

RESEARCH PAPER

“How can you live without your kids?”: Distancing from and embracing the stigma of “incarcerated mother.”

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Abstract: *This article examines how incarcerated mothers constructed moral identities in the face of stigma. Analyzing data from participant observation and 83 in-depth interviews with incarcerated mothers, we show that mothers claimed moral identities by distancing from the stigma of incarceration and/or embracing the identity of incarcerated mothers. Utilizing these strategies, women challenged the stigma of convicted felon/bad mother and reinforced the assumptions that motherhood is compulsory and should be reserved for women with enough money and standing to give their children advantages. The implications for understanding motherhood as a mechanism of moral identity and social control are discussed.*

Key words: *criminology; sociology; women’s studies*

Introduction

In our collective imagination, mothers are the glue that holds families together. They are thought to be innately nurturing and gifted with a special ability to care for their children and families (DeVault, 1991). Being a mother is a moral identity (Katz, 1975; McMahon, 1995)—an identity that signifies moral value, worth, and character. Yet, “mother” cannot be reduced to a “master status” (Hughes, 1945) that enforces universal meanings on all mothers or trumps other identities. “Mother” identities are influenced by class, race/ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, and other cross-cutting identities, which are implicated in social inequality. Some women face barriers to the full moral and social recognition of motherhood (e.g., Collins, 2000; Edin & Kafalis, 2005; Lewin, 1993; Zinn & Dill, 1994).

In the age of mass incarceration and the War on Drugs, more parents are incarcerated than ever before. Women are the fastest growing population of prisoners since 2010 (Glaze & Kaeble, 2014). Incarcerated women also are more likely than incarcerated men to have children. Approximately 62% of the over 200,000 incarcerated women in the United States are mothers (Glaze & Maruschuk, 2008). They are also more likely to have custody of their children prior to incarceration and to lack male partners to care for their children during incarceration (Mumola, 2000; Schafer & Dellinger, 1999). Thus, the burden—and the stigma—of parenting in prison falls predominantly on women. Yet, our knowledge of how mothers manage this burden is limited.

Convicted felons suffer a “spoiled identity” (Goffman, 1963), often enduring what Garfinkel (1956) called “degradation ceremonies:” public rituals that mark the transition to a lower status. For incarcerated mothers, the transition from law-abiding citizen/mother to convicted felon can be especially harsh, as mothers have been defined as the moral backbone of society (Warner, 2005), whose fall from grace implies a severely damaged or depraved character (Rafter, 1992). Incarcerated mothers are by no means the only stigmatized group of mothers, but they are among the most marginalized women in society. This marginality, combined with the stigma and shame of incarceration, “renders this powerless population essentially disposable in the eyes of society” (Allen, Flaherty, & Ely, 2010, p. 162). Incarcerated mothers respond to social condemnation in different ways, but the stigma weighs heavily on all of them. This stigma has consequences for mothers’ ability to reintegrate into society (Garcia, 2016), and reflects on their identity as mothers after release (Sharpe, 2015).

While Davis (1997) argues that felons are criminalized in part because they are seen as *incapable* of



being good mothers (see also Chesney-Lind, 1997), even the most marginalized individuals in society work to salvage spoiled identities (e.g., Snow & Anderson, 1987). Many incarcerated mothers engage in oppositional identity work to challenge the stigma that they are “bad” mothers who neglect their children (e.g., Allen, Flaherty, & Ely, 2010; Barnes & Stringer, 2014; Ferraro & Moe, 2003). Oppositional identity work involves “transform[ing] discrediting identities into crediting ones and redefining those identities so they can be seen as indexes of noble rather than flawed character” (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996, p.141). For incarcerated women with children, doing oppositional identity work can be a deterrent from violating jail rules, a way to cope with the pain and emptiness of day-to-day life in jail, and a source of hope for the future (Martin 1997; Showers, 1993). But oppositional identity work does not just help women cope with incarceration. It can also enable them to translate identities as good mothers who love and care for their children into their lives post-release (Bui and Morash, 2010; O’Brien 2001).

Literature Review

Our literature review consists of two parts. First, we review the literature examining how individuals construct moral identities in the face of stigma. Second, we review research on how mothers in particular negotiate stigma in their attempts to reconstitute motherhood as a source of moral worth.

Constructing Moral Identities in the Face of Stigma

With the exceptions of Goffman (1961) and Sykes (2007/1958), moral identity scholars have ignored incarcerated persons. However, research demonstrates that individuals struggle to create moral identities under even the most dehumanizing conditions. Scholars have examined how higher-status groups negotiate what Goffman (1963) calls the “courtesy stigma” stemming from their association with stigmatized groups (e.g., Fields, 2001; McQueeney, 2009; Ueno & Gentile, 2015). In their study of correctional officers (COs), Tracy, Myers, and Scott (2007) show how the COs they studied dealt with the stigma of working with prison inmates, who are widely seen as “deviant human rubbish” (Davis, 1998). The COs challenged the stigma of the “scum of law enforcement” by claiming that no one else could do their jobs, emphasizing the dangerous parts of their job as the most desirable (e.g., they prided themselves on being “assholes every day” and the “most-hated officers”), and blaming inmates for being “stupid,” “lazy,” “liars,” and “fuckin’ nuts.” The COs did not face a stigma by virtue of their own actions, but by *courtesy* of the population they worked with. In response, they drew on the resources at their disposal to restore a sense of moral identity and virtue in their work.

