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Fathering from prison: Managing relations and reflecting upon intergenerational impacts

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Abstract

In this chapter, I explore how imprisoned men manage and reflect upon fatherhood. Drawing upon nineteen interviews with Portuguese prisoners, I explore the points of connection and detachment between the representations and practices conveyed by the dominant fatherhood ideology and those enacted by fathers in prison.

An in-depth analysis of narratives outlines the challenges and tensions felt by imprisoned men in terms of childcare practices, economic provision, and sustaining the father's identity in a context characterized by imposed separation, penal restrictions, and scarcity of resources. Imprisoned fathers also reflect upon the potential intergenerational impacts of incarceration on their children and describe their attempts to (re)construct the interface between presence and absence within the prison context.

Keywords: fatherhood, imprisonment, intergenerational impacts, relations, structured uncertainty, prisons, Portugal, children, gender asymmetries, rights, responsibilities, challenges, tensions, presence, absence, imposed separation, penal restrictions, gatekeeping, interviews.

Introduction

Over the last decades, prisons became more “permeable”, featured by a continuous flow of people, goods and services (Combessie, 1994; Cunha, 2014). This is coupled with prisons’ humanization movement, which entails the (formal) recognition of prisoner’s rights (including respect for private and family life) and the progressive judicialization of carceral relations. Altogether, those elements have been promoting policies aimed to preserve the prisoner's social ties with their relatives (Touraut, 2012: 179). Nonetheless, these trends don’t conceal the fact that instruments aimed at endorsing social ties are subject to a prison’ management rationale that continues to place primary emphasis on surveillance, discipline, authority and control (Craig, 2004). That is, the carceral world continues to be an overregulated environment, driven by security and control principles, whose main aim is to segregate and isolate offenders, to remove them from the social body and maintain social order (Garland, 2001).

Prison policies are, therefore, interwoven in cumulative and overlapping disciplinary forms that balance goals of safety, control, rehabilitation, and prevention of de-socialization. In this sense, relationships with the external world are enacted at this intersection of contradictory regulatory principles: the environment that prevails in prison inexorably limits policies that promote the upholding of social ties (Touraut, 2012; Granja, 2018, 2019). In this chapter, I aim to explore how the boundaries and contexts of personal relationships between imprisoned fathers and children are redrawn in the shadow of penal control. Drawing by nineteen interviews conducted in a Portuguese prison I will explore how imprisoned men manage fatherhood and reflect upon prison intergenerational impacts.

In Western Europe and North America, ideologies that promote a “new paradigm” of fatherhood have been increasingly disseminating in popular culture, expert discourses and current social policy (Marsiglio, 1993; Wall and Arnold, 2007; Gregory and Milner, 2011). There’s been a cultural transition from the image of a distant father, as a provider and a symbol of authority to the figure of the present, involved and caring father. That is, men are currently expected to play an active role in parenting functions, participating in nurturing activities, supporting both financially and emotionally their children, and sharing parental responsibilities with mothers. However, the ability for parenting according to dominant social expectations is not simply a matter of individual effort,

commitment and willingness. Parenting is highly conditioned by structural and contextual circumstances (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2009), inextricably linked with access to resources such as money, time, health, and social support, deeply intersects with social class and status (Umberson, Pudrovska and Reczek, 2010) and is featured by individual trajectories and socially situated masculine discourses and practices (Castelain-Meunier, 2002; Woldoff and Washington, 2008; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2009; Smock and Greenland, 2010). Imprisoned fathers, as a particular category of underprivileged and criminalized men, have remained largely overlooked and unscrutinised by social policies and debates that address contemporary fatherhood. This chapter explores the points of connection and detachment between the representations and practices conveyed by the dominant fatherhood ideology and those enacted by fathers in prison.

(Dis)connections between the new paradigm of fatherhood and being a father in prison

Norms and social expectations about fatherhood are being rediscovery and reinvented (Marsiglio, 1993; Wall and Arnold, 2007; Gregory and Milner, 2011). Fatherhood has been increasingly subjected to new tensions, becoming more varied, fluid, and fragmented (Castelain-Meunier, 2002; Collier and Sheldon, 2008). Currently, fathers face a context in which they may search and actively construct their meanings and definitions as fathers, among the plurality of possibilities available (Forste, Bartkowski and Jackson, 2009).

Acknowledging the “co-existence of change and continuity” in father’s traditional and new images and roles (Collier and Sheldon, 2008a:134), several authors have been showing the multi-layered nature of the current fathering ideology (Ives, 2007: 190). That is, despite recent changes in the social construction of fatherhood and in social policies that claim for a more engaged and involved father, ‘traditional’ ideals such as the breadwinner, disciplinarian, and moral compass figure are still very much present and influencing men’s attitudes towards fathering (Lamb, 2000; Machado and Granja, 2013). In other words, the role of the father “now carries with it a host of expectations that range widely from nurturer to breadwinner” (Forste *et al.*, 2009: 51).

This wide range of roles that fathers are expected to fulfil, also highlights a broader and more subtle move from “rights to responsibilities” in family law (Collier and Sheldon, 2008a: 102) that has been expanding in law in Western countries (Ives, 2007).

