst abuse and difficulties prior to incarceration, and then are subject to additional scrutiny as they violate the rule of law and end up in prison. These women are accustomed to a lack of power and control when they enter prison. Then, once they enter prison, they have little control over their lives because of the confines and restrictions of prison itself. Women spoke of this experience as a continuation of a lack of control over their lives. When I asked Tanya, a mother of two and grandmother of two, what she considered the most frustrating part of being in prison, she told me: "I can't get out any faster. No matter what I do. I can't get to them [her children and grandchildren] any faster. They [the prison staff] set the rules, tell me when I can go home. Even with classes, they set the day. People want SAPP [Substance Abuse Prevention Program]. You have to wait 1 year but you can't get out of here until you complete it." She said she was worried that her grandchildren will not remember her and discussed her lack of control in dealing with her family because of being in prison.

In my first group interview, the mothers talked about a loss of control in various aspects of their lives because of prison. One mother was upset that she could not even get away from the horrors of prison through the mail. She was visibly frustrated and commented: "And if you write 'em, it's stamped jail mail!" Other mothers echoed her sentiments during that interview. Some were very frustrated with the staff members. At the end of this meeting, I asked if there was anything else they would like to share and one

mother said to me: “They need to have programs for officers. They treat us bad. They need to work with the public like you work with the public. They call us names and treat us horrible.” Another mother echoed with: “some officers make inmates act like wild animals.” The conversation turned to the pattern of abuse and lack of control both inside and outside of prison. One mother said: “We dealt with child molestation, rape, abuse.” Another mother added: “I was beat for 17 years.” An older member of this group brought the group together commenting, “We were abused out there. We are abused in here.” These conversations consistently had an undertone of frustration with the lack of control over their own worlds.

Pam, a mother of two children under the age of 10, told me that the biggest challenge she faces was “not being able to see them [her kids] and missing out on all the little things they do growing up. Knowing someone else is out there raising your kids—that’s something you’re supposed to be doing.” Other mothers shared this challenge, while many worried their children would not remember them and their lack of control over that process. In my second group interview, mothers questioned whether or not their children would even know who they are, whether they would know that they are actually their mothers, and whether or not they would have any respect from their children as their mothers. They said this process of possibly losing their children was beyond their realm of control. Instead, it was the “system” which held the power. I found the coping mechanisms the women used to navigate ambiguous loss to be indicative of my research participants’ search for control over their own lives, particularly motherhood.

Advanced Kids

One of the most common sentiments, used by 16 of the research participants, was that their children were smart and advanced beyond their age; same moms, modified moms, and detached moms all used this strategy in a variety of ways. Same moms were more

likely to use this strategy to note that there is no need to be in the daily lives of their children physically, because their children can handle things on their own, as they are advanced beyond their biological ages. Modified moms used the same rationale to convey the point that it was okay for them to have a different, modified role as mother. Detached moms used this strategy to suggest one of two things: (1) that their children's need for a mother had passed or (2) that the mothers themselves could detach to work on their own problems. Many of the mothers indicated that their children had grown up very fast because of their intelligence and/or because of their situation of having a mother who was incarcerated. Some of the women, even with younger kids, indicated that they viewed their children more as friends, and talked to and treated them as such. Some women recognized both benefits and problems with this idea.

Claire, who was a detached mom with two daughters ages 14 and 21, was adamant that she had been a good mother (despite her drug use and her involvement in selling drugs) but that her children were "pretty much grown" so she did not need to be as active in parenting in their lives anymore. She described purposefully how open she had been with her daughters, throughout their lives, about her drug addiction and the importance of explaining drug use to children. "How can they understand it if they don't hear about it?" She suggested that her children were mature enough to handle such conversations. When talking about her older daughter, she said she was her "love child" and was with her every step of the way in her active addiction. She always felt like her older daughter could handle the reality of the situation, suggesting this child was mature enough to be her friend from a very young age. Her older daughter even participated in drug use with her. Claire commented: "I didn't like her doing meth, but she could handle the pot smoking and the drinking." Through such statements, she spoke of her older daughter's maturity throughout her life and how, once she was a teenager, Claire did not have to actively parent—she could

be more of a friend. Claire was insistent that even her 14-year-old daughter was grown and, thus, able to get by without Claire's presence in her life.

Kim, a modified mom of two sons ages 9 and 17, was incarcerated on drug charges. She shared her feeling that her incarceration helped her older son to grow up: "[My oldest son] went into Kohl's and stole some money...because he didn't have any money. He didn't get any charges. He used to be afraid to do things...but this [my incarceration] has made him grow up...so that's beneficial." She said she believes he is growing up even more because of their separation and this will only make him a stronger man. Kim said she had made mistakes as a parent: "I don't deserve to be here for the drugs but I deserve to be here for the things I did as a mom...I deserve 6 years... You can't really be a good mom if you are on drugs...no matter how you try to cover it." Kim's recognition of her mistakes as a mother coupled with her praise of her son for "growing up" by stealing illuminate how some mothers use coping strategies to deal with mixed emotions and find benefits of their incarceration for their children. "Motherhood" helped Kim endure as she accepted her incarceration as punishment not for drug activity, but rather for her failures as a mother.

Catherine, a modified mom incarcerated multiple times over the past 10 years for drug charges, has three sons in their 20s. She offered a unique retrospective view on parenting in prison and her children's reactions. She said that she thought it was beneficial for her oldest two sons as it toughened them, but then she and her husband babied her youngest son because she felt guilty for her situation. Her youngest son is currently incarcerated which Catherine much regrets. She talked of the benefits of her older sons growing up faster and the detrimental effects of not growing up fast enough including not learning consequences on her youngest son. Catherine said her oldest son has opened up to her and been the spokesperson for the children. He once told her: "Do you not think it [her incarceration] hurt us [her children], too?" Catherine said she does feel guilty for what her

children have had to endure, but still sees value in her older children being forced to grow up so fast that they have become mature and responsible adults.

Not all women viewed treatment of their children as friends or adults in a completely positive light. Renee, a same mom, expressed mixed emotions about treating her youngest son, currently age 10, as a friend and an adult since he was about 4 years old. She talked about being absent from her son's life for nearly 7 years during previous incarcerations. She said it makes her feel guilty, but she always remained close with him. She told a story of a fight she had with her younger son:

He bucked up on me one night like he was grown and said he wanted to go live with his aunt Kel...I said fine and...got him in the car. Then he apologized the whole way over there and said he didn't want to go but I made him go...I wanted to teach him a lesson....[After he was gone] it messed me up real bad. I didn't have my best friend.

Renee reflected on their relationship and the mistakes she says she made: "Maybe I shouldn't have treated him so grown up." She said acting like he was more grown up gave her an excuse to get "too fast out there" and neglect him. Still, she held the perception that he is mature beyond his years: though difficult, he handled the way she treated him in a mature manner.

The common thread across the women who emphasized their children's maturity is that such suggestions were used to excuse and even render useful the mothers' separation due to incarceration. Since they view their minor children as adult-like, they surmise that the children may not need as much parenting as others. Some women, such as Renee, indicate some sense that treating young children as adults may be harmful, yet they go back and forth on the topic, suggesting confusion despite the need to validate their actions. Such confusion is a symptom of ambiguous loss. The women have physically lost their children and are attempting to navigate prison life and redefine themselves as mothers in the

absence of their children. Another way that these women talk about themselves, in what comes across as a coping mechanism, is to separate themselves from their crimes in positive ways. Below, I explore the idea being a good person and mother, despite being incarcerated, as illustrated by my interviews.

“I’m still a good mom.”