Research also shows how disadvantaged and socially unpopular groups claim a sense of moral worth in the face of stigma (e.g., Sandstrom, 1990; Schneider, 1988; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Wolkomir, 2001). Studies of incarcerated mothers (Allen, Flaherty, & Ely, 2010; Barnes & Stringer, 2014; Enos, 2001; Ferraro & Moe, 2003) demonstrate that motherhood is a source of self-worth for women *and* a source of stigma. Yet, incarcerated mothers do not simply accept this stigma. Some incarcerated women justify committing larceny or selling drugs as attempts to provide for their children, thereby transforming criminal behaviors into evidence of their commitment to their children and claiming a moral identity as mothers (Ferraro & Moe, 2003; Hunter & Greer, 2011). Others look to the future and their eventual performance of “good motherhood” to help bolster their identity as mothers. The incarcerated mothers in Stringer’s (2009) study acknowledged that their past behaviors caused their children pain, but looked forward to mothering their children upon release. One woman spoke of how she comforted her son: “this will pass. We’re gon’ (sic) be out there playing ball and football, so don’t give up” (2009, p.341). Enck and McDaniel (2015) found that the hope of having more children bolstered women’s identity during incarceration, even if they had performed poorly as mothers in the past. These studies show that individuals have agency to shape and reshape what it means to be a mother through the personal meanings they attach to that identity (Gatrell, 2005) and their social interactions within specific historical, cultural, and institutional contexts (Glenn, 1994).

With more Americans—including mothers—incarcerated than any other time in history (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Guerino, Harrison & Sabol, 2012), the penal system has a significant influence on the structure and content of familial relationships. Research has demonstrated the effects of incarceration on the wives and girlfriends of incarcerated men (Comfort, 2008), children of the incarcerated (Johnston & Gabel, 1995; Siegel, 2011), and caregivers of incarcerated parents’ children (Bernstein, 2005; Katz, 1998). However, incarcerated mothers themselves are understudied. We seek to fill this gap by analyzing how incarcerated mothers

claim moral identities in the face of stigma.

Motherhood as a Moral Identity

“Mother” is perhaps the most criticized and revered social identity in our society. Mothers are deeply valued, but closely scrutinized for their choices and circumstances. Many scholars have argued that the cultural expectations of motherhood place women in a bind (Blair-Loy, 2003; Crittenden, 2001; Hays, 1996). Hays (1996) coined the term “intensive mothering” to describe the impossible expectations placed on mothers in our society. On the one hand, intensive mothering demands personally selfless, financially expensive, and emotionally consuming caregiving. On the other hand, economic realities demand that most women work for pay outside the home and cannot devote endless time, money, and energy to satisfying their children’s every need and want. While intensive mothering is not widely practiced—even by the affluent white women for whom it might be the most feasible—it is “the most powerful, visible, and self-consciously articulated” ideology of mothering in the United States (Hays, 1996, p. 21).

Additionally, mothers from diverse racial/ethnic and class backgrounds may embrace different ideals of what it means to be a good mother. For example, Collins (2000) argues that motherhood is especially valued in black communities. Segura (1994) shows that many Mexican immigrant mothers do not perceive a conflict between paid work and motherhood. In her study of a diverse group of working mothers, Christopher (2012) found that contemporary mothers rejected the contradictions of “intensive mothering” (Hays 1996) that positioned paid work as antithetical to good motherhood and incorporated decision-making (if not intensive caregiving) into a way of mothering that made sense for them. Many poor women, across race, value “being there” for their children—being attentive and keeping them safe rather than being a “supermom” (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Elliot & Haseltine, 2013). Dow (2016) finds that middle and upper-class women expect to work outside the home and use kin and kith to care for children. Scholars argue there is no universal ideology of mothering (e.g., Baca Zinn & Dill, 1994), but the expectation to be a “good mother”—however that is defined within a culture or group—appears to transcend social differences. However, far from being a romanticized moral status or experience, motherhood is saturated by social differences and inequalities.

Even so, motherhood can be a valuable source of moral worth for women who have children. Enos (2001) and Hairston (1999; 2002) point out that social acknowledgement and privileges typically accompany the mother role. Edin & Kefalas (2005) argue that for women who have little access to middle-class markers of success, such as career and home ownership, caring for children is an important source of moral identity. Baker & Carson (1999) find that despite severe social disapprobation, substance-abusing women do not necessarily see themselves as “bad mothers.” The women in their study considered themselves good mothers when they met their children’s basic needs, shielded children from their drug use, and used drugs strategically to manage stress. In this study, we ask three key questions: how do incarcerated women challenge the stigma they face as “bad mothers?” What resources do they draw on to craft moral identities as “good mothers” under conditions of extreme social control? What are the consequences of these strategies for women’s rehabilitation and reentry?

Setting

Northeast Jail was a relatively small facility, designed to hold 962 prisoners, located in the northeastern United States. At the time of fieldwork, it housed approximately 150 women and 1450 men. Only pre-trial offenders and those sentenced to two-and-a-half years or less were housed there. The average sentence at Northeast Jail was six months. The interior was austere, with muted paint colors and clearly stenciled cell numbers on the walls. It had industrial-style stairs and railings, with mostly-metal furniture bolted to the floor. The living space had a few very small windows in the two outer corners of the main space (referred to as “the pod”) and one in each of the cells. The lights were fluorescent, and the air was stale. The physical space of the jail gave little indication that motherhood and children were important, but therapeutic groups and classes¹, counseling meetings, and daily conversations often revolved around women’s children and motherhood.

Researchers have long overlooked jails in favor of prisons (Irwin, 1985; Klofas, 1990; Richie, 1996). But as Klofas (1990, p. 69) writes, “the jail touches more people’s lives than does any other form of correctional service.” Thirty times more people rotate through jails than prisons each year (Richie, 1996), and the

number of people incarcerated in jails has increased steadily over the past two decades (Sturges & Al-Khattar, 2009). Approximately 60% of women at Northeast Jail were serving sentences for drug possession or sales, 30% for property crimes such as writing bad checks and identity theft, and about 10% for violent crimes such as assault and battery. The pattern of offending among women at Northeast Jail was similar to patterns of female criminality in the U.S. overall.