It is coupled with a legal harmonization, at an international level, of the idea that children must receive care from both parents, including from non-residential parents. Within this landscape, that assigns increasing importance to the role of fathers in children's lives, the rights and responsibilities of imprisoned men have remained largely overlooked and unscrutinised by social policies and debates that address contemporary fatherhood (Hairston, 2002).

According to Creasia Hairston (2002), who has been extensively studying parenting in prison settings, before imprisonment, most fathers assumed several responsibilities towards children. Studies in several national contexts have been showing that fathers generally carried out different roles, in terms of financial support and caregiving, and had different levels of involvement with children from different mothers, enacting scenarios of interchangeable paternity (Machado and Granja, 2013). At the time of arrest, men usually lived in the same household as at least one of their children, typically their youngest (Hairston, 2002). But, in general, most children lived with their mothers or grandparents and continued to live with them following their fathers' conviction and arrest (Koban, 1983; Mumola, 2000; Schafer and Dellinger, 2000).

Upon imprisonment, the boundaries and contexts of parental relationships are entirely redrawn on the shadow of prison. There is a consistent body of literature showing that prisoners who maintain regular contact with children and report family support during imprisonment are more likely to remain connected to their offspring after release and to have more positive outcomes in re-entry (Visser, 2011; Lösel *et al.*, 2012; Pierce, 2015; Fowler *et al.*, 2017; Martin and Phaneuf, 2018; Charles, Muentner and Kjellstrand, 2019). However, prison systems are usually alienated from the concept of "imprisoned father" and present a deep shortage of instruments sensitive to parent-child involvement. Institutional procedures regarding forms of contact, such as phone calls, letters, and especially visiting, are generally characterized by a lack of attention to the needs of prisoners, and especially the needs of visitors (Christian, 2005; Comfort, 2008; Sturges and Al-Khattar, 2009; Pierce, 2015; Martin and Phaneuf, 2018). Visiting involves a challenging emotionally and financially commitment both for adult visitors (Grinstead *et al.*, 2001; Christian, 2005) and for children, due to the unsympathetic, unsuitable, hostile and restrictive prison environment (Hairston, 2007; Nurse, 2001). By overemphasizing principles of control and surveillance over family bonds and presenting a deep shortage of instruments sensitive to parent-child involvement, prison systems, therefore, structure an environment with little concern for prisoners who are fathers (Nurse, 2001: 387).

The scarce possibilities afforded by prisoners to “be a father” in prison thereby combine tensions and inconsistencies between involvement and withdrawal, presence and absence, responsibility and duties dismissal. By extensively limiting contact, prison regulations have the potential to detach, or further disconnect, prisoners from their children as well from other relatives (Nurse, 2001; Woldoff & Washington, 2008). By remitting men to a peripheral role in childcare, engagement, and economic provision, prison systems embody, reproduce and consolidate gender asymmetries. That is, dismissing prisoners from assuming parental responsibilities, necessarily imposes on other caregivers, mostly mothers, full responsibility for child upbringing. This also implies that parental involvement during imprisonment depends, on a large extent, on the relationship between the father and the main caregiver, usually mothers (Clarke *et al.*, 2005: 239; Nurse, 2001; Machado & Granja, 2013). Generally, if harmonious relationships are maintained, caregivers tend to encourage the upholding of contacts and connections. On the contrary, if relationships are strained, mothers may be not willing to facilitate interaction, being uncooperative and discouraging father-child ties (Dyer, 2005). This scenario composes what has been called “maternal gatekeeping”, a theme largely addressed in literature focused on fathering from prison (Roy and Dyson, 2005). In such situations, imprisoned fathers have scarce leverage to negotiate patterns of involvement with children (Arditti, Smock and Parkman, 2005).

Besides impacting father-child attachment, imprisonment also tends to undermine most parenting practices, namely caring activities, economic provision, protection, support, guidance, discipline, and education (Hairston, 2002; Dyer, 2005; Swisher and Waller, 2008). Therefore, by restricting contact and preventing parental functions, fathering from prison is mainly characterized by fathers’ lack of control and own perceived inability to engage in fathering practices (Boswell & Wedge, 2002: 42; Tripp, 2001).

Notwithstanding, the highly restrictive and limited carceral environment may also paradoxically allow fathers to reframe and re-construct previous relationships with children. As Kathryn Edin and her colleagues show, imprisonment may be a “turning point” in some previously detached parent-child relationships (Edin, Nelson and Paranal, 2004). By sheltering individuals from the pressures of everyday survival that previously constrained their fathering performances – such as poverty, violence, criminality, and substance abuse – and by providing prisoners time available to dedicate to their children, fathers may revivify or recreate paternal commitment (Clarke *et al.*, 2005; Machado and

Granja, 2013). In this sense, if fathering from prison is conceptualized as a “dormant period”, due to inability to carry out fathering roles, re-entry may represent an opportunity to “start over” with children, eventually displaying renewed fathering intentions (Arditti *et al.*, 2005: 277).

Intergenerational impacts of imprisonment

Assuming that the children of imprisoned parents are at increased risk of developing behaviours that are not in line with the prevailing social norms, there has been an increase in studies assessing the potential intergenerational impacts of imprisonment. In general, these studies tend to highlight the harmful consequences that the imprisonment of parents can have on the lives of children, highlighting, in particular, the emotional, behavioural and mental health problems that (allegedly) arise from paternal or maternal absence (Gabel, 1992; Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999; Parke and Clarke-Stewart, 2003; Hairston, 2007; Murray and Farrington, 2008a, 2008b).