Owen (1998) found that many incarcerated mothers proclaim they are good mothers despite the actions that resulted in their incarcerations. In Enos’ (2001) study, incarcerated mothers shared that specific types of crime (like property crime, drug use) did not conflict with motherhood, and could even support motherhood. Similarly, my research participants overwhelmingly expressed the sentiment that they were still good mothers, despite having been convicted of a crime. Fourteen of them explicitly made this assertion through stories offering anecdotal evidence that they were still good moms. Mothers who used this strategy repeatedly told me that they did not want outsiders to view them as bad people, explaining to me that they were not like the women criminals seen on television. They often defined either the type of crime they committed as a relatively non-serious crime or no crime at all or their specific act for which they were convicted as something they did for the good of their children. They expressed the idea that people and deeds are separable, at least in their individual cases. They expressed love for their families, particularly their children. One respondent, Jill, a detached mom, explained to me: “I abused drugs, not my children.” Another mother, Sandra, a same mom, commented: “What I did doesn’t define who I am.” Both were common sentiments among women incarcerated for drug crimes. I highlight three main, recurrent themes the research participants used to suggest they were still good mothers: drug addicts are not bad people, the “I did it for my

kids” explanation for breaking the law, and children’s successes as evidence of being a “good” mother.

Drug Addicts are Not Bad People. Twelve of the 35 women I interviewed individually were incarcerated for drug-related crimes. Many of the other research participants, though convicted of other crimes, admitted to drug use. Some of them spoke of the negative aspects of drug use and some admitted that they liked doing drugs. Either way they tended to assert that drug users are not bad people. Many of them described themselves, literally, as being sick (i.e. Jocelyn, mother of 2; Jill, mother of 4; Catherine, mother of 2) and needing help, not punishment. Others talked about what they considered to be general traits of drug addicts. For example, Julie, a modified mom of two teenaged sons, told me: “I think drug addicts are more apt to want to help people.” She shared with me how she wanted to work with “old people” but because of her history of criminal convictions, she would not be able to do so once she gets out of prison and this made her sad and depressed. She repeated the idea that drug addicts are not inherently bad people and they love their kids—unlike people who perpetrate “worse” crimes such as murder or child molestation.

All women convicted of drug crimes attested that their drug involvement had nothing to do with their love for their children. Catherine, a modified mom with three adult sons, shared with me her thoughts on the differences between drug addicts and “the others” who were at KCIW. She told me that drug addicts are not criminals like other women incarcerated at the prison. Made this comparison in regard to parenting:

The ones of us who are drug addicts love our kids more than anything in the world...Drug addiction keeps us from being the parents we want to be....I have a friend who has been in the system a long time and we both feel the same way about our children. We love them, but we are drug addicts.

She largely blamed the prison for many of her problems in dealing with family and reintegrating to the outside world, giving the impression that her prison time stood in the way of her parenting as much as if not more so, than her drug use by commenting: “If you didn’t have problems before you got here, you will after you’ve been here!” She focused on what she did right as a mother, as evidenced by her well-adjusted children.

Other mothers did not evaluate their crimes as good or bad but rather focus on how their drug involvement had no impact on how they felt about their children. Claire is a detached mom who had manufactured methamphetamine. She said she would text her children every day to tell them that she loved them. They were often separated because she would make sure her younger daughter had a safe place to stay while she was using drugs. And, when they were together, she would sing her daughters songs like “You are so Beautiful to Me.” She provided many examples of providing for her children even when they were living elsewhere because of her drug involvement. She shared with me how when she was “away” she stayed close enough to see her kids get off the bus, and if she bought \$40 worth of groceries for the place where she was staying, she would get \$40 worth of groceries for the home where her daughters were staying. Claire considered herself a good mother because she voluntarily separated herself from her children, making sure she had a safe place for her younger child to go—away from the place where she was manufacturing methamphetamine. She was adamant that she fulfilled her roles as a mother by providing a safe home and financial support for her children—through the income from her drug sales. Her participation in illegal activities in no way negated her status as a *good* mother.

“I did it for my kids.” Many women were insistent that they had committed their crimes for their kids. For example, Crystal, a same mom and mother of four, had previously been incarcerated on drug charges, after which she lived in a halfway house until mid-2010.

She violated her probation by leaving the halfway house to see her daughter graduate from high school. At the time of our interview, she had been incarcerated for 2 years and repeatedly told me she was in prison only because she loves her daughter—and would be out of prison still if her daughter had not been so important to her that she broke the law to see her graduate. Crystal shared: “She’s my life...I would do just about anything for my daughter... You’re talking to a woman who got an escape charge and ended up back in here just to be with my daughter.” She presented her actions as positive evidence that she is a good mother despite her conviction and return to prison.

Rhonda, a modified mom, has four children and is incarcerated on drug charges. When I asked her what would help people have a better family life when they leave prison, she told me that employment is a problem and if good employment is not available, mothers will sell drugs in order to provide for their children. She explained the situation that landed her in prison:

We grew weed, and uh, sold it, and uh, was trafficking methamphetamine, so that’s why I’m here...The one reason I started selling drugs was because I had twins and their dad didn’t want to help me. So I started selling drugs. I’d still work but if I’d worked two jobs I’d never ever seen my kids. I would work a job and then do that [sell drugs] on the side and pay the bills. Their dad never did anything—he only paid child support for a year and a half. I should have done something legal...That’s one of my biggest worries when I get out of here [trying to find a legal job].

Though her actions were criminal, according to Rhonda, those actions did not affect the fact that she loved her children and provided well for them. In fact, her participation in selling marijuana and trafficking methamphetamine was beneficial, from her perspective, to her children: it allowed her enough money to take care of them *and* spend time with them.

Ten of the women I interviewed individually were incarcerated for fraud. These mothers, too, often explained their crimes by focusing on what good they did for their children. Bonnie, a detached mom and mother of three, misused her corporate credit card. She had previously been incarcerated in a county jail for the original charge and was at KCIW for the first time for falling behind on her restitution. She explained how she had to make the choice between paying the restitution or taking care of her kids and their home as she only had a limited amount of money. She chose her family, choosing to provide food for her kids and pay the mortgage instead of paying the restitution she was court-ordered to pay. So, even though what she did was against the rules of her probation, she made what she considered to be the best decision for her family.

Tamara is a modified mom with four children. She was incarcerated previously for fraud and drug charges. She explained: "I wrote bad checks and stolen checks. But I spent it [the money from the stolen checks] on my kids. It was a bad thing to steal, but I used it for good [on the kids]." Regardless of the fact that she ended up in prison, Tamara proclaimed her abilities as a good mother. Even when she participated in criminal activities, she said she had the well being of her children at heart.

Children's Successes. The success of children offered proof for many of my research participants that they were good mothers: if their children turned out okay, their parenting must have been sufficient. Sharon, a same mom and mother of four children under the age of 18, repeatedly discussed how advanced, grown, and successful her children are and how well they are doing. She says in relation to there successes: "I gotta be doing something right somewhere, or my kids wouldn't have gotten this far." Some mothers, such as Julie, talked about the successes of their children as proof that their crimes did not negatively impact their mothering abilities. Julie consistently referred to her oldest son's achievements in Basic Training for the National Guard as evidence that she was not a bad

mother. She told me: “My 19 year-old son is everything I want to be. His love is so unconditional...but I do feel guilty because he loves me regardless [of her crime and drug addiction].” She noted how she worried about sending her son mail stamped “prison mail” because she did not want to embarrass him. Nonetheless, his successes suggest that she was still a good mom, despite what she called her “demon of addiction.” His successes prove her success as a mother, as does his continued love.