The facility's status as a jail had implications for our study of incarcerated motherhood. Short sentences often meant that mothers were away from their children for short periods of time, and many intended to resume full-time parenting upon release. Researchers cite mother-child visitation as an important reinforcement of family relationships that is seriously lacking in the penal system (Michalsen, Flavin, & Krupat, 2010). In state and federal prisons for women—which are usually located in rural areas far from women's homes—visitation is difficult, expensive, and rare (Laughlin, Arrigo, Blevins, & Coston, 2008; Tewksbury & DeMichelle, 2005). Yet, most of the women housed at Northeast Jail were from neighboring cities and towns. This meant that some mothers saw their children somewhat frequently. For other mothers, however, the obstacles of transportation, caregiver work schedules, and caregiver relationships were insurmountable even though children were nearby. Thus, there was variation in how access to visitation and contact with children shaped incarcerated women's identities as mothers.

Methods

Prior to conducting research, Aiello obtained permission to conduct this research from Northeast Jail before undergoing a full IRB review at her university. Northeast Jail required an application and two meetings with administrators who offered suggestions for interview questions, but were otherwise hands-off regarding the details of the project. Per the university IRB, interview subjects signed an informed consent form and were provided with a copy for their records with contact information for the university IRB should they have questions about the study. In order to protect confidentiality, all interview recordings and transcripts were kept in the researcher's possession, with names and identifying information kept in a separate, locked file-cabinet.

Aiello conducted 83 interviews with mothers at Northeast Jail. Interview subjects were proportionate to the overall racial/ethnic makeup of the jail: 43% white, 20% black, and 36% Latina. The average age was 32, and mothers had an average of three children. The mothers in this study had varied mothering careers and varying access to their children during their incarceration.² Forty-one mothers lived with their children prior to incarceration, and another 15 did not live with their children, but had regular contact with them. Twelve mothers had no contact prior to their incarceration, and 17 had some, irregular contact³. Those who had caregivers willing and able to bring the children to the jail on Saturday mornings were able to participate in a weekly, 90-minute visitation program for mothers and children. This visit was significant because it was the only contact visit in the facility; all other visits took place "through the glass," with prisoners and their visitors speaking through a phone. Approximately half of the mothers in this study saw their children on a regular, weekly basis through the visitation program. Twelve of the mothers had no visitation with their children.

Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours, with an average of one hour. They were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. In addition, Aiello spent 750 hours conducting participant observation at Northeast Jail—attending visitations, participating in groups and classes, observing counseling, staff, and attorney meetings, facilitating phone calls between incarcerated women and their families, visiting women when they gave birth in outside hospitals, and otherwise hanging out an average of three days per week. Motherhood was a primary topic of concern and discussion in all of these arenas. Detailed field notes were recorded from memory after each visit to the jail.

Data were coded and analyzed using initial coding, memoing, and focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). In the initial coding, both authors reviewed the interview transcripts independently to identify broad categories that emerged from the data. For example, both authors coded the original main themes (e.g., women's first-time motherhood, the circumstances surrounding their arrest and incarceration, their feelings about the caregivers of their children, visitation, jail programming, staff, and fellow prisoners) and certain parts of the interview transcripts that captured women's talk about motherhood. In this process, we found that the women routinely highlighted motherhood as a source of moral identity.

The process also involved memoing (e.g., working collaboratively using Google Docs) to identify

the strategies through which the women claimed moral identities in the face of stigma (i.e., essentializing motherhood, choosing motherhood). In this iterative, collaborative process, we alternated between coding and memoing to ascertain more detailed moral claims (e.g., distancing and embracing) (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Collaborative memoing enabled us to respond to each other's thoughts in a timely manner as we unpacked the subtleties in mothers' moral identity management strategies. Once we identified initial themes and codes, we re-read the interviews and memoed together more intensively. For example, we discovered that mothers were distancing themselves from each other *and* from their own past behaviors (e.g., drug use). While these strategies seemed quite different at first, memoing helped us to see that the women were using both forms of distancing to claim moral identities as mothers. Finally, we used focused coding to develop more detailed moral claims. For instance, focused coding helped us to develop the analysis in regards to self-sacrifice. We found that mothers spoke about self-sacrifice when they talked about their lives before their incarceration, during it, and in the future, but that it took on particular meaning when they spoke about self-sacrifice in regards to visitation. Mothers talked about their willingness to forego visitation for the sake of their children, a practice that we analyzed as a form of embracing incarcerated motherhood.

We treated the mothers' narratives as "identity talk" (Snow & Anderson, 1987) or moral identity "claims" (Goffman, 1963). In short, we did not analyze the mothers' narratives as objective accounts of their experiences, but rather as rhetorical attempts to claim moral identities as mothers. This enabled us to analyze how incarcerated women talked about themselves as good mothers in the face of intense stigma and within conditions of extreme social control in jail.

Findings

Below, we discuss our findings. In the first section, we provide a backdrop for how Northeast Jail—a setting of extreme social control and degradation—nevertheless provided the women with resources to re-envision themselves as good mothers. In the second section, we analyze the strategies by which the women constructed moral identities.

Jail as a Setting for the Construction of Moral Identities

In struggling to cope with the stigma of incarceration, mothers at Northeast Jail engaged in oppositional identity work. In the eyes of their families, communities, and society at large, they had not just violated the law, but neglected their children (Katz, 1998). When Becky⁴, a mother of three, was asked if she had gone to counseling before jail, she replied: "I never thought I needed it. I thought I was just a normal mom like everybody else, but normal moms don't beat up on their kids...so I figured I ain't a normal mom." For Becky and others, being in jail threatened their self-concept as mothers. Yet, as Goffman (1963) notes, jail can also offer a "moral experience"—a dramatic transformation in the ways people evaluate their and others' moral worth. For many of these mothers, jail was a turning point wherein new moral identities were constructed.