Most of these studies indicate that the children of imprisoned mothers and fathers tend to exhibit fear, anxiety, isolation, guilt, depression, regression in development and changes in behaviour and school performance (Bloom and Steinhart, 1992; Murray and Farrington, 2008b). Amongst these studies, there is a particular focus on research that seeks to explore the relationship between parental involvement with the criminal justice system and the potentially increased vulnerability of children to future transgressive behaviour (Murray *et al.*, 2009; Murray and Murray, 2010; Besemer *et al.*, 2011; Wakefield and Wildeman, 2011; Murray, Farrington and Sekol, 2012). However, despite the prevalence of investigations that seek to unravel the potential connections between parental confinement and childhood and juvenile deviant and criminal behaviour, a clear causal relationship between these phenomena has never been established (Hairston, 2007: 21). On the contrary, studies have shown that imprisonment is part of a complex set of social and family issues where, among various forms of social exclusion and marginalization, the imprisonment of fathers and mothers represents the corollary of a series of problems that also affect children (Hissel, Bijleveld and Kruttschnitt, 2011: 358). Thus, although the results of these studies can be used to draw attention to the fact that the action of the criminal justice system has possible repercussions on the well-being and quality of life of children of imprisoned parents, it is of utmost relevance to avoid abusive generalizations of results by establishing causal and direct associations between parental

confinement and infantile and juvenile delinquency. Based on assumptions that can be widely criticized and presenting several methodological problems (Parke and Clarke-Stewart, 2003; Hairston, 2007) these studies do not allow to determine the amplitude, magnitude and potential intergenerational impacts of imprisonment in the medium and long term. Intending to further elucidate the experiences of men in prison, in this chapter I explore the imprisoned fathers reflecting upon the potential intergenerational impacts of imprisonment, outlining their main concerns and strategies to deal with such possibility.

Fathering in prison: a look into Portuguese policies

In Portugal, there is no formal auditing of prisoners' parental status. This absence of information has contributed to the reiteration of the invisibility of parenting in prison. This has consequences both in the field of academic production and, especially, regarding intervention and planning of social policies. Existing surveys estimate that the prevalence of parenthood among Portuguese prisoners may be quite high. A survey found that 85% of imprisoned women are mothers and 67,3% of imprisoned men are fathers (Torres *et al.*, 2016). Although the percentage of imprisoned mothers is considerably higher than the one of fathers, there must take into consideration that men are more imprisoned than women: 93,3% of the Portuguese prison population is male¹. This, therefore, implies that the actual number of incarcerated men who have children is higher than of incarcerated women who are mothers.

In Portugal, historically, the rights of male and female prisoners to increased access to family life were played out differently, thereby reproducing dominant gender ideologies. For men, these rights were likely to be constituted in terms of access to sexuality, in particular in the discussion of conjugal visits. At least since 1996, some Portuguese male prisons developed pilot projects which enabled conjugal visits for convicted men (Granja, 2017), whereas until 2008 there were no facilities available to conjugal visits in female prisons. Up to that year, women prisoners only had conjugal visits if their partner was also imprisoned, only emphasizing men's sexual imperatives (Granja, Cunha and Machado, 2014).

¹ <https://www.pordata.pt/Portugal/Reclusos+total+e+por+sexo-271> (last accessed 4 February 2021).

In contrast, female prisoners' access to family life was traditionally constituted in terms of parenting within the prison. Despite the legal framework that regulates the residence of children in prison have been changing over the years (Cunha, 1994; Cunha and Granja, 2014), Portugal has a relatively long tradition – dated from the period of *Estado Novo* Portuguese dictatorship (1933-1974) – of mothers being allowed to have their children with them during prison sentences². Fathering in prison has been, however, addressed differently. Only in 2009, the judicial regulation of children in prisons, assuming gender neutrality, expanded the possibility of residing with children in prison for male prisoners³. Despite legislative changes, inequalities still remain. Formally, the Portuguese law assumes the ideal of gender egalitarianism, but its application reveals a more complex scenario. Having their children in prison during sentences continues to be a highly unlikely scenario for imprisoned fathers. Logistical and environmental issues associated with most men's prisons – which commonly include serious problems of overcrowding – imply that it is highly unlikely for children to reside with their fathers in prison (Machado and Granja, 2013; Cunha and Granja, 2014). For example, there are no day-care centres in male institutions, neither cells equipped for a child's stay and separated from other prisoners' quarters, both formally considered indispensable conditions for the permanence of children in prison (cf. Decree-Law n.º 51/2011⁴). Furthermore, although the need to assure female prisoners “special needs” regarding motherhood is mentioned among State orientations addressing parenting in prison, there's no equivalent reference regarding fathering (cf. Law n.º 115/2009).