Julie offered evidence that her incarcerations helped her oldest son become successful in adulthood. I specifically asked her what ways she thought her situation when he son was younger made him successful. She told me: “He manned up. He had to. He grew up and took care of my younger son. He felt like the man in the family—he’s very driven. Now, he is physically breaking records in training for the National Guard. He can do 68 push-ups in a minute...I look for him to be a Green Beret.” Julie admitted that she had done bad things through her drug addiction, giving her son “an example of what not to be.” However, she still suggested that the experience of her son going through her incarcerations made him a stronger person and has driven him to do better in his own life, putting him at an advantage over his peers.

Clarissa, a modified mom with three children, echoed Julie in discussing the successes of her children as evidence that she is a good mom. I had the opportunity to interview Clarissa twice. During our second interview, she opened up considerably about what it feels like to be a parent in prison. She told me: “I think I am a good parent. I have good kids. My older kids are successful and my youngest is an accelerated student. They all have good manners. I did without so they could have. Children live what they learn and learn what they live.” Though our conversations, Clarissa admitted that she had made a “bad decision” that landed her in prison. But she never conceded that decision made her a

bad mother, her children are examples of her success as a good mother—they learned to be good people from their life with her.

The mothers I spoke with clearly had individualized concepts of “good” and “bad,” based on their individual circumstances. Many of their personal conceptions differed from the definitions accepted by mainstream society. Some women, such as Tamara, were aware that they were deviating from accepted social norms even though they did not view their actions as “bad.” Other women, such as Claire, did not seem to have a handle on the mainstream norms and disclosed no fault in their actions as a mother. Regardless, the women who used the strategy of still being a good mom offered a variety of anecdotal evidence that their children had fared well, despite the mothers’ deviations from traditional motherhood standards by entering prison.

Redefining Motherhood

Twenty-eight of my research participants actively redefined motherhood based on their constraints of prison. As evidenced by the large numbers of the mothers in the modified mom category (17) and the detached mom category (11), the majority of the women in my study had to redefine what it means to be a mother. In Chapter 6, I provided stories of women who had redefined their roles as mothers due to incarceration. Here, I discuss how they translate that redefinition of roles into a strategy to cope with the ambiguous loss experienced during incarceration by telling stories of satisfactory mother role performance.

I asked every mother I interviewed what it means to parent in prison. Modified and detached moms often commented on how they changed what motherhood means to them during incarceration. Belinda is a modified mom with four children all over the age of 20. She has been incarcerated six times in the space of 14 years. She noted that each time, it

took some hope and trust away from her children; only two of her children remain in contact with her. She says the others “got tired.” She told me: “Each time you come [to prison] people lose a little more faith in you. If you hurt someone enough, they have no choice but to draw away from you.” She said her children were “wounded deeply” and withdrew from her through her incarcerations. Her role as a mother has changed often over the past 14 years, based on the ages of her children and her children losing their trust in her.

When Belinda’s children were younger, she would let them decide whether or not they wanted to visit. She knew it was not a perfect situation, but she still wanted them to be “okay coming through those gates.” She said her family visited a lot “back then.” She said the visitation was helpful in allowing her to feel like a mother, though she thinks it would have been better if there was more privacy. She also said when her children were younger, though the visits were nice, leaving was extremely hard (a sentiment shared by many women in my study). She said her attitude has been that she is going to get better and make the most of her time in prison. She said: “If I was going to be here, I wasn’t going to be bitter about it...I was going to get all I can out of it.” Some of that meant changing her views on motherhood and finding other things to keep her busy to make her a good mother. She also told me, in relation to the classes offered at the prison: “You can learn from anything if you go in with the right frame of mind.” But what she would like to see, as someone who has been through prison and the reunification process as a mother quite a few times, is a continuation of the parenting program offered at KCIW. She thinks that communication is important with children while the mother is incarcerated and learning better parenting skills and continuing to have help learning about being a good mother would be beneficial to families, “because being in prison makes a whole new ballpark in parenting.” Belinda recognized the need to change the definition of motherhood based on the ages of one’s

children and the personal situation of the mother behind bars. She thinks that for a mother to better accomplish her goals, there also needs to be complimentary services for the families on the outside. She thought these services were necessary to help modify motherhood and family life to deal with the realities of separation due to incarceration.

Other mothers, including Rhonda, a modified mom, suggested that there is really nothing that can help mothers to effectively parent while in prison. Instead, mothers must change what it means to be a mother while incarcerated. Rhonda gets regular visits from her family and says that the only time that she can deal with family issues as a parent is during those visits. She commented: "Visiting is real important. It gives us a chance to sit down and talk face-to-face and get those problems out. Visiting is very important to keep the connection." Nonetheless, she says that there is really nothing that can help ease the effect of incarceration on families, including her ability to effectively mother like she did when she was not in prison. Thus, she has changed her definition of what it means to mother. She accomplishes a different level of mothering during visits and works to make herself a better person. She wants to rebuild her children's trust: "The only way to help is to get out and help rebuild that trust with your kids. You've killed that trust. You've jerked that sense of stability they had from underneath them. You can send letters, use the phone, and visit on a steady basis—other than that, you just have to wait until you get out. It's [trust] something that has to be built later on." So Rhonda is focusing on her changed role as mother and hopes she can prove to be an involved mother upon release.

Women were not always as confident in their statements on their exact redefinitions of motherhood, focusing more on the loss of motherhood and needing to *find* a specific way to redefine motherhood but being unable to adequately do so. Instead of being able to adequately redefine motherhood in concrete terms while incarcerated, some utilized this strategy to say *how* they are redefining themselves to be better moms when they return

home to their families. These mothers are taking control of the situation by looking to the future while reflecting on the past and preparing themselves to be even better mothers after incarceration.

Holly is a detached mom with two children, ages 11 and 14 who are staying with family while she is incarcerated. When I asked her about parenting in prison, she commented on the ineffectiveness of attempts to parent from prison. In addition to the inability to be successful, it robs caregivers of being able to adequately perform their duties. Therefore, she changed her role as a mother to focus on working on herself in order to eventually be a better mother on the outside and she recognized that she had to allow the caregivers on the outside to perform parenting duties. She said that parenting might be easier with teenagers because their relationships are much more effective as teenagers can communicate their feelings. She noted that younger children, even to the age of about 7 or 8, cannot understand what is happening because they “can’t wrap their head around it.” She also said that parenting from prison has a lot to do with the nature of the parent-child relationship prior to incarceration. That relationship can then dictate how to talk and interact with children while incarcerated. For Holly, she has chosen to keep her personal issues separate from her children for the time-being and focus on her own recovery. She has redefined working on her personal problems and allowing caregivers to do their jobs in the daily lives of children as motherhood for her during incarceration.

Prison Programming and the Modification of Motherhood. Another way that my research participants used the modification of motherhood as a coping strategy was through the participation in prison programming. Mothers often turned to talking about the programs available at KCIW that have helped them redefine what it means to be a mother and cope with being a mother in such a non-traditional role behind bars. Mothers often discussed the parenting class as the best class they have taken, though the wait is too long

to get in to the class. (A common sentiment about programs was frustration over long waiting lists. Some women had heard that the parenting class was good, but they were not happy that they were still waiting to take it.) Debra, a modified mother, noted that the parenting class was helpful in learning how to listen to your kids (instead of just telling children it is going to be a certain way because you're the mom) and having more patience with the younger kids (like not yelling at them when you are frustrated but instead walking away and counting to 10). Sandy is a modified mom with one child, age 4. She said the program is helpful because it teaches different parenting styles. She said that her child does not know what no means and the parenting class has helped her better understand the implications of that and will help her be a better mother when she leaves prison. Rhonda, a modified mom, has 4 children, ranging in age from 9 to 20, and 1 grandson. She said the parenting class was useful for parents with children of all ages. During the time of our meeting, Rhonda said that they were learning about younger kids and the importance of going to school. But she said the information is helpful even with older children and she will take the information she has learned through the class with her when she reunites with her family.