The mothers in this study deployed the resources available to them in the total institution (Goffman, 1961) of jail to construct moral identities. Although dominant constructions cast incarcerated women as "bad" mothers—and being in jail undoubtedly made it difficult for women to parent their children—jail offered time, space, and (limited) tools for women to renegotiate dominant meanings of motherhood. Having been, to a greater or lesser extent, uprooted from their social moorings, incarcerated mothers found themselves *liminal persona*: people who are "neither here nor there; [who are] betwixt and between the positions assigned by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner, 1969, p. 95). Like others in a liminal status (see Sandstrom, 1990), incarcerated women were driven to make sense of, and at times challenge, the "spoiled" (Goffman, 1963) features of their identities.

Incarcerated mothers drew on the roles, networks, discourses, and ideologies of jail to do oppositional identity work and construct identities as good mothers. The formal programming and everyday culture of Northeast Jail provided incarcerated mothers with two contradictory messages that facilitated their construction of moral identities: motherhood as a choice and motherhood as biological. First, the crux of Northeast Jail's rehabilitative programming was an ideology of "choice" and "empowerment," which pinned the blame on the women themselves (Aiello, 2013). Echoing the findings of other scholars who have studied women's penal facilities (Enos, 2001; Hannah-Moffat, 2001; McCorkel, 2013), the discourse of empowerment labeled drug addiction, involvement with unsavory men, crime, and incarceration as women's *choice*. For mothers, the

implication was that they chose to abandon their children.

While this message was typically implicit, there were moments when staff and prisoners explicitly charged incarcerated women with bad motherhood. Almost daily staff or prisoners reiterated some version of, “You weren’t thinking of your kids when you were in the streets,” to admonish women who cried or showed concern for their children. Grant, who conducted intake interviews with new prisoners as part of her job, explained, “A lot of them say they did not have good parents. Now their parents are raising their kids.” She added, “I don’t get it. I have two kids,” implying that she would never leave her children with inadequate caregivers. The rhetoric of choice enabled the comparison between Grant’s motherhood—as a white, middle-class, married woman with a solid career—to that of the predominantly disadvantaged women at Northeast Jail. This oversimplified explanation of how these women landed in jail (“they chose to”) impugned the women’s motherhood, while denying the social inequalities that shaped their lives.

Yet, the jail-based rhetorics of “choice” and “empowerment” also motivated many of these women to restore their dignity and worth as mothers. Jail ideologies gave women a language to talk about what they wanted and envisioned for their future as mothers. In articulating their commitment to motherhood, they reclaimed a moral identity as mothers that accommodated their new circumstances. Indeed, motherhood is one of the only positive sources of social recognition and status available to incarcerated women (Enos, 2001; Hairston, 1999; 2002).

Second, the staff framed motherhood as a biological status that could not be rescinded by incarceration, termination of parental rights, or even death. Parenting class was one jail-based forum in which biological notions of motherhood were emphasized, even though the official curriculum was rooted in choice and “concerted cultivation” (Lareau, 2003) style child-rearing strategies. The parenting class instructor often described motherhood as a natural phenomenon created by God: “45,000 fish are in sperm. Only you made it to be born. There is a reason why you were the one.” She argued that the birth process created an unbreakable bond between mother and child:

No matter what, your kids will always love you and trust you. They know who you are. Even if you have a baby and it...gets adopted by someone else, that child will always know that something’s not quite right...and maybe when they’re 18 they’ll try to figure it out.

The biological understanding of motherhood reinforced the moral identity of some mothers, but limited women’s access to other sources of self-worth, like vocational and educational training that might enable them to support themselves and their children after release. Such training was sorely needed for women with limited education and job skills. While the men at Northeast Jail had access to ten different vocational programs, only two of those programs were open to women. Community college courses available to incarcerated males were also off-limits for women. The jail staff justified this inequity by arguing that there were not enough women to constitute a full college class, and men and women could not be permitted to take classes together. However, men and women were allowed to work together in two income-generating programs at Northeast Jail: a graphic-design program that produced brochures and other promotional items, and a manufacturing program that produced goods that were used both at the jail and sold to other penal facilities. In contrast, almost all the other programming for women was therapeutic and focused on motherhood. This was further important because biological understandings helped jail staff to use motherhood as a mechanism of social control. Prisoner behavior was seen as a reflection of women’s commitment to motherhood. Only women who followed jail rules and actively participated in programming were viewed as committed to their children.

Sue’s experience shows how prisoner behavior was grounds for mother-blaming. Sue was sent to segregation for getting into a verbal tiff with a correctional officer; she was also banned from visiting her infant son. She incited the ire of the counseling staff, who chastised her for lacking a commitment to her child. A staff member yelled at Sue: “You’re a mother now! You need to learn how to act.” The staff simultaneously essentialized motherhood and rebuked Sue for failing to make the right choices. Sue’s *choice* to “mouth-off” to a correctional officer, and suffer the loss of her visit, violated the social expectations of motherhood. Even though Sue spent her days locked up and separated from her son, she was beholden to the mandate that mothers should put their children at the center of all their decisions and actions. Here, and in other situations, jail staff used both rhetorics (choice and essentializing) to demean and control incarcerated women. Yet, as we

will show, women capitalized on these same rhetorics to challenge the stigma associated with incarceration and build “good mother” identities.

The incarcerated mothers we studied found strength, pride, and self-worth in motherhood (see also Barnes & Stringer, 2014; Enos, 2001; Shamai & Kochal, 2008). As Marlene, a mother of five, said of the incarcerated mothers at Northeast Jail, “We don’t have a career or anything. We take pride in our mothering.” For these incarcerated women, motherhood was both a source of stigma and a foundation upon which they built moral identities. As such, this study moves beyond binary notions of motherhood as either oppressive or liberating to show how incarcerated women both resisted and reinforced stigmatizing discourses around incarcerated motherhood at Northeast Jail and society at large.

Strategies for Constructing Moral Identities

The women at Northeast jail utilized two key strategies for constructing moral identities: distancing and embracing the stigma of “incarcerated mother.”