Thus, despite recent legislative amendments that seek to mitigate gender differences, men's parenting role remains a largely overlooked aspect of prison life and prison policy in Portugal. Imprisoned fathers are formally included but simultaneously practically ignored in the only Portuguese prison policy that directly addresses prisoners'

² During *Estado Novo* Portuguese dictatorship, penitentiary treatment was heavily drawn on dominant gender ideologies, namely domesticity and motherhood. Therefore, the residence of children in prison with their mothers was originally implemented as a mechanism to rehabilitate deviant women. Aimed to instil feelings of maternal responsibility in inmates and cultivate mothering skills, mothering within prison aimed to put women “back on track” in terms of corresponding to “female roles” which they had supposedly strayed from. Thus, although permission to keep infant children in prison took the children's interests into account, it was primarily justified by the program's aim to educate the mothers (Cunha, 1994).

³ The permissible age limit for children to live in the institution with their parents is three years old, exceptionally five years old if the following conditions are met: authorization of another holder of parental responsibility is provided; staying in prison is considered in the child's best interest; there are the requisite facilities. For recent general regulations see General Regulation for the Prisons in Portugal, Decree-Law n.º 51/2011.

⁴ Available: <https://dre.pt/pesquisa/-/search/276858/details/normal> (last accessed 4 February 2021).

parenting, i.e., allowance to reside with underage children during prison sentences. This follows broader patterns, highlighted by studies focusing on parenting issues in different settings, which show how “support for father involvement, to the extent that it exists, occurs within the framework of fathers as part-time, secondary parents whose relationship with children remains less important than mothers” (Wall & Arnold, 2007: 508).

Similarly to other countries, Portugal also does not have particular policies guaranteeing prisoners contacts with their children. This, therefore, implies that parent’s ability to maintain contact is dependent on the availability of economic, social and temporal resources, limited by institutional surveillance and prison restrictions, and contingent on prisoners-carer relationships (Dyer, 2005; Lösel *et al.*, 2012; Granja, Cunha and Machado, 2013). In Portugal, visits are allowed twice a week, one hour each, with three visitors at most. Visiting rooms are generally characterized by a lack of facilities adapted for children, and no provision is usually made for the special needs of infants (bottles of water, breastfeeding and diaper changing).

Facing this highly restrictive framework, how do prisoners balance social expectations and personal desires regarding fatherhood? Fathering in prison reveals complex connections between the new paradigm of fatherhood, prison policies and fathers’ situated expectations and experiences. My aim in this chapter is to examine how imprisoned fathers reconstruct, reframe and reinvent their discourses and practices when confronted with conflicting messages that, on the one hand, appeal to more involved fathers, and, on the other hand, institutionally dissuade and prevent fathers from fulfilling their parental obligations.

Methods

This chapter is part of a larger research study conducted in Portugal whose main purpose is to explore the relationship between prisoners and their families and the social and familial impacts of incarceration. Drawing on information collected by nineteen semi-structured interviews with nineteen Portuguese male prisoners, I propose a comprehensive and interpretative approach of men’s narratives.

Interviews were conducted in a Portuguese male prison between January and February 2012. Participants’ oral consent to conduct and record the interviews was obtained after they were informed about the study’s aim and their anonymity was guaranteed. The interviews lasted, on average, seventy minutes and the tapes were transcribed verbatim. A purposive sample was used, which means that new data were

added to the analysis when it was considered of theoretical interest (Guest *et al.*, 2006). Prisoners were targeted using five main criteria: Portuguese nationality; variety of family configurations; ethnic diversity; convicted; and had been imprisoned for more than six months.

The majority of the interviewees came from precarious economic, social and cultural backgrounds, reflecting trends shown in other national and international studies on prisoners (Wacquant, 2000; Cunha, 2002; Gomes, 2014; Torres *et al.*, 2016; Granja, 2017). Five interviewees were “ciganos”⁵, as shown in table 1. The participants ranged in age from 23 to 56 years old, with an average of 35 years. The men had low levels of education and social status: nine had four years of school, and, before imprisonment, the majority had been dependent on welfare due to low incomes, precarious work conditions, and high rates of unemployment. Most men interviewed had minor children, with an average of 2,5 children. During imprisonment, fourteen fathers had their offspring in the care of children’s mothers.

Regarding legal and criminal characterization, twelve prisoners were recidivists. Ten interviewees were convicted due to crimes against property, and five were convicted for crimes related to drug trafficking. There were also two prisoners sentenced due to crimes against people, one prisoner serving a sentence for driving a vehicle without a legal license and one prisoner arrested for possession of a prohibited weapon. Prison sentences ranged from two hundred days to nineteen years, with an average of six years and eighteen months.

⁵ Roma, a highly stigmatized and widely dispersed ethnic group, is the designation adopted by Roma activists and some members of the Roma community. However, the majority of members of this community in Portugal use the ethnonym “ciganos” to identify themselves.