Other mothers viewed the parenting class as a means to an end. Some said they were required to take the class in order to have a chance of getting custody of their children upon release. For example, Tamara, a modified mom, has 4 children, 3 of her sons have been in a "group home" since her incarceration but her oldest just turned 18 and was able to get out. Her daughter is in foster care. She says that the parenting class is beneficial, but was more vague in her description of why. She told me: "It shows you things you might not know but need to know. I will do anything to get my kids back." She says she has had to modify how she mothers because of the confinement of prison and lack of contact with her kids. Now, the only way she can parent is through letters and telling them things will be

okay. But she says she has realized that she will have to change and *show* them things are better upon release.

One mother confided in me, during our second meeting, that she had used another prison program as an outlet to help her modify her motherhood roles and share her thoughts with other incarcerated mothers: she wrote an anonymous article for the prison newspaper, *Women of Conviction*. She had originally written the letter to the editor with her name on it. But the editor, a mother I also interviewed, said she would have to publish the letter as anonymous so as not to start any riots (suggesting the depth of the intimate importance of motherhood for incarcerated mothers). This mother told me she wrote the letter about how people discipline their kids and judge them for the same things the women themselves are in there for doing, and some are still doing—like calling other people names. She said to me that she asks other mothers: “Did you teach your kids that growing up?” when she hears and sees mothers acting inappropriately. She hopes her article will give other in prison something to think about in terms of their parenting. The following is an excerpt from the newsletter I obtained through the representative in the Procedures Office who set up my interviews:

Everyone talks about everyone and does all the things we discipline our children for. What are we becoming this day in age? Haven’t we all suffered enough with out having to sit and ridicule each other? Instead of being the women we tried to teach our children to be, we have become all that we taught them not to be. In fact, look where we are; we are convicted of our crimes-“guilty or not.”...How does this happen? We ask. Well, I believe I have an answer to that; although I fear no one will like the answer because I didn’t, once I realized what I had said. We stopped helping each other; physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually...We act, do, and say all the things we have disciplined our children for: lying, stealing, back stabbing...the

list goes on. And leading by example. We really haven't taught them anything except when it is wrong it's okay when the fact is.. "It's Not!" So unless we want our children to end up like us, we have to change. We have to make ourselves better people before we can ever teach our children to be better people. LEAD BY EXAMPLE, DON'T LET YOUR CHILDREN BECOME YOU.

The mother who wrote this letter is expressing the ability to mold motherhood. She said she sees mothers all the time behaving badly, though they are in fact mothers who should still be working to set examples for their children, even while they are incarcerated. Through her words a sentiment I found common, yet not so openly expressed by other mothers, that the definition of motherhood can be changed during incarceration emerges. Mothers in prison still have control over their actions and responses to others. This particular mother feels like motherhood takes on a new meaning while incarcerated and after the experience of incarceration. She told me that incarcerated mothers need to take a good look at themselves, to be self-reflexive so to speak. Doing so can help gain a better understanding of what got them there and help lead them on the right path to being a better mother. But it may require some deep thought and changes in motherhood while incarcerated.

Religion

Without any prompts from me, 13 of the mothers I interviewed individually and 2 of the mothers in the group interviews discussed religion, particularly Christianity, as a positive aspect in their lives and/or as a way of coping with the difficulties of prison life. The mothers who utilized this strategy were, in essence, taking control by relinquishing control to a higher power. They had been used to feeling out of control in their personal lives, but the decision to turn to a higher power and relinquish control in that manner was

empowering. Research participants used this strategy to speculate on future role performances: by being a good, Christian mother and handing their problems over to God in the present, they would ultimately win their battles that landed them in prison and prove their capabilities as mothers.

Dana is a modified mom is mother of two. She said she coped with her incarceration and the separation from her children by “reading the Bible, going to church, writing letters, and praying.” Dana found solace in her faith, with the comfort that prayer and the good deeds of going to church and reading the Bible would help her cope with her situation of being separated from her children and family. Others, including Bree, Sara, and two participants in group interviews generally talked generally about the power of prayer and the importance of church as coping mechanisms for dealing with the loss of their children, but did not share intimate details of their faith. Belinda completely conceded Jesus as the way she would overcome her struggles and find strength even while she was separated from her children. She found comfort in the new chaplain at the prison and told me that “sometimes you just need someone to pray with.” In short, she said “Christ is the answer,” to handling the struggles of prison life as a mother and her faith will help her achieve satisfactory role performances in the future.

Sharon, a same mom with four children, claimed that she had a good family life with her children prior to her incarceration by talking about how her children went to church—all of them except her oldest son whom she said liked to hang out with “gangsters.” She also noted that, through her incarceration, she has changed for the better as she has become more involved in religion through the religious services at KCIW. She told me how this change was going to help her achieve her goals and be a better person, including a better mother. “Hard time is not easy time. Sometimes you have to break down and show you have a weak side. Sometimes you have to break down the hatred inside—you have to be

able to forgive. The Bible says that—about forgiveness. I am more into the Bible now. I always had that, but my marriage pulled it away from her.” She said to fulfill her parental roles she has to do what the court has told her to do and what the Department of Corrections continues to tell her to do. She is trying to get better at her parenting and coping skills, and her religion assists in that process. She said she cannot take credit for her answered prayers because “God’s strength has gotten me this far.” She would like to see church groups welcome children with incarcerated parents into their communities. She was saddened by the knowledge that churches turn away families due to incarceration, which Jesus would not do. In terms of her role performance, Sharon said she believes God’s strength will help her achieve better things as a mother.

Kathleen had not had custody of her two adult sons in a very long time, nor was she certain who their fathers were. Kathleen had been incarcerated multiple times over her children’s lifetimes and talked of her rough life as a child and young mother, including abuse by men. She spoke of being too old to be incarcerated (she was 44 at the time of our interview) and how she is working hard to turn her life around to be a better influence in her family, including to her granddaughter. She is doing this through religion. Kathleen had always felt a sense of a higher power in her life, but she was not always faithful. She said she wishes she could go back in time, but she realizes that she cannot. So, she is a Christian now. She is using the Bible to help her find the right path, to become what she considers to be a better person while she is incarcerated and that will help make her transformation into a “good” person outside of prison easier. She has learned not to be as angry as she was prior to this incarceration. She told me: “You can’t live your life like that—being angry all the time. God don’t want you to have enemies. It will be God’s will when I go out that door.” A higher power, Kathleen believed, would give her the strength to be a better grandmother once she left prison this time.

Kathleen was gratified when some of the younger inmates came up to her recently and asked her to help explain the Bible to them. They had seen her reading and studying the Bible and it made her feel good that they came to her. Kathleen expressed a feeling of mothering to these younger girls. She was full of pride, saying she wants to help others and she believes Christianity is the way. While it may be too late to be a mother to her children, she was able to play a sort-of mothering role to young, incarcerated women through religion. She also said that she would like to reconnect with her sons and her granddaughter to the extent that she would like to, at a minimum, fulfill a traditional grandmother role to her granddaughter; religion is helping her be a better person to make that possible.

