

# FATHERS IN JAIL: MANAGING DUAL IDENTITIES

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This research is a qualitative study examining the identity work of incarcerated fathers. Organized around the concept of prisonization, the goal of this project was to examine the way that incarcerated fathers manage the disparate identities of inmate and father. Twenty-five men were interviewed at a jail in Florida, and were asked to share their life stories with the investigator. Narrative linkages between their families, their crimes, and their time in jail were utilized to develop a deeper understanding of these men's lives. Diverse identity management strategies, regulation of contact with children, and turning point narratives were the main forms of identity work these men used to manage the contrasting identities of inmate and father.

Between 1960 to 1990, the percentage of children living away from their biological father more than doubled, from 17% to 36% (Popenoe, 1998). The absence of a father in the homes of juveniles has been shown to correlate with higher levels of delinquency (Gabel, 1992; Harper & McLanahan, 2004; Popenoe, 1996; Wells & Rankin, 1991). Father absence also holds negative repercussions for children's educational achievements (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Children who reside with only one of their parents are twice as likely to drop out of school, and 1.4 times as likely to be out of school and unemployed than are children who reside with both biological parents (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Perhaps the most influential, negative effect of father absence is the financial strain felt by women and their children (Seltzer, 1994). Additionally, the economic situations of these families tend to worsen over time (Popenoe, 1998). While a variety of social forces have acted to precipitate this change, few scholars in the debate on father absence

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have acknowledged the influence of paternal incarceration as a factor in father absence.

As 2002 ended, the U.S. Department of Justice reported that 2,166,260 people (men and women) were incarcerated in America (Harrison & Beck, 2003). Among this population were 665,475 people in state jails (Harrison & Beck, 2003). Within this large population of incarcerated Americans, fathers comprise over one-half of the United States' male prisoners (Harrison, 1997; Mumola, 2000). Given this ever-increasing population, the term "incarcerated father" has taken on new meaning and importance. There is a burgeoning need to examine and understand incarcerated fathers' lived experiences.

Incarcerated fathers occupy an intriguing position in modern social life. These men deal with the concerns of two powerful and influential institutions: the family and the criminal justice system. As a result, these men must manage the potential conflict between the identities of inmate and father. Therefore, the primary goal of this research is to examine how men deal with the conflicting identities of family and incarceration. The key issue, then, is how do men maintain and work with their father identities throughout the incarceration process?

There are many reasons contributing to the relevance of this study. First, to be a father implies that there is at least a familial dyad of father and child, meaning that children frequently become the unintended victims of paternal incarceration. Studies have accounted for a variety of ill effects suffered by children as a result of paternal separation due to their father's incarceration (Gabel, 1992). Certainly more should be learned about men's identities as fathers during incarceration if for nothing more than to discover the ways in which corrections and community outreach programs can assist these men in returning to their roles as fathers once they have fulfilled their sentence. Second, these men are a part of the community in which they reside. While this research focuses on how men manage their father identity while assuming the new identity of inmate, these men are also engaging in the loss and management of a variety of other identities and roles that they assume in their everyday lives

within the community. These men act as fathers, husbands, and employees, among a variety of other identities. Third, the identity and commitment to the identity of father can be examined as a part of the scholarship on recidivism. Previous research has asserted that men who maintain healthy and substantial family relations during incarceration are less likely to recidivate compared to other inmates (Carlos & Cevera, 1991). The way in which these men maintain or distance themselves from their identities as fathers is another way in which we can advance our understanding of the relationship between families and criminal behavior. Finally, while most research has focused on identity management within prisons, this research examines the assumption of the inmate identity while in jail. These role changes may be more transitory as jail sentences are of shorter duration than prison sentences. Therefore it is possible that the identity management strategies of jail inmates will vary from those that have been observed in prison populations.

This research builds on an exploratory study that asked male inmates to describe themselves as fathers and discuss the impact of incarceration on their relationships with their children (Tripp, 2001). Here, participants were allowed more freedom in their responses than in the exploratory study. By giving the participants more “leg room,” new issues that had not been addressed in the previous study came to light. Participants were given more “leg room” through the use of life histories, rather than a detailed interview rubric. By asking these men to share their life histories, they were free to direct the interview, allowing for more natural and unforced narrative linkages between subjects such as incarceration and fatherhood. Surely enough, the main idea that permeated almost all of the interviews was the struggle between their institutionalization and their ideals about fatherhood responsibilities.