Distancing from “incarcerated mother.” The majority of mothers *distanced* themselves from the identity of “incarcerated mother.” They did this in two ways: by “separating mother/addict selves” and/or talking about motherhood as a “choice.” Their liminal status—i.e., they were neither full-time mothers nor prisoners who had relinquished the role of mother—gave incarcerated mothers some freedom to redefine themselves. Certainly, they had to manage the stigma associated with their crimes, motherhood, and incarceration. But the ambiguity of their position also allowed them to draw on a multitude of (at times contradictory) notions of what it meant to be a mother and incarcerated woman in order to remake themselves as virtuous mothers.

Separating mother/addict selves. For mothers with long-term drug addictions, essentializing motherhood helped them manage the stigma of substance abuse and the associated behaviors (e.g., neglect) that threatened their identities as good mothers. These women argued that their true potential as mothers was realized when they were not using drugs or alcohol. Other times they invoked the rehabilitative language of the jail to position themselves as good mothers because they wanted to get and stay clean for their children. In either case, they separated their addict selves from their *true mother selves*.

Most mothers said that jail did not make it easier to be mothers to their children. For some, though, being in jail gave them a sense of clarity they had been unable to achieve “on the streets” and under the influence of drugs. Kimberly said that coming to jail had saved her life, and also made her feel like a good mother: “It’s weird because I get this perception that I’m a good mother because I’m clean. And I have a different attitude, different goals. How do I say it...I feel like I can comfort her more, even over the phone, than I could two weeks ago.” Like the substance-abusing mothers in Shumai and Koshal’s (2008) study, Jane said that she felt like more of a mother in jail than on the streets:

When I’m out there, I’m not a mom. I’m not a sister. I’m not a daughter. I’m not an aunt. I’m just a drug addict, full-fledged. I can show love when I’m sober. When I’m messed up, I can’t even love myself.

Beth was also addicted to heroin, but unlike Jane, she was the primary caregiver of her young daughter: “I always thought I was a good mother, ‘cause I was there. She never wanted for anything.” Through parenting classes and counseling at Northeast Jail, Beth came to believe that her drug addiction prevented her from being fully present for her daughter:

It was like a slap in the face because she didn’t have my whole heart, you know what I mean? Subconsciously, a part of me was focused on the drugs. So even when I was there, I wasn’t there with her, you know, mentally, emotionally. So that is kind of neglect, in a way.

Incarceration gave Kimberly, Jane, and Beth “clean time” that allowed them to get in touch with their “true” feelings about their children and motherhood. While incarceration was the vehicle that made this transformation possible, talk about sobriety as true motherhood distanced these mothers from the self that used drugs and became incarcerated. Clean, the women were able to claim a moral identity that was lost or fractured when drugs hindered their ability to be fully there for their children.

Women also claimed a moral identity through their efforts to get and stay clean. One of the catchphrases at Northeast Jail was “do you,” meaning that jail was a time for women to focus on themselves, take care of their problems, and stay out of trouble and each other’s business. Cassie utilized this rhetoric when asked if there was anything staff could do to make it better for her as an incarcerated mother:

No. Not right now. I got to fix myself, pretty much. It’s all about me. It’s got to be about me first. And all that that people say kids come first, but me as an addict, I got to fix my addiction before I can be a mother.

While the dominant rhetoric surrounding motherhood and drug addiction suggested that women who used drugs did not love their children, statements like Cassie’s effectively transformed fighting addiction into good mothering. Tatiana offered the counterpoint that addiction and love for children are not mutually exclusive: “Who would go through nine months and the ordeal of labor, only to not love your child? It’s a mother’s instinct to love their baby. It’s just that drugs intervene and come between them.”

Talking about motherhood as a choice. Just as crack-using mothers have been portrayed as irresponsible women who love drugs more than their children (Roberts, 1999, p. 156), the incarcerated mothers at Northeast Jail strove to cast off the stigma of “not caring” about their children. As liminal individuals, incarcerated mothers had “no status, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows” (Turner, 1967, p. 98). The inability to differentiate themselves from the group was a source of considerable anxiety for mothers who struggled against the stigma of assumed drug use, selfishness, and bad motherhood that accompanied the “choice” rhetoric at Northeast Jail. As a result, they sought to differentiate themselves from other incarcerated mothers. Some women did this by talking about motherhood as a “choice.”

The mothers in this study dissociated themselves from others by engaging in what Schwalbe, Godwin, Holden, Schrock, Thompson, & Wolkomir (2000) call “defensive othering.” Defensive othering is “identity work done by those seeking membership in a dominant group, or by those seeking to deflect the stigma they experience as members of a subordinate group” (Schwalbe et al., 2000, p. 425). It involves accepting the “devalued identity imposed by the dominant group, but then saying in effect, ‘There are indeed Others to whom this applies, but it does not apply to me’” (p. 425). At Northeast Jail, the choice rhetoric allowed women to defensively “other”—and define themselves as better mothers than—their fellow incarcerated mothers.

Some mothers bristled against the perception that all incarcerated women were addicted to drugs. Marlene did not feel that Northeast Jail was preparing her for life on the outside because “everything is based on an addiction. I’m not an addict, [but] I have real frickin’ problems like you do when you go home.” Colleen strongly criticized the women who purchased the drugs she sold. She justified why her marijuana use was different than other women’s use of harder drugs:

I can’t be like, ‘oh, we’re the same type of woman’ because we’re not. If it came down to me smoking or selling my ass, I would not. I just wouldn’t smoke. That’s not an option. You’re degrading yourself as a woman, a mother, as anything.

Abby believed that staff should consider the situations of individual women: “Just don’t think automatically when you see us that we’re drug addicts.” Deeply ensconced in Abby’s frustration at being thought of as an addict was her belief that women who use and sell drugs are not good mothers:

It pisses me off sometimes, because...I never sold drugs, but I live in the neighborhood...and I see you and you’re never with your kids. You can be out of touch for years and...then you want to come here and cry about them?...It gets me frustrated because, how can you live without your kids?