A few of the research participants talked of writing as a means of coping with the separation from their children, including writing religious poetry. One of the mothers in my study is a published author. She had published in several books and on several websites. She also had some of her work printed in *Women of Conviction*, the quarterly newsletter at KCIW. One of her poems speaks to her faith in God and the importance of religion in her life. That poem is quoted below:

Lord save me please
 For my children's sake
 I made a promise Lord
 I hate to break
 I prayed for forgiveness
 From the burdens I bare
 Just a little mercy Lord
 So I maybe there
 Children don't ask

For the life they have been given
 It's not fair for them to pay
 For the life we've been living
 A second chance Lord
 Is all it will take
 No more mistakes Father
 Will I ever make
 All my faith God
 I place in you
 I know Lord
 Your word is true.

Through the words in this poem and the interview with this mother, it is obvious that religion is important to her and an integral part of her recovery. The poem is an excellent example of just how control is relinquished to a higher power in search of a better life. She notes burdens, mistakes, and promises were broken. She recognizes her role as a mother in this process and the unfair impact it has had on her children. But, it shows that handing over control to, or placing faith in, God is a way that she can be sure that she will make no more mistakes. Finally, in her life that has spun out of control and impacted her family negatively, she has found an answer in relinquishing control to God with the faith that these hardships will pass in his control. In the future, her role performances will be indicative of the good mother she said she knows she can be with the strength of her faith as her guide.

Summary: Control Amidst Ambiguous Loss

In this chapter, I explored coping mechanisms for dealing with ambiguous loss among incarcerated mothers. The first three coping mechanisms allow incarcerated

mothers to gain control over their mother role performances of the past and present while relinquishing control to a higher power allows women to come to terms with the lack of control over their daily lives, but for a positive force that can potentially save them and make them better mothers in the future. Being able to (re)construct the role of mother, discussed in Chapter 6, while utilizing the coping mechanisms discussed in this chapter help to give some concreteness to the ambiguity that otherwise saturates the lives of this group of women.

Mothers offer specific examples of how they preserve motherhood while incarcerated, such as Crystal violating the rules of her halfway house to be at her daughter's graduation or Claire singing "You are so Beautiful to Me" to her daughters. This anecdotal evidence helps shape the way they define their roles and performances in those roles as mothers. The mothers are offering concrete "proof" through their stories to convey the point that they are still mothers—and they are good mothers, despite the fact they are incarcerated.

Boss (1999) notes:

The resolution of ambivalence essentially hinges on helping a person to recognize his or her conflicting feelings... But sociology provides another perspective.

According to this view, ambivalence results from mixing the elements of cognition (such as social definitions of roles and status) and emotions (which includes conditioning and learned behavior). Thus from this perspective, ambivalence can result from the ambiguity of not knowing who is included in the structure that is supposed to be one's family. Conflicting impulses that may exist inside the psyche are often a consequence of this uncertainty (p. 61-62).

My findings in this chapter suggest incarcerated mothers actively combat the ambiguity and ambivalence of what is happening to their families, particularly what is happening to their

own motherhood/mothering abilities. According to the sociological perspective to which Boss refers, the mixture of intense emotions and perceptions of traditional roles and statuses of mothers, can result in a great deal of uncertainty about the mothers' places in their families. Conflicting thoughts may result, such as Renee's confusion over whether or not treating her young son as an adult and a friend was really such a good idea or Kim recognizing her "mistakes" as a mother had an effect on her son while finding positives in her son's deviant behavior of stealing. My research participants expressed a variety of such mixed emotions, yet the stories they told suggested they were attempting to reconcile these emotions and conflicting thoughts into evidence that they are still good mothers. I find the coping strategies explored in this chapter suggestive of attempts to reconcile the ambiguity and ambivalence that confuse incarcerated mothers' thoughts on motherhood and their children.

The women in my sample worried about losing motherhood completely as caregivers took over daily parenting roles. Incarcerated mothers overwhelmingly expressed sadness and guilt over missing big milestones and small, daily happenings with their children. The coping strategies discussed in this chapter help control the negative consequences of ambiguous loss and the negative emotions it produces by suggesting evidence of satisfactory role performances in the past, present, and future to offer proof that they are good mothers. Research participants expressed concern and uncertainty about their lives, then countered these statements with the evidence that they do have something to hold onto in terms of their children and their statuses as mothers through stories of satisfactory role performance.

Chapter 8

Discussion: Ambiguous Loss, Concrete Hope

My primary research question was “How do incarcerated mothers negotiate motherhood from behind bars?” To answer this question, I interviewed 49 mothers at Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women (KCIW) in Peewee Valley, Kentucky. I interviewed 35 of these mothers individually and 14 in two group interviews, consisting of 7 women each. Relying heavily on feminist epistemology, I asked a variety of open-ended questions and provided prompts to encourage women to tell me their experiences of mothering from behind bars. I found that mothers negotiate motherhood with difficulty but with agency and that the difficulties are gendered. The following are the main conclusions of my study:

1. Incarcerated mothers experience ambiguous loss due to the physical separation from their children and the unanchored nature of motherhood in prison.
2. Ambiguous loss for incarcerated mothers is as much about identity as it is about concrete absences.
3. Mother role shift is an active process for incarcerated mothers who are agents in self-definition of their identities as mothers; variation in how incarcerated mothers forge motherhood under carceral conditions suggests an active, not a uniform, process.
4. Incarcerated mothers are social constructionists, negotiating ambiguous loss through four major coping strategies used to preserve motherhood by providing evidence of satisfactory mother role performance in the past, present, and future.

5. The coping strategies utilized by incarcerated mothers suggest a search for control over their ambiguous loss.

My research is innovative in five ways: (1) it explores parenting in prison from the mother's perspective; (2) it applies ambiguous loss to the experiences of incarcerated mothers in an innovative way that includes the loss of children and motherhood; (3) it provides a typology of shifting mother roles based on personal stories; (4) it describes specific coping mechanisms utilized to preserve motherhood; and (5) the sample is of an understudied population (incarcerated white mothers from mostly rural areas). As such, criminologists, mental health professionals, and family sociologists may find usefulness and potential for further research in this study. Below, I offer some suggestions to build on this research. Addressing limitations also spurs suggestions for building on findings of this study.

Addressing Limitations

The 35 individual interviews in this study lasted an average of only 45 minutes. I had the opportunity to interview four of my participants twice. These interviews lasted approximately 1 hour each. This study would benefit from longer interviews with additional follow-ups. Also, the family information I obtained from my research participants could not be substantiated by other family members. Further, the majority of the information I obtained on life in prison (including programs participated in, etc.) came from the women themselves and could not be validated within the constraints of my study. Some method of triangulation to verify and elaborate on information provided by the mothers would be useful. Additionally, recording devices are not allowed in the prison where I conducted research. Therefore I paraphrased much of what the women told me. While I was careful to capture as many of their words as possible, a more detailed analysis

of mothers' narratives would require full recordings of interviews. Finally, the research participants in my study all volunteered to be interviewed. It is beyond the realm of this analysis to determine the extent of selection bias or differences among mothers who did not choose to participate as compared to my sample, as no reference group exists. However, it must be noted that only mothers who considered themselves to hold the identity of mother volunteered and women who considered themselves mothers but did not want to discuss their experiences with me were excluded from analysis, and would have likely produced additional results.

The Power of Ambiguous Loss: Research and Treatment

The incarcerated mother often leaves her children unexpectedly without a formal goodbye, often a first stage in ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999). Separation of mothers from their children in a traumatic event through arrest and incarceration can mark the beginning of a turbulent emotional time for families, full of uncertainty (see Bernstein, 2005). The family system as it stands is compromised upon maternal incarceration and the separation of mother from child. As my study has suggested, incarcerated mothers enter a world saturated with ambiguous loss. On the surface, the mothers recognize the lack of control over their daily lives (e.g. not being able to see their children, difficulties in communication, and institutional restrictions). At the same time, the mothers find strength in their constructions of the family system—they redefine motherhood and search for control as they modify their roles and offer proof of satisfactory role performances as mothers from behind bars.