Using both grounded and narrative methodologies (Glaser, 1978; Gubrium & Holstein, 2000), 25 semi-structured qualitative life history interviews were conducted with incarcerated fathers in a North Central Florida jail that houses approximately 800 to 900 inmates on a daily basis. While specific questions and probes were

utilized to examine key issues, participants were given the freedom to direct their stories in ways that helped to contextualize their lived experiences. This allowed the researcher to build codes based on the participants' stories. Codes were developed as the investigator read transcripts and found similar themes in many of the interviews. Interviews were then re-read to search for more examples of areas where these codes could be applied. These research strategies helped to develop an in-depth understanding of how incarcerated fathers navigated the dueling identities of inmate and father.

This paper will focus on the way men orient themselves towards their status as fathers and inmates through the ways they talk about being a father and being an inmate. The interviews will foster a better understanding of the ways that incarcerated fathers construct these highly distinct identities. Additionally, the ways in which incarcerated fathers link these two subjective positionings (father and inmate) will be examined so that the meaning within each of these men's accounts can be fully understood. This is an important methodological directive as the ways that individuals link subjects allows the researcher to understand how people organize their own social experiences. Therefore, this research will examine how men link accounts of fathering with other subjects, especially incarceration.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Theoretical Background*

Throughout this paper, symbolic interactionism, social constructionism, and narrative analysis will influence how the concept of identity is used. Within the symbolic interactionism framework, people are viewed as social actors that make choices in their daily interactions that reflect their conception of the self (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Social construction follows the same pragmatic foundation as symbolic interaction. This theoretical paradigm asserts that researchers must examine the processes through which persons construct their taken-for-granted realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Narrative theory states that the self is revealed in the ways that people talk about their daily lives (Holstein &

Gubrium, 2000). Therefore, researchers examining self-concepts should examine the ways that people construct and organize their texts (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

### *Incarcerated Fathers*

The typical incarcerated father has a low educational background, was poor at the time of his arrest, and provided financially for his children before incarceration (Hairston, 1998). Hairston also notes differences among the family forms that these men leave behind; less than one-fourth of imprisoned fathers are married, and nearly 50% of incarcerated fathers report multiple mothers for their children. During their absence from home, many incarcerated fathers, especially men who are not married to the mothers of their children, fear that other men will replace them as father-figures in their children's lives (Hairston, 1998). Sometimes, after their release from prison, men do return to situations where other men have taken on a fathering role with their child (Nurse, 2000). Therefore, the family relations that these men depart from and return to upon release are diverse in structure, size, and consistency.

Frequently, secondary socialization within the penal system leads inmates away from outside ties, such as family relations, and into the prison culture. This process of "prisonization" (Clemmer, 1940) is often tied to a weakening of family ties and an increase in isolationist behavior with regards to relationships outside of the prison walls (King, 1993). Prisonization entails an individual's inculcation into the prison subculture. Within this process, commitment and use of pre-prison identities are said to decline as the individual creates a "prison identity," through which they navigate the prison experience (Paterline & Peterson, 1999; Schmid & Jones, 1991). Similarly, Wheeler's U-Curve asserts that inmates display a stronger connection to their "outside" identities at the beginning and end of their sentence (Wheeler, 1961). Because fathers frequently report deterioration in closeness with their children while incarcerated (Lanier, 1993), prisonization linked to a loss of family ties would appear to be a highly salient issue. Incarcerated fathers who lose this father-child closeness are more likely to provide self-reports of depression, or many of the symptoms of depression (Lanier, 1993).

Paterline and Peterson (1999) found that inmates who place high value on their non-prison identities (father identities in this research) are less likely to become fully integrated into the inmate subcultures that characterize prisonization. This is consistent with Stryker's concept of identity salience (1968). Stryker's identity salience asserts that individuals have a variety of identities (i.e., father, husband, inmate, employee, friend, etc.). All of these identities are structured into a hierarchy, and those that are ranked highest are more likely to be invoked in a variety of circumstances. Therefore, the hierarchical organization and commitment to distinct identities will be a useful sensitizing concept to examine how men manage the disparate identities of father and inmate.

Schmid and Jones' (1991) work provided the theoretical and conceptual framework of prisonization that most influenced this project. Schmid and Jones examined the creation and use of survival strategies and identity construction among first-time prison inmates. These researchers noted how inmates maintained a "dualistic self." Inmates hold two identities, a pre-prison/personal identity and a prison social identity. As the first-time inmates learn about their new environment they "suspend" or shelve their pre-prison identity in order to assume a different identity that would help them to navigate in the new world. While maintaining their prison identity, many inmates expressed concerns and fears about their ability to return to old roles such as husband, father, and friend to persons outside of the prison's walls.