Table 1: Prisoners' characterization

Socio-Demographic Characteristics	Ethnicity	Non-Cigano	14
		Cigano	5
	Age	Mean	35
		Range	23 - 56
	Education	Cannot read or write	1
		4 years of schooling	8
		6 years of schooling	5
		9 years of schooling	2
Secondary school		3	
Family	Household' Constitution	Number of children (Average)	2.5
		Number of children (Range)	1 - 7
		Residential father (all children)	11
		Non-residential father (all/some children)	8
	Carers during imprisonment	Mother	14
		Grandparents	2
		Foster Care Institution	2
		Others	1
Characteristics of Criminal Record and Convicted Offences	Criminal Record	Recidivists	12
		First Conviction	7
	Crime	Crimes against property	10
		Related to drug trafficking	5
		Crimes against people	2
		Others	2
	Length of the sentence	Mean	6 years and 8 months
		Range	200 days – 19 years

Source: Prisoners' files and interviews

Fathering in prison: challenges and tensions

The new paradigm of fatherhood is currently defined as “primarily a state of doing, and not a state of being” (Ives, 2007: 186). In other words, powerful normative discourses are increasingly encouraging fathers to be practically involved in children’s lives. However, as previously mentioned, the prison environment, overregulated by order, discipline and control, does not foster a close involvement between fathers and children. The most obvious and immediate deterrent to father-child involvement during imprisonment is accessibility. Prisoners cannot be present both in banal and significant

moments of infants' life, neither can fulfil caring activities. Prisoner's own perceived inability to enact fathering practices that they conceptualize as crucial leads to fears of being forgotten and/or replaced by other relatives in children's lives. These concerns are especially acute when fathers are convicted to long custodial sentences and/or have young children. André, aged 23, has one four-years-old daughter, being taken care by the mother with the help of grandparents. André is facing his first conviction and is sentenced for aggravated robbery for sixteen years. Discrepancies between André' desires to stay involved and the impossibilities imposed by confinement are clear in his narrative:

I want to follow up my daughter' development, I want that during "father's day" when my daughter is at kindergarten doing little gifts, she is aware that she has a father. (...) Right now what concerns me is that I cannot be out there and be involved with my daughter. I think the most important stage in our children' life is their development, when they are little when they begin to interpret things and acquire moral values. I think it is very important for fathers to be by their side; and that is what makes me so confused. I can't be there! (...) Father's day arrives, parents are called to the school and where is the father of my daughter? Imprisoned. At my daughter's birthday, she asks me to go to her party and where am I? Imprisoned. Right now that's what worries me. I'm not there. I can't see my daughter growing.

André outlines the impossibility to measure up to social expectations and personal desires regarding fatherhood while serving a prison sentence. Imprisoned fathers tend to feel helpless and powerless to stay engaged with their children. The effects of separation foster estrangement experiences that are especially vividly during direct contacts with offspring, where mutual alienation becomes more apparent. Jorge, aged 29, has one three-years-old son and is facing his first conviction. He is sentenced for nineteen years due to aggravated robbery, qualified theft and sequestration. The mother of his son is also imprisoned, and his son is living with maternal grandparents. Jorge talks about the most emotionally challenging moments during his imprisonment.

Sometimes I'm talking with my son on the phone, and he's calling "father" to his grandfather and it hurts. (...) But the thing that has hurt the most here in prison was when my son entered in visit walking. I didn't see my son's first steps, I didn't hear my son's first word, and that's what hurts me. I lost everything. What really hurts is that I gave my child the life he didn't deserve.

Anthropologists have highlighted the symbolic value of family rituals, consisting of celebrations, traditions, and patterned family interactions, especially during times of tension, change and uncertainty (Pett, Lang, & Gander, 1992: 528). The partial disintegration of family rituals triggered by prison sentences – such as important stages of infants’ development, father’s day, Christmas, birthdays – is experienced by fathers as especially difficult and challenging due to their relevance in enforcing and strengthening family connections among relatives. It is relatively common in prisoners’ narratives the assessment of the time they have spent in prison according to their absences in children’s lives: that is, prisoners tend to count the years spent in prison by reporting how many Christmas or children’s birthdays they missed (“*I already spent three Christmases here*”). Family rituals provide a sense of family cohesion, belongingness, support, connection, and bonding (Homer *et al.*, 2007) from which imprisoned fathers are most deprived.

During prison sentences, family interactions are endorsed within policies that promote links between prisons and the outside world, such as home leaves, probation, visiting, birthday celebrations, and parole. However, by being enacted at the intersection of contradictory regulatory principles – rehabilitation and prevention of de-socialization *versus* discipline and control – these policies are still conditional on the prevalence of surveillance and authority. In this sense, family contacts tend to be defined as privileges and bonuses of the prisoners, rather than as the rights of the family as a whole (Farrell 1998; Wacquant 2002: 376). This means that more advantageous contact conditions with relatives (including children) only are assigned to prisoners along a series of progressive phases, which vary in control intensity along with the length of imprisonment, and during which prisoners must prove themselves “worthy”. Furthermore, even after obtaining more favourable terms, there is a permanent possibility of suspension of these “beneficial” instruments if their rules and regulations are not strictly enforced or if prisoners are guilty of problematic conduct (Comfort, 2002).