Boss (1999) offers hope for dealing with ambiguous loss. She notes that the revision of relationships must take place. In order to cope with ambiguous loss, individuals must be able to revise their perception of their family while letting go of the need for an

absolute and precise definition of the family (p. 32). The research participants in my study were already revising their perceptions of family and motherhood, even without the therapeutic interventions Boss recommends. Mothers must then change how they view the family and must have an elastic definition of their family and the places of members (and themselves) in it. The notion that this stress is manageable within an ambiguous loss framework is encouraging for the women themselves as well as those working with families experiencing incarceration in programming or therapy settings: what needs to be provided is the new set of skills that Boss suggests are called for. She suggests finding meaning in the ambiguous loss, gaining a sense of control despite ambiguous loss, reconstructing identity to reflect the consequences of ambiguous loss, normalizing ambivalent feelings, revise the nature of the attachment to those lost, and discovering hope in the meanings created through these processes (Boss, 2006). Again, research participants in my dissertation study were unconsciously navigating ambiguous loss *with* these tactics Boss suggests even in the absence of therapeutic interventions from an ambiguous loss framework.

Mothers in my study often shared with me the difficulties in communicating with their children, arguably exacerbating the symptoms of ambiguous loss. They pleaded for help to assist in managing their loss and associated emotions. While visitation is generally the focus of programming for incarcerated mothers and their children, the adoption of an ambiguous loss framework offers the potential to better tailor interventions to help incarcerated mothers and their children better cope with their unique situations, including their unique losses. My research participants suggest that incarcerated mothers are capable of utilizing Boss's suggestions for alleviating symptoms of ambiguous loss. Incorporating ambiguous loss into an integrative therapeutic program may offer additional hope and success for incarcerated mothers by helping them understand their ambiguous loss of

children and identity and deal with their ambiguous loss within a validated therapeutic model.

Policy Implications: Prison Programming

Framing the experiences of incarcerated mothers in terms of ambiguous loss not only helps broaden our understanding of the “pains of imprisonment” for this population, it also provides *hope* for helping incarcerated mothers. The strength of this theory lies not only in its explanatory power; it also lies in its potential for treatment. Boss, an academic and psychotherapist in private practice, has afforded service providers with a model for *treating* ambiguous loss. This model provides tools for therapists to use to help those experiencing ambiguous loss *cope* with their situations (see Boss, 1999, 2006). In Chapter 5 I offered evidence that incarcerated mothers experience ambiguous loss as well as family stress, a precondition for ambiguous loss. Boss’s detailed therapeutic intervention model recognizes the triggers of family stress and ambiguous loss and provides therapists with a blueprint for treatment.

Ambiguous loss can have a variety of consequences that revolve around the confusion of family dynamics, including members questioning their family and their individual roles within the family system (Boss, 1999, p. 20). In the following passage, Boss (1999) summarizes some key aspects of the Family Stress Perspective important for family service providers:

First, stress is simply caused by change—or the threat of change—in composition of the family... Second, persistent distress is not good for any individual or family...that in spite of continuing ambiguity, people have the potential to recover and thrive by learning how to *manage* the stress... Third...information should be

shared with [the families] even if that information is “I don’t know what the outcome will be” ... Fourth, ambiguous losses can traumatize (pp. 21-23).

Incorporating these aspects into prison programming offers potential to assist incarcerated mothers in better navigating their experiences with ambiguous loss.

Clearly, maternal incarceration is a stressful process that can be confusing, making mothers question various aspects of their family life. Specifically examining the assumptions in the family stress perspective, we can see that the changes that result from maternal incarceration can be traumatic for mothers, children, and potentially caregivers, as a result of change within the family. Additionally, she alludes to the suggestion that programs may benefit family members by providing more truth and information to aid in making the situation less ambiguous; simply facilitating open dialogue can help reduce ambiguity from the mothers’ perspectives as well as the children’s and caregivers’. With further research on ambiguous loss and inmates, prisons can better tailor programs for inmates in the following ways:

1. Train prison therapists on ambiguous loss, allowing them to use its treatment models within a prison setting.
2. Tailor prison programs on family to teach inmates about ambiguous loss, providing them with a vocabulary and tools for understanding ambiguous loss in their own lives.
3. Create support groups for inmates where they can share their experiences, tragedies, and triumphs related to ambiguous loss. Information and support from others experiencing ambiguous loss can help with the coping process.

Incorporating ambiguous loss into prison programs on individual and group levels allows interventions and treatments to be tailored to address unique circumstances of

incarcerated mothers. Such incorporation opens potential for personal and family growth even through the experience of ambiguous loss.

The Bigger Picture: Sociological Implications

In addition to specific policy implications discussed above, the results and conclusions in this study can be applied more generally to sociological concerns. As discussed in Chapter 4, race is a pervasive, though silent, theme in this research. The results of my dissertation have something to say not only about the institution of motherhood in prison for a specific racial group of prisoners. Mothers in my study repeatedly referred to themselves as different than “usual” prisoners. Though not discussed in terms of race, it might be that participants were implicitly comparing themselves against the stereotypical prisoner—minority from the inner city. In the future, researchers should continue to consider the pervasive influence of race on the perceptions of prisoners by others and on how prisoners view themselves. As Enos (2001) found, race plays a large role in the prison experience for mothers and their families. Future research should consider to explore differences in the prison experience among multiple racial categories and various other groups in society.

The implications of this study span beyond prison, prisoners, and families of inmates. The prison itself is not just a peripheral institution. This research is not just about mothers in prison. Instead, what happens in prison can tell us many things about society at large. Researching women in prison opens doors to motherhood in general, large social problems (including poverty, drug abuse, family abuse, racial discrimination, and various disadvantages faced by certain segments of the population), the subjective nature of laws, crime, victimization, and recidivism. What happens in prison is both a result of what is happening in the free world (i.e. laws, disadvantages) and an element that influences life in

the free world (i.e. recidivism, family restructuring). Studying groups of prisoners can provide insight into the depths of society. The prison itself is woven into the fabric of our contemporary culture. What is missing from many discussions is the notion that the prison system is failing.

Results from this study indicate that incarcerating mothers has larger implications than just psychological distress for those who are currently incarcerated. Families, including innocent, impressionable children are deeply impacted by their mothers' situations. Tax dollars are spent to incarcerate these women with, at least in the opinions of my research participants, little help toward rehabilitation. Policy makers use these inmates as pawns for their political positions without regard for the human impact of their policy decisions. Many of the mothers in my study expressed the sentiment that they *want* to stay away from activities that bring them to prison, but they do not know *how* to live a life that is crime free by legal standards. They admitted to battles with drug addiction, poverty, and abuse, each of which feeds the other and has resulted in arrest, conviction, and incarceration. In the future, alternatives to incarceration for incarcerated mothers may be especially pertinent to study, both for policy makers and scholars. I now turn to some additional suggestions for future research.

Suggestions for Future Research

My study was exploratory in nature as my goal was to gain a better understanding of how mothers in prison negotiate motherhood. All interviews were conducted at a single prison with a relatively homogeneous population with severe time constraints. Future research should seek to replicate and validate my research within this population and among other groups of incarcerated mothers. As such, I suggest additional research in the areas of motherhood in general, relationships between incarcerated parents and their

children, the specific effects of incarceration on families, and ambiguous loss as it pertains to inmates. I further suggest more macro-level empirical and theoretical analysis on incarceration.