Schmid and Jones described how their participants would use strategies to distance themselves from their new prison identities as the end of their sentences approached, which is once again consistent with Wheeler's U-Curve (Schmid and Jones, 1991; Wheeler, 1961). During interviews, men that were concerned about their return to the outside world would distance themselves from other inmates by stating how they were different from all the other inmates. The description of dual selves and differentiation from other inmates were strategies used by many of the inmates in my research as well. This "bifurcation of self" (as coined by Schmid and Jones) will continue to be a central theme in this paper.

It is important to note a key distinction between the current study and the work of Schmid and Jones (1991). While the latter study examined the experiences of first-time incarcerants, all of the participants in the current research are repeat offenders. Nonetheless, many of the findings and conceptualizations offered by Schmid and Jones (1991) are consistent with previous works that have not focused solely on first time offenders (Paterline and Peterson, 1999; Wheeler, 1961). Another difference between these two studies is the location for the research. Schmid and Jones (1991) conducted their research within a prison, whereas the current research was conducted within a county jail. While this project hypothesizes that similar effects will be found among men in jail, discrepancies will be noted and examined. However, the findings from Schmid and Jones (1991) still provided insightful sensitizing concepts that were helpful in guiding this research.

Recent studies have begun to focus on the identities of inmates who are fathers, and how these men manage their father identities before, during, and after incarceration (Nurse, 2000; Tripp, 2001). Nurse (2000) examines young fathers' experiences in the juvenile prison system in California. Her work focuses on the difference between fathering daydreams, or visions, and actual experiences. She found that young fathers were unprepared for the changes that occurred during their incarceration. Unanticipated problems such as father-child unfamiliarity, fear of replacement as fathers by other men referred to as "sanchos," and a change in the relationship with their child's mother were all issues that these young men confronted. These problems were influential on these young men's readiness to return to "street life," as they were disappointed that their envisioned father identity did not satisfy their expectations. Tripp (2001), the exploratory study upon which the current research is based, revealed that incarcerated adult fathers focus on fathering actions performed prior to incarceration in order to maintain and define their father identity. Inmates also noted high levels of conflict with their female partners (wives or girlfriends) during their discussions of fathering. Overall, incarceration was a negative and stressful influence on these men's place within their families. Conflict was centered on a loss of

financial stability, loss of control in their children's daily lives, and a loss of control in their own lives (Tripp, 2001).

In this analysis then, the notion of prisonization will be explored. Does the "bifurcation of self" minimize or influence men's conceptions of themselves as fathers? Or does the salience of the father identity reduce inmate inculcation into the prison subculture? The distinct conceptualization of two lived realities, pre-prison and prison, will be maintained as a conceptual tool to examine incarcerated fathers' lived experiences. Later, the findings will reveal that different men access these distinct identities in various ways.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Data for this research were gathered through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. All interviews were conducted at a county jail in North Central Florida that houses between 800 and 900 inmates on a given day. In accordance with the request of the university's review board, only non-violent offenders were recruited as participants. While an interview schedule with specific topics of interest was utilized, the researcher encouraged the participants to direct their own interview, in the form of a life history, in order to reduce the contamination of data that can be caused by the interviewer's influence. This methodological directive is connected to the narrative aspects of this research that seeks to harvest knowledge from the individual stories of each participant.

### *Sample*

In order to begin developing a sample, the researcher was given access to weekly jail lists which noted the inmates' names, offenses, housing locations, and estimated times of release. From this information, a list of non-violent inmates that were potential participants was compiled. Inmates on this list were given participant recruiting forms to complete. The primary goal for these forms was to distinguish between fathers and non-fathers, further restricting the sample in accordance with the research goals of this project. The collection of recruiting forms from all participants also provided demographic data. Inmates were asked to provide their



age, race, marital status, fatherhood status (yes or no), the ages and gender of their children, whether or not the children were born of multiple mothers, and their current criminal offense (See Table 1, below, for sample characteristics).

**Table 1**  
**Demographic Information on Participants**

| Participant Pseudonym           | Age | Race | Marital Status | # of Kids | # of Mothers | Offense                        | Father Type |
|---------------------------------|-----|------|----------------|-----------|--------------|--------------------------------|-------------|
| Jeff                            | 26  | AA   | Single         | 2         | 2            | VOP                            | RP          |
| Justin                          | 38  | AA   | Divorced       | 2         | 2            | Sale, possession of cocaine    | DD          |
| James                           | 24  | AA   | Single         | 1         | 1            | VOP                            | RS          |
| Michael                         | 26  