Accordingly, "benefits", i.e., more favourable conditions for family involvement, might be both assigned and withdrawn during short periods. Prisoners and their families, therefore, enact involvement in a context of “structured uncertainty”. This concept was developed by Radelet, Vandiver, & Berardo (1983) regarding families of men sentenced to the death penalty. Here I propose to extend the scope of the concept, including other prisoners who are not sentenced to death. I argue that structured uncertainty (also) regards the vagueness that prisoners and their families experience regarding their contacts since

they are surrounded by variation and ambiguity. That is, despite facing a highly structured context, in which every relation is “played out in interactions whose timing, content, and context are dictated by prison regulations” (Dyer, 2005: 208), there is a permanent inconstancy and changeability of family contact patterns. This promotes prisoners’ frustration and highlights fathers’ lack of control over family life. Samuel, aged 24, has two children, with four and nine years old being taken care of by his wife. He is a recidivist and is convicted due to drug trafficking for six years and two months. Samuel and his relatives were hopeful that his probation would be authorized a few days before our interview took place. All requirements were allegedly fulfilled: he had a job opportunity on the outside and all familial, social and behaviour requirements were met. But correctional authorities’ final decision prevented Samuel probation due to his previous convictions. In his narrative, Samuel reports the hardships of building a stable relationship with his children when facing continuous limitations and restrictions to family contact, regardless of his strict compliance to prison regulations.

My son is always asking me when I'm going to leave [prison]. (...) I started to give him a bit more reassurance that I would go home [due to probation]. Now I'm not allowed to go. How do I explain these situations? (...) I cannot explain them. (...) My daughter understands better. When my parole was prohibited, I talked with her and explained. She said she wouldn't cry in front of me but then when she was alone, she would cry [Samuel starts crying].

Besides influencing the upholding of relationships, making it difficult for fathers to explain to infants why their absence is determined by others, structured uncertainty also heavily influences families’ economic situation. Samuel further explains:

When I entered prison, we [family] had some money (...) we learned how to manage our money during the first years I spent here ... But now towards the end [of the sentence], money starts getting scarcer, right? Here I am not able to send money to them! (...) I was expecting to leave prison, re-start work and helping them. Providing for my children... Here I'm not able to do it.

Besides all limitations imposed on accessibility, involvement, and engagement (Lamb, 2000), imprisoned fathers also tend to be prevented from being economically responsible for their children. The possibilities to be a provider while in prison are scarce or non-existent, therefore interfering with the establishment of financial support

agreements (Swisher and Waller, 2008). Men's earning income in prison is unstable and, if there is the possibility of having a job, wages are generally low. Although some prisoners can transfer some money to their families – a possibility allowed by Portuguese prison systems – there are usually meagre and sporadic amounts.

It is, however, important to note that although economic provision for children might be hampered by imprisonment, this does not imply that all men steadily held the role of the provider before imprisonment. A distinction between these scenarios, often blurred in literature, must be made. Drawn overwhelmingly from young, unemployed, working classes, and facing high rates of addictive problems, before imprisonment, some fathers were facing contextual circumstances that turned economic provision for children flexible, unstable or even unfeasible (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2009; Machado and Granja, 2012). In such situations, the instability or absence of provision is not triggered but perpetuated and exacerbated during imprisonment. Besides not allowing parents to enact the role of economic provider through their income, prison systems also limit other “fluid” forms of material support. For example, some fathers reported that they used to choose not to consume cartons of juice and milk provided by the correctional facility during some meals, to offer them to their children – since many families face difficult economic situations on the outside (Comfort, 2008; Granja, 2018). This constituted a seemingly insignificant provision but was symbolically important for fathers since it somehow materialized a small contribution towards their children. However, when prison administration realized this was a common practice among some prisoners, particularly among the most disadvantaged ones, it was formally forbidden.

Besides undermining childcare practices and economic provision, imprisonment also pressurizes the father's identity. Prison environments are designed to deprive individuals of their independence and responsibilities (De Viggiani, 2012: 272). Prisoners are subject to constant control procedures and mechanisms, quite noticeable during direct contacts with children, such as visits, which deny most of their authority and autonomy. Children tend to incorporate and reproduce, by their representations and actions, their image of fathers as individuals subject to the authority of the others in the more mundane tasks. In this sense, prisoners feel that their identity as role models within the family is damaged. Fernando is 36 years old and has five children aged from two to twenty, being taken care of by his wife. He is a recidivist and is sentenced for possession of a prohibited weapon for two years and two months. His narrative explains one of his son's reactions to prison surveillance and monitoring during prison visits.

Each time I go through that door [visiting room door] my tears fall because every time my son hears the sound of the bell [that indicates the end of the visit] he says "father, stand up, go away, go" seems like he wants to get rid of me ... He knows that someone will yell if I don't stand up and go away (...) is very, very, very [difficult] for a father to be in prison.

Men's loss of independence, coupled with their submission to authority and with the lack of resources for "hegemonic masculinity" accomplishment, may question and threaten prisoner's sense of manhood (Bandyopadhyay, 2006; Jewkes, 2002; Messerschmidt, 2001). Accordingly, these deprivations might also influence men's identities as fathers: prisoners lose the ability to define themselves as self-assured, self-contained, and autonomous subjects (Collier, 1998: 138).

Reflecting upon the intergenerational impacts of imprisonment

Although there are several contingencies associated with studies stating that children of imprisoned parents face a higher risk of presenting emotional and behavioural problems, namely delinquent conduct, I argue that it is still important to understand how prisoners perceive the potential intergenerational impacts of incarceration on their children. Their interviews outline several concerns in this regard, not only in terms of how their imprisonment will affect children objective life conditions, both presently and in the future, but also how children interpret and make sense of their fathers' crimes and conviction (Fowler *et al.*, 2017). More particularly, prisoners worry that their children might commit "the same mistakes" they did. Bruno, aged 38, has one eight years old son being taken care by his wife. Bruno is facing his first prison sentence due to qualified theft for four years and six months. As the following quotation shows, Bruno is worried about the effects that his trajectory, permeated by drug addiction, might pose negative influences over his son.