Although Abby parroted the dominant view that mothers who “live without” their children are bad mothers, she applied it to life on the streets, not to life in jail. In jail, she was one of the group: a mother who committed a crime that led to separation from her son. Her claims to good motherhood rested on “othering” the women who sold and used drugs on the outside—those who were not with their children when they could (and should) have been. In contrast, Abby positioned herself as a mother who was with her son before her incarceration and *would be* with him if she were free, but the choice was not hers to make at that point.

Like many penal facilities, Northeast Jail was a “revolving door” (Harris, 2015), with many of the

same women returning again and again on charges related to addiction, mental illness, and poverty. Most women's sentences were relatively short (one year or less). Camille and Becky, each serving two-year sentences, were exceptions. Both were exasperated by what they saw as other women's lack of desire to stop doing the same things that had landed them in jail in the first place. Camille had seen many of her fellow prisoners return multiple times: "Most of them who say they're not coming back? I'll see you in a couple of months. I give up. I'm not even going to be mad at you, because you just want to keep doing it." Becky reiterated a common trope about mothers who claim to miss their children:

I see a lot of girls that go and come back out and every time they come back they wanna cry about their kids, but...then they're...back two weeks later? They really don't care.

The rhetoric of choice helped these mothers differentiate themselves from the group (and its associated stigma) when they accounted for other women's return to jail as something those women *wanted*. Camille's "you just want to keep doing it" and Becky's "they really don't care" bolstered their identities as mothers who do care, despite their incarceration.

The mothers in this study also used the choice rhetoric to define themselves as mothers who planned a better future for themselves and their children because they were taking advantage of jail programming and putting their children first. Danielle felt that mothers who did not take the jail's parenting class were not genuinely invested in their children: "Some of them didn't do the parenting group, but yet they talk about 'oh I love my kids,' 'oh I miss my kids.' Don't you think it's important that you get involved with parenting groups so you can be better?" Rhonda's daughter had been in the custody of her mother for several years due to Rhonda's repeated incarcerations. Yet, Rhonda argued that women should make the most of what the jail has to offer: "Even though none of us were really thinking of our kids when we came here—obviously we were doing what we wanted to do, period—but now that we are in here, I feel that we should benefit from being here." Further, Rhonda intimated that women who did not follow the rules of the jail were not good mothers. Rhonda commented on mothers who had lost their visits due to penal violations:

You know you have your kid's visit coming up that day, so you should be on your best behavior. Just suck up everything. I mean, if somebody calls you a bitch, just get over it. What's more important? Them calling you a bitch, or you getting to see your kids?

These mothers expressed the belief that good mothering is putting children first: good mothers always think about how their actions will affect their children. At Northeast Jail, being a good parent was largely reduced to a matter of individual choice. Those who wanted to see their children, address their issues with substance abuse, and achieve personal growth were seen as more likely to be good mothers.

Embracing "Incarcerated Mother"

A smaller group of mothers at Northeast Jail transformed incarceration from a mark of shame to a badge of moral authority. These women viewed jail as a "moral experience" (Goffman, 1961), or a life lesson that clarified their priorities and empowered them to be better mothers. While the majority of mothers used distancing strategies to deflect the stigma of incarceration, some mothers embraced their situation—they built identities as especially committed, selfless, and worthy mothers *because* they had overcome the pain of separation from their children and made something positive of it. As Snow and Anderson (1987) defined it in their study of homeless men, embracement is the "verbal and expressive confirmation of one's acceptance of and attachment to the social identity associated with a general or specific role, a set of social relationships, or a particular ideology" (p. 1354). Embracing the identity of incarcerated mother allowed these women to reformulate the stigma of incarceration and integrate it with valued definitions of self. The women at Northeast Jail embraced the identity of incarcerated mother by highlighting the hardships involved and by treating it as a growth-experience that granted them wisdom to be better mothers in the future.

Incarcerated motherhood as hardship and self-sacrifice. First, these mothers contended that the experience of mothering from behind bars epitomized a special commitment to and appreciation for their children. Camille reflected:

It's hard to be a mother while you're in jail, a lot of people think it's impossible. It's not impossible. My dedication always was, and is ...I'll do anything for my kids, but I appreciate them a lot more.

The little things that used to aggravate me, now I find to be cute.

Camille maintained that, while she had always been committed to her children, jail made her a better mother because she was now more patient with and appreciative of her children. When asked if jail made her feel differently about being a mother, Ava said, "It's hard, it really is...Like right now, it's summer time, they're on summer vacation. I wonder what they're doing, where they went." Ava stressed that separation from her children heightened her desire to be with her kids. Unlike mothers who distanced themselves from the stigma of incarceration, Camille and Ava embraced it as an experience that strengthened their moral identities as mothers. In fact, jail made them value motherhood more deeply.

Several women also positioned their own mothering as superior to their children's caregivers, in their own eyes and the eyes of their children. Natalie said: "I was very upset about a lot of things [with her parents as caregivers] but I couldn't do nothing about it, so I just tell my kids don't worry, I'll be home [soon]. It's not even that [my parents] are being hard. It's just that that's not how I would do it." Sabrina talked about negotiating caregiving with her mother, who had guardianship of her two daughters:

It's a little bit touchy because I don't want her to feel like I'm coming down on her for things that were done with me and my brothers that I don't want done, or I want done differently. Like we didn't talk about our feelings. Everything was always ok. We knew we were loved, but we weren't really hugged, or we weren't really told we were loved.