“Motherhood” and Motherhood. My research suggests that the term “motherhood” encompasses unrealistic expectations of women in American society. Incarcerated women are often subject to disadvantages prior to entering prison, tarnishing their standard of motherhood from various angles. Collins (1994) suggests that theorizing about motherhood should take systems of privilege into account in order to develop definitions of motherhood that are relevant to various groups, not just the dominant group. Collins suggests the necessity of embracing the variety of backgrounds and circumstances of mothers in order to better develop more adequate and accurate definitions of motherhood. My findings suggest a need to better understand the lives of incarcerated mothers and their families *prior* to incarceration. Future research would benefit from more longitudinal studies of motherhood in general, as well as mothering from behind bars for diverse groups of incarcerated mothers.

Incarcerated Parent-Child Relationships. The mothers in my sample talked about their relationships with their children before, during, and after incarceration. Some moms and modified moms sought to keep a strong relationship with opportunities to mother while incarcerated. Even though detached mothers excused themselves from parenting while incarcerated, all of them still considered themselves mothers and claimed they wanted good relationships with their children. Future research should explore more details on relationships between incarcerated parents and their children. Through my study, I only had the opportunity to interview the mothers. Interviewing other family members would be beneficial in furthering research on this topic. Longitudinal studies that follow incarcerated parents and their children through the incarceration process would also

be helpful in gaining a better understanding of incarcerated parent-child relationships and help tailor family-level interventions.

Changing criminal justice policies may assist in these endeavors. For example, a few states (New York, Nebraska, and Washington) are in the beginning stages of opening up programs to aid longer mother-child bonding, including the use of prison nurseries (Kauffman, 2001). Research is only beginning to study the impact of these programs for incarcerated mothers and children and should be expanded. Future research should also explore the nature of incarcerated parent-child relationships across variables such as age (of child and parent), length of incarceration, number of incarcerations, living conditions of children, and other family factors.

Incarceration-Specific Effects on Families: Finding Positive Outcomes. Johnson (2006) notes that a definitive empirical basis for connections between parental incarceration and family outcomes has proven elusive, as has efforts to understand the variable responses of children to parental incarceration. Scholars disagree on whether or not incarceration itself generates negative outcomes for families or whether it is other social disadvantages that plague the family before, during, and after incarceration. Future research should continue to seek out innovative methodological approaches to tease out incarceration-specific effects on families (see Johnson and Easterling, 2012)

In studying the impact of incarceration on families, we tend to focus on the negative outcomes that can be generalized. However, it is imperative that we get a better grasp on a wider range of outcomes, including positive ones, to better tailor programs and services for families dealing with incarceration. My research participants cited both positive and negative outcomes on their families because of their incarcerations. Exploring positive outcomes among families who have experienced incarceration may provide insight into

resilience factors that can help to mediate the negative effects of parental incarceration on children, as well as the negative environmental factors present in their lives.

Ambiguous Loss. Further research is needed using the ambiguous loss framework to examine circumstances and experiences of incarcerated mothers. This framework has immense potential to fill gaps in the existing literature, including the ability to explain incarceration-specific separation effects (see Johnson and Easterling, 2012). Additionally, working within such a framework, more possibilities for successful interventions and programming may emerge. Ambiguous loss can also provoke more relevant discussion in the study of incarcerated mothers. The importance of perception of the family itself calls for the need to examine the unique circumstances of these families both as a group and on individual levels. It is thus necessary to explore incarcerated mothers' experiences further in their own words, since the most important definition of the family is the one they themselves operate from.

Although methodological concerns often limit research on incarcerated mothers, working within the framework of ambiguous loss highlights the need to overcome such challenges in order to better understand the unique circumstances these women face. Further exploration is needed to determine if the combined loss of children and identity has unique effects not yet touched on with the current framework of ambiguous loss and family stress perspective.

Incarceration. This study addresses the specific question of how incarcerated mothers navigate motherhood from behind bars. As such, the results and conclusions reached focus on this one aspect of this single group in regard to prison life. However, these findings could also be useful in looking at larger issues of the prison and incarceration from a sociological perspective. Punishment is a social institution that appears to be self-contained but which actually touches on a vast number of social relations and has

implications for cultural meanings in general (Garland, 1990). Future research should consider institutional forces on the individual, taking Owen's (1998) work to higher levels in terms of how the social institution of prison permeates the social institutions in the free world and vice versa. What occurs inside of prison offers insight into societal values as well as issues of control and power at various levels in society (see Rhodes, 2004). Future research may benefit from using smaller groups, such as mothers as explored in this study, to examine the impacts of these larger social forces on individuals and families. Further, future research on the impact of incarceration should also consider alternatives to incarceration. As the prison has become such a "normal" part of our society, we often assume that it is a necessary component of our lives and that it is serving its intended purposes. And, this institution has transformed over time. For example, some scholars (see Feeley and Simon, 1992) suggest that a "new penology" is emerging and suggest the development of a changing language and shifting concerns within penology. An overarching theme in this argument is that criminal law and criminology as concerns have faded away, giving renewed focus on aggregates with a reliance on imprisonment. Though not the focus of this study, my research participants acknowledged such issues in our discussions. They inadvertently expressed knowledge of the bureaucracy that is the prison system and exhibited an awareness that the "system" (as they referred to it) is creating criminals at the expense of doing justice. Future research should explore such topics and their implications for policy and social change.

Final Thoughts: Hope

Incarceration is largely viewed as a detrimental event in the life of a mother. My results have suggested that ambiguous loss is responsible for much of the trauma

incarcerated mothers experience during and even after their incarcerations. Still, the potential for hope exists in the lives of these women. Boss (2006) suggests:

With ambiguous loss, hope must be discovered despite imperfect endings and unclear terminations. But such endings can be symbolically understood and, through narrative and relational therapies, reconstructed so as to renew hope. To discover hope is to embrace the ambiguity and then find meaning in it. The paradox becomes easier to live with than holding on to what was—an impossible hope (p. 195).

My research has suggested that, on their own, without the prompting of a therapist, incarcerated mothers are able to redefine their mother roles and proclaim satisfactory mother role performances to deal with the ambiguity in their lives and find meaning in the ambiguous loss of their children and of their identities as mothers. Incorporating an ambiguous loss program into their lives can only bolster the success of their efforts.

Universally, the mothers I interviewed were *aware* of the ambiguity in their lives, yet they lacked an *understanding* of its meaning. I believe that incorporating the concept of ambiguous loss into the prison system and into the practice of therapists can serve to soften many of the harsh symptoms of ambiguous loss by allowing prisoners a *vocabulary* for their unexplainable sorrows as well as an outlet with which to deal with their emotions. My results suggest that incarcerated mothers need help to (re)connect with family, (re)bond with children, and (re)define their identities as mothers as much if not more than they need help with rehabilitation for their crimes. Treating ambiguous loss is a positive step in this process. The mothers with whom I spoke verbalized a desire for more assistance in their journeys but a lack of availability of programs that served their needs.

Some may argue that prisoners are part of a *hopeless* population. I disagree. I find incarcerated mothers to be...mothers. I find ambiguous loss to be present in their lives.