It is a doubt that I have because he sees me as an example and I fear that he will also want to do the same things that I did. Because we know that now when he enters puberty these things will start to appear and he can think "oh, my father also tried this, I will try it too".

To prevent this type of influence, prisoners strive to resignify their life trajectories, permeated by deviant and criminal behaviours, into life lessons to transmit to their children. One of the main ways to do this is to explain to children the crimes they committed, underlining its harmful consequences. Paulo, aged 43, is serving a 7-years prison sentence due to a series of thefts and qualified scam. He has been facing a drug addiction problem since his youth. As his narrative outlines, Paulo explains to his daughters his life trajectory in the hope that they will choose a different path, learning from their father's example.

I already explained my crimes to my daughter. "My drug addiction led me to commit crimes and I have to pay for it", that's what I say to them, "dad is a good human being, but I wasn't a good citizen, now I have to pay " (...) what worries me more are undoubtedly my daughters. I hope to be able to live with them, to be able to forward them on a good conduct of life. I don't want them to follow the example that I was, I want them to remember what I am now.

A similar strategy is reported by João, aged 38, that is facing his first conviction due to qualified theft and is sentenced to three years and six months. He has one six years old son, being taken care by the mother. João decided, since the beginning of his prison sentence, that he would be completely honest with his son about why he is imprisoned. He considers this to be a good way of explaining to his son the consequences of his choices, in the hope that his son will choose a different life path.

I am not hiding anything from him, I am telling him why I am here for his own good. This way I explain what the consequences [of our choices and behaviour are]. Above all else, I need to explain the consequences.

Concerns about the intergenerational impacts of incarceration are further complexified by biographies of some interviewed fathers who have themselves been affected by the incarceration of their parents. This is the case of Samuel, who had, for most of his childhood and adolescence, both parents imprisoned. Samuel was raised by his grandparents and, during his youth years, he was also institutionalized in a juvenile facility due to deviant behaviour. Samuel reports considerable concerns over the impacts of his imprisonment on his children since he has been through the same experience.

My son cries every time he comes here to visit me. It's awful. It is one of the things that hurts me the most because I know what he is feeling because I have been through the same.

Samuel is also concerned about the impacts his imprisonment might have on the future relationship with his children. His father died but his mother is still imprisoned. By his own choice, he does not maintain a relationship with his mother. He worries that the same might happen with his children when they fully understand his situation.

I have no contact with my mother. There is a permanent hurt towards her. Because she had her opportunity and then she went back to drugs. But can I judge her? I did the same. This worries me.

Interviewed fathers fully recognize and acknowledge that the experience of having an imprisoned parent could have important intergenerational effects on their children. Besides imposing financial hardship and challenging the upholding of a close relationship, fathers also equate the potential effects that their imprisonment can have on their children present and future behaviour. Aware of the potential intergenerational effects of imprisonment, fathers attempt to explain to their children the crimes they committed, as well as its harmful consequences, in the hope this might have a deterrent effect in children's behaviour. Their interactions are, therefore, framed by the aim of being a male mentor (Fowler *et al.*, 2017). However, these types of strategies are further complexified for imprisoned fathers who have themselves been children of imprisoned parents, as it is the case of Samuel. In such situations, fathers are not only concerned about children's future behaviour but also about the implications of imprisonment in their future relationship with children, as increasing awareness of the reasons that led fathers to prison, might increase the risk of future strained relationships.

(Re)inventing the interface between presence and absence

Fathering in prison is mainly inscribed into a nexus of absence, powerlessness, structured uncertainty and threats to identity. Facing specific social conditions inside the carceral milieu, men must actively renegotiate, reconstruct and reframe their fathering' scripts (Clarke *et al.*, 2005). Do prisoners resign and completely renounce from the responsibilities of fatherhood, corroborating and reproducing male periphery in

childcare? Or do fathers strive to maintain, albeit reconfigured, their parenting roles (Charles, Muentner and Kjellstrand, 2019)? There is no straight answer to these questions. Data shows that prisoners engage in some roles still available to them, while withdrawal from others, thereby revealing scenarios of “fragmented fatherhood” (Collier and Sheldon, 2008). Such negotiation is anchored on the management and balance of individual trajectories, social expectations, personal desires, prison restrictions, access to economic resources, and relationship dynamics with children’ caregivers.

Most interviewed fathers talk about their ability to remain engaged in their children’s lives during imprisonment by providing emotional and developmental support. Connections with offspring provide prisoners with a sense of belonging, a source of hope and represent a major motivation to the future. During imprisonment, and especially during prison visits, João is investing in developing a close emotional relationship with his son. By trying to actively participate in the child’ development, João provides his son educational encouragement and also attempts to build an emotional connection with him through small gifts and actions.

He is learning to speak English, he knows all the numbers in English and the whole alphabet, I train here with him. Now I began to teach him a few mathematical rules. I'm here but it's like if I was outside. (...) My son sends letters to me with drawings. Every week he asks daddy for a surprise, I draw, or I try to give him an lollypop or an Kinder egg. A simple paper airplane, a doll made of paper ... he gives such a huge value to that, I feel really happy.