Sabrina felt a conflict: she was grateful for her mother's willingness to care for her children, but concerned about her mother's parenting style. Somewhat ironically, this conflict allowed her to define herself as a *better* mother than her own mom. Colleen, too, defined herself as a better mother than her sister, who had taken her children in, when she said: "When you call 'em they're like 'I miss you. I love you.' That's so good. I don't know how my sister would feel. They don't tell her that." By differentiating their own mothering from the family members (mothers and sister) who were now caring for their children, Natalie, Sabrina, and Colleen claimed a special role in their children's lives. In doing so, these women cemented moral identities as mothers whose presence was sorely missed and who were devoted to—and uniquely capable of—making life better for their children once they returned home.

Additionally, some women invoked the hardships of mothering from behind bars as evidence of their willingness to sacrifice their own needs for their children. The theme of self-sacrifice came up routinely in regards to mother-child visits. Pilar explained that visits were important to her, but it was up to her children whether or not they attended: "I will not make them come unless they're ready for it, you know. Like if it's hard for them to come and see me and go away and leave me behind, I wouldn't let them come." Linda found the process of visitation too frightening for her children: "The hallway, that long hallway, and then they were walking down and they were crying. I was like, Christ, I'll never put them through that again. And I didn't." For Pilar and Linda, the desire to protect their children from the anxiety of visiting them in jail outweighed their own "selfish" desire to see their children. Pilar and Linda's reflections on visitation reinforced their moral identities as mothers who put their children's well-being first.

Anna's six-year-old daughter had been out of her custody for close to a year. Per court order, her father brought her daughter to visit once a month. During visits, Anna observed that a distance had grown between them:

I feel that our relationship is deteriorating because we don't connect like we used to, you know. We just don't. In fact, last week, or the week before, when they did the visits, um, she asked me, "Mommy, why are all these kids crying? Why are all these Moms crying?" I said, "Because they miss one another." I said, "You don't miss me?" She said, "Yeah, but I'm not gonna cry about it."

The trajectory of her relationship with her daughter was very painful for Anna, but she accepted responsibility for the actions that led to the rift in their relationship. She demonstrated self-sacrifice by accepting the new reality of their relationship and pledging to make the best of it: "You know, what could I say? I couldn't say anything, I was really hurt, but I see that, you know, I caused this on myself. And now...all I can do is try to be the best parent I can be from here."

Incarcerated motherhood as life lesson. Second, a few women highlighted the new parenting skills

and sense of moral authority they had gained from incarceration. While incarceration is typically associated with a loss of freedom and humanity (Sykes, 2007/1958), these women fashioned themselves as good, street-wise mothers *because* they were incarcerated. The mothers at Northeast Jail claimed a special mission to teach their children not to follow in their footsteps. In interviews, women repeatedly said they didn't want their children to make the same mistakes they did. Natalie spoke at length of how jail had "changed her as a mother":

One time my daughter says to me, when I get older, I want to smoke weed and cigarettes go to the club and shake my butt just like my mommy. And I laughed, I thought it was funny. But now, it's not funny. She's watching me. And I gotta...let her know that you don't wanna be like that. She could end up here.

Alyssa agreed that being in jail helped her to be a better mother. When her daughter shared that someone had offered her cocaine and that she had sex for the first time, Alyssa said, "No way. I don't want her following in my path." Similarly, Gladys presented the scenario: "If somebody said to him, 'Try this,' I want him to say, 'No, I'm not gonna try it 'cause my mom tried that and my mom was in jail.'" For Natalie, Alyssa, and Gladys, jail provided a new perspective, maturity, and real-world knowledge that helped them enact moral identities as role models and mothers to their children.

Nancy emphasized that her experience in jail inspired her to embrace a special mission as a mother and a teacher-protector of children. She described jail as:

a life experience I will never forget. So when I walk out...at least I'll have the experience to tell my child. I've been in jail and trust me. That's not a place you want to go.

Lily, too, embraced her identity as an incarcerated mother: "If I find my daughter doing things that led me to being here, I will let her know especially so she doesn't think that I'm just scolding her or lecturing her. I'm going to let her know that I was there and you don't want to go there." In contrast to mothers who "scold" or "lecture" their children, Lily vowed to use the hard-won lessons of jail to guide her daughter down the right path. Her moral identity was grounded not in holier-than-thou preaching, but in the front-lines of lived experience. In her view, this potentially shameful disruption in her mothering was a moral experience that made her a better mother. Her hope for the future lay in focusing on what she still had, not on what she had lost through incarceration.

Discussion and Policy Recommendations

At the beginning of this article, we posed three research questions. One, how did the incarcerated women at Northeast Jail challenge the stigma of "bad mothers?" Two, what resources did they use to craft moral identities as "good mothers" under conditions of extreme social control? And three, what were the consequences of their strategies for rehabilitation and reentry?

First, in order to contextualize incarcerated women's moral identity management strategies, we must not forget that incarcerated women confront an intense stigma as "bad mothers." It was not that the mothers at Northeast Jail were innately bad or deficient. Rather, poverty, racial discrimination, trauma, and education were the pathways that led most of these women to Northeast Jail. Once labeled with a felony conviction, the most valued identity the women lost (and were trying to reclaim) was that of "mother" (see also Bachman et al., 2016; Sharpe, 2015). As policy debates shift from a "lock 'em up and throw away the key" approach to a more nuanced, research-based discussion about what works to discourage crime and facilitate re-entry (Mancini, Baker, Sainju, Golden, Bedard, & Gertz, 2015; Opsal, 2015), our findings shed light on how women manage incarcerated motherhood, both as a source of stigma and a moral identity. Insofar as most incarcerated women will be released, and many will return to parent their children, it is crucial that policymakers consider how the content and quality of mother/child relationships during incarceration affect women's sense of self, as mothers' self-concept is integral to the mother/child relationship and women's social reintegration post-release. These findings are also important for supporting children's future well-being, as the mother-child relationship during incarceration is crucial for children's emotional development, sense-of-self, and future relationships (Poehlmann, 2005; Poehlmann & Eddy, 2013; Smyth, 2012). However, we urge caution when incorporating children and motherhood into the incarceration experience because incarcerated women's motherhood can and has been used as a tool of punishment and control (Aiello, in press; Haney, 2013; Rafter, 1992).