Consequentially, I find the hope offered by ambiguous loss and its treatment program to provide potential for hope in the lives of incarcerated mothers. I found hope in the stories that the incarcerated mothers told me, despite the ambiguity and the losses in their lives. I hope that my research can be part of a discussion—a movement—that encourages the mothers to find concrete hope in their own lives.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Sample Demographics and Criminal History

Table 1:
Sample Demographics and Criminal History

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Number of Children	Offense (for current incarceration)
Sharon	38	White	5	Rape*
Sheena	33	Black	8	Burglary*
Kim	37	White	2	Dangerous Drugs*
Brandy	33	White	2	Stolen Property*
Pam	28	White	2	Forgery*
Jill	24	White	4	Dangerous Drugs*
Tamara	37	White	4	Forgery*
Jocelyn	26	White	2	Dangerous Drugs*
Kathleen	44	Native American	3	Dangerous Drugs*
Renee	34	White	2	Forgery*
Crystal	37	White	3	Burglary*
Clarissa	40	White	3	Dangerous Drugs*
Marie	32	White	1	Forgery*
Bonnie	42	White	3	Forgery*
Rhonda	39	White	4	Passing Forged Document*
Jane	51	White	1	Assault*
Sandy	24	White	1	Marijuana*
Catherine	46	White	3	Dangerous Drugs*
Debra	35	White	3	Criminal Abuse*
Belinda	46	White	4	Forgery*
Laura	~30's	White	3	Dangerous Drugs*
Claire	~40's	White	2	Drug Possession*
Sara	30	White	2	Dangerous Drugs*
Julie	40	White	2	Fraud*
Carla	25	White	2	Receiving Stolen Property*
Patricia	31	White	2	Unknown
Ellen	34	White	2	Forgery*
Holly	36	White	2	Robbery*
Lisa	39	White	2	Robbery*
Sandra	40	White	2	Fraud-related
Tanya	36	White	2	Unknown
Amanda	35	White	3	Drug-related
Bree	45	White	3	Manslaughter
Dana	28	White	2	Drug-related
Zola	28	Black	5	Criminal Abuse and Theft

*Confirmed by KCIW staff

Appendix B: Research Synopsis/Sign-up Sheet for Research Participants

Opportunity to Participate in a Research Study—for MOTHERS

A student at the University of Tennessee is conducting continuing research on the impact of incarceration on families, with a focus on the experiences of children with incarcerated parents. The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the experiences of children who have experienced parental incarceration. Children with incarcerated *mothers* are specifically targeted for inclusion in this study. Open-ended questions will be asked to both incarcerated mothers and their children regarding the children's experiences with an incarcerated parent. Mothers who participate in the study will be asked to provide consent for their children to be interviewed. Interviews will be confidential and no actual names will be used in reporting of results.

If you are a mother (and your children are under the age of 18 OR are over 18 but experienced parental incarceration any time before their 18th birthday) and would like more information, please sign up below. A presentation will be given to further explain details of the study for those who have not yet participated. If you spoke with Beth in February and would like to have a follow-up interview, she is interested in speaking with you, again, as well.

Mothers who previously participated

Mothers who have not yet participated

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Department of Sociology
University of Tennessee
Beth Easterling, MS, Principal Investigator
Dr. Lois Presser, Principal Investigator
(865) 974-7024

AGREEMENT TO BE PART OF A RESEARCH STUDY

PURPOSE

I, _____, agree to participate in this research study. The purpose of the study is to explore the impact of incarceration on families. The researchers will be interviewing both inmates and children in this study. All data gathered by the research staff will be used only for the purpose of the study.

PROCEDURES

I understand that this study involves interviews. The interviews will take place in private space such as in my home or in a public place such as a park where privacy can be achieved or, if in prison, in a room provided by prison/jail staff and may be video-monitored (without audio monitoring) by staff. Any one interview will last one to two hours.

I understand that, by signing this form, I am giving permission for the researchers to contact my child and his/her caregiver for the purposes of this study. By signing this form, I also acknowledge that my child is aware of my incarceration and, to the best of my knowledge, I believe my child is able to discuss his/her experiences with the researchers.

Through participation in this study, I agree that I will not reveal any sensitive information or any information that I do not want criminal justice officials to be aware of to the interviewer.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND BENEFITS

I may feel discomfort, such as sadness or anxiety, from discussing my life and the issues with which the research is concerned. No other risks or problems are expected to result from the study. The potential benefit of the study is a better understanding about the effects of incarceration on the family.

It is possible that children may reveal legally sensitive information during the course of an interview. Should this happen, the interviewer will redirect the child immediately to remain on the topics necessary for this study.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW

I understand that my participation is voluntary. I am free to refuse to be interviewed as part of this study. I am also free to decline to answer any question or questions. These decisions will be kept confidential.

AVAILABILITY OF INFORMATION AND CONFIDENTIALITY

If I have any questions about the study or the interviews, I am free to call Beth Easterling or Lois Presser at (865) 974-7024. I can also contact Brenda Lawson, who monitors the well-being of those involved in research studies at the University of Tennessee, at (865) 974-3466.

Any question that I have concerning any aspect of this study will be answered.

I understand that information from the interview with me may be used when the Investigators report study findings, but that my real name will never be used. Records will be preserved with a made-up name substituted for my real name. No other information available to the criminal justice system will identify me as having been interviewed. All records of my real name, including this form, will be kept in a locked box. Only the Principal Investigators will have access to this box.

The information that I provide will be kept confidential after the study is over. I understand, however, that if I tell the interviewer about a crime that I committed in the past (an example would be abuse of a child), she might be forced by law to report this.

My name will be on any record except for this form. This form will be kept in a locked file. Only Beth Easterling and Lois Presser will have a key to this file. All other records will be kept under a made-up name instead of my real name. The information that I provide during the session will not be associated with me, even after the study is over. Any publications that come from this study will only use a pseudonym in lieu of my real name.

SIGNATURES

I, the undersigned, understand the above (page 1) explanation and volunteer to participate in this study. I agree that the researchers may contact my child and my child's caregiver and my child knows that I am incarcerated. I further agree that information from my interview may be used for publications using pseudonyms only (without my name and with no way to identify me as an individual).

Participant's signature

Date

I agree that information (including excerpts) using pseudonyms can be used in publication. _____
Initials

I decline having information using pseudonyms used in publication. _____
Initials

Principal Investigator's signature

Date

Appendix D: Sample Interview Questions

- (Age, race, time at KDOC, number of incarcerations and length, charge for current incarceration)
- How many children do you have?
- What are their ages?
- What is your relationship with the child(ren)'s father(s)?
- When was the last contact you had with them?
- What type of contact was it? (i.e. letters, phone, in person)
- How often do you see your children, in general?
- How important is visitation with your children while you are incarcerated? How does it benefit you? Your children?
- What are your feelings on being separated from your child?
- How are your children dealing with your separation?
- Do you view your children differently now that you are in prison?
- Do your children know where you are and why?
- What is the biggest challenge to being a parent right now?
- How do you fulfill your roles as "parent" while separated from your child?
- How do you feel your role as parent has changed?
- Do you still feel like a mother?
- Has your view of being a mother changed?
- Do you feel strain in your role as parent and other roles (i.e. inmate)?
- Do you feel confused about your family situation?
- What does it mean to "parent in prison?" (ways/how?)
- Describe your family.
- Do you have a sense of loss in prison? (related to children, family, etc.)

- Describe that loss.
- Do you still feel attached to your children? How?
- How do you cope with incarceration? What do you do to maintain independence? Feel in control of your life?
- What type of support do you have here?
- Who is caring for your child?
- How is your relationship with that individual?
- What is their role in facilitating contact between you and your child?
- How do you talk to your child and explain your situation?
- Have you participated in any programs/services to help families dealing with incarceration?
 - If so, what were they? Please describe. Were they helpful?
 - If not, what types of programs do you think would be helpful?
- Tell me about your life.
- Describe a good day in prison.
- Describe a bad day in prison.
- What is most frustrating about your time in prison?
- Do you talk with other inmate mothers about your children?
- What is your biggest regret?
- What would you like to share with me about your time here?
- How do you think your life will be different when you get out of prison?

Vita

Beth Allen Easterling was born in Roanoke, Virginia. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics from Roanoke College in 2002 and a Master of Science degree in Applied Sociology from University of North Florida in 2005.