Prisoners’ commitment to sharing experiences during visits, engaging in several activities with their offspring, is crucial to reinforce the father’s presence in children’s lives and resist emotional detachment. Prisoners convey the idea that their rights to be involved with children should not be conditional upon imprisonment. Fathers thereby strive to take an active role in decisions regarding child’s care and well-being, education, discipline and related issues. When harmonious relationships between fathers and mothers are maintained, children’ educational issues tend to be shared and negotiated, as Bruno reports. His narrative outlines how the possibility to stay involved with children constitutes an important coping mechanism for prison daily life.

I'm focused on my son's development, and on trying to support my wife and my son as I can here on visits. (...) It's more complicated here. I do not want to be doing a lot of pressure; I always have doubts about how to handle this. But I know

that, even unconsciously, both my wife and my son come to me as the person to ask for advice. I always talk with my wife about our son's education. That gives me a certain pleasure, makes me feel active, makes me feel beloved, it makes me feel present. Even not being there. And that's good, it makes me feel good.

The roles available to prisoners – such as education support, partial decision-maker and moral guide – help, to some extent, maintaining fathers' identity as responsible and involved individuals in children's lives. However, the ability to sustain a close connection in the interface between the outside and the inside demands an onerous and challenging work and implies economic resources' accessibility (Grinstead *et al.*, 2001; Christian, 2005), as well as carers' availability and willingness (Swanson *et al.*, 2013; Charles, Muentner and Kjellstrand, 2019). Despite the importance of children caregivers in the father-child connection, they remain virtually invisible both in public debates and policies. This calls for the need to further explore carer's work in promoting connections (Roy and Dyson, 2005) since it is generally (invisible) female work that provides the unpaid, but costly, bridge between the prison and the outside world (Aungles, 1994).

Conclusion

Ideologies of “responsible fatherhood” have been increasingly disseminating in popular culture, expert discourses and current social policy. Fathers are being reconstructed and reinvented as emotionally involved parents (Collier and Sheldon, 2008). In this chapter, I discussed how these dominant normative expectations interact with the paucity of attention attributed to imprisoned fathers in public debate and prison policies.

The prison context does not provide an environment that is conducive to maintain parenting relationships due to its conflicting regulatory principles that overemphasize safety, discipline and surveillance over family bonds. In a context of “structured uncertainty” (Radelet, Vandiver and Berardo, 1983), family ties are interlocked with control management requirements. Furthermore, prison environment reproduce and amplify gender asymmetries, displaying little awareness of men's parenting roles. To the extent that it exists, institutional support for father's involvement in prison settings is generally designed within the framework of men as peripheral in childcare and as individuals whose relationship with children remains less important than mother-child

bond (Wall and Arnold, 2007). A clear example of this is how Portuguese law, despite being gender-neutral, provides different infrastructures to nurture a child-parent relation to imprisoned fathers and mothers (Machado and Granja, 2013).

Within this background, data shows that father-child bonds are entirely redrawn by carceral monitoring. Imprisonment (further) excludes and exonerates fathers from their emotional, socio-economic and moral responsibilities towards children. From the more traditional ideals of fathers as disciplinarian figures and as breadwinners, to more recent conception of parents as emotionally involved caregivers, prison policies and practices tend to undermine most parenting practices. Fathering from prison thereby encompasses complex negotiations between rights and responsibilities, whereas the former is limited and the later mostly undermined. Fathers are, therefore, inscribed in hybrid positions that challenge the polarity between involvement and withdrawal, presence and absence, responsibility and duties dismissal. That is, while men's accounts show that prisoners attempt to engage in some responsibilities available to them – such as education support, partial decision-maker and moral guide – it is also clear that they have to resign to others, such as economic provision. The challenges of upholding a relationship between children and father also further exacerbate fathers' concerns over the intergenerational impacts of incarceration on their children, something that might have implications long after the end of the prison sentence. Imprisoned fathers worry not only about the impact of their imprisonment into children objective life conditions but also about its implications in their children conduct in the medium and long term. Such concerns are further complexified by biographies of interviewed fathers who have themselves been affected by the incarceration of their parents. The strategies used to attempt the mitigation of the intergenerational impacts of incarceration, namely, transforming their deviant and criminal paths into life lessons to be transmitted to children, are limited and considerably hampered if fathers don't have the opportunity to maintain a close relationship with children.

Dismissing and incapacitating men in prison to uphold their caring and economic responsibilities have broad implications, both behind and beyond prison walls. Regarding imprisoned fathers, it fosters alienation, powerless, frustration and promotes fears of being replaced by other parental figures. Outside prison walls, female relatives, and especially mothers of children, take overall responsibility for childcare. This reproduces and consolidates gender inequalities, by naturalizing the idea that the economy of care is primarily the women's responsibility, and that the role of fathers is secondary and even

dispensable. In this context, fathering from prison sets out both the invisibility that some fathers still have, regarding the enactment of rights and responsibilities and the seemingly unproblematic overloading of women in parental functions. This calls for the need to critically explore how to endorse father's rights and responsibilities within the prison context, fostering the sharing of parental responsibilities, without risking further pressuring or marginalizing this underprivileged category of fathers.

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