Second, the women used two key strategies to craft moral identities: distancing from and embracing incarcerated motherhood. These strategies were powerfully restricted—and partially enabled—by their incarceration. We would argue that the distancing strategies did the most damage to incarcerated women. By focusing on moral identity rather than stigma, we seek to value incarcerated women's humanity and reveal subtleties in their identity-making processes that may be missed by a more negative focus on stigma (Schneider, 1988). Listening to the narratives of women in jail, we see that—far from feeling like “bad” mothers—these incarcerated women embraced motherhood as a valued identity. For many women at Northeast Jail, their liminal status provided some freedom to redefine themselves—a freedom to which the stigma framework may blind us. Indeed, the women's hopes for the future were predicated on what they saw as being a good mother—putting their children first, spending time with their children, and not taking their children for granted.

Third, these strategies had consequences for rehabilitation and reentry. The women's narratives speak to the limitations of moralizing motherhood. The challenges women face when they leave prison or jail are multi-fold. They struggle economically (Johnson, 2014), have trouble finding jobs (Harris & Kelly, 2005), and face limited options for securing safe, affordable housing (Petersilia, 2005). They have inadequate access to substance abuse and mental health programs during incarceration and after release (Bachman et al., 2016; Peugh & Belenko, 1999). While these obstacles are intertwined with women's lives as mothers, the jail's rhetoric around motherhood, addiction, and incarceration focused almost solely on whether or not mothers loved their children enough to make better choices. Without greater attention to the economic component of motherhood and better solutions to the problems of substance abuse and mental health for poor women, incarcerated women's moral identity work as mothers will be fruitless. Jail and prison programming must include high-quality GED programs, college education, and vocational training for incarcerated women. The antiquated assumption that women and their children will be supported by men only serves to undercut women's economic independence and successful reentry.

Our analysis of distancing and embracing strategies tells us that motherhood can operate as an invisible form of gendered punishment that many women experience during incarceration. As Welsh and Rajah (2014) argue, “feminist criminologists must be alert to the ways in which forms of invisible punishment continue to oppress and marginalize crime-processed women” (p. 323). Although suffering for motherhood is not a formal sentence, it is indeed part of the punishment for mothers who become incarcerated. While some scholars (e.g., Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2004; Showers, 1993) argue that motherhood is linked to rehabilitation and that the penal system should provide more resources to help women sustain mother identities in jail, our findings urge caution. While motherhood can empower women to survive and thrive after prison, effective penal policy must acknowledge that motherhood is a help for some women's reentry, but a hindrance for others' (Michalsen, 2011). A singular focus on motherhood is not necessarily helpful for women.

Further, even as the strategies we discuss here did not vary by race, this does not mean that mothers' experiences prior to, during, or after incarceration are not racialized. Women's experiences are always shaped by race/ethnicity as a vector of identity in a racially stratified society (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). We suggest that the relative homogeneity of moralizing strategies may be due to the dominance of the intensive mothering ideology (Hays, 1996) in the U.S. The white, middle-class model of motherhood that privileges solitary caregiving—putting children's needs first and an intense focus on children's desires and development—was seen in every interview in this study, despite the fact that none of the mothers were practicing it. The privileging of intensive mothering devalued other types of parenting that made incarcerated motherhood possible, like othermothering (Collins, 1994; Leverentz, 2011) and non-custodial mothering (Bemiller, 2005). The double-bind that characterizes mothering in the U.S. (Crittenden, 2001; Hays, 1996; Hochschild, 1997) was magnified at Northeast Jail, where women had virtually no access to the resources that would allow them to achieve the culturally-prescribed norms of good motherhood. Yet, they relied heavily on motherhood to make meaning of their lives and build moral identities.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world, and is a close second to Thailand in the incarceration of women (Walmsley, 2015). The U.S. demonstrates a notable disregard for incarcerated mothers and their children. For instance, the U.S. is one of the few nations that does not systematically allow mothers and

infants to reside together (Goshin & Byrne, 2009). The harsh treatment and over-incarceration of offenders in general, and women specifically, may factor into the stigmatization of drug- and criminal-justice-involved women in the U.S. Therefore, it would be reasonable to conclude that the strategies women in this study used to combat stigma are specific to the U.S. context.

Northeast Jail's status as a county jail is a strength of this study because jails are often understudied in favor of prisons. However, it could also be a limitation when considering how these findings might apply to incarcerated mothers held in state and federal prisons. Short sentences and the central location of Northeast Jail meant that many mothers in this study saw their children regularly and planned to reunite with them upon release. The low-level crimes that warranted short sentences also meant that mothers moved in and out of jail on a repetitive basis. It is reasonable to expect that mothers serving long sentences far away from their children would develop different coping mechanisms and strategies of identity management.

The personal and in-depth nature of ethnographic interviewing enabled us to capture women's narratives of incarcerated motherhood. Yet, generalizability is limited, especially since only one penal facility was studied. A mixed-methods approach incorporating survey or other quantitative data would enable researchers to generalize about how incarceration influences mothers' identity management. It is also important to identify how incarcerated mothers' identity-making strategies in jail help or hinder their lives post-release. To that end, future research should examine how women's experience of motherhood in jail/prison shapes their success after incarceration.

Endnotes

¹Therapeutic groups and classes were described as voluntary by the staff, but successful completion of programming was closely tied to parole, so women had a considerable incentive to participate.

²Access to visitation during incarceration was not necessarily consistent with whether or not mothers were a significant part of their children's lives prior to incarceration.

³Numbers that add up to more than 83 can be accounted for by different living relationships between mothers and one or more children.

⁴All participants' names have been changed to protect their identities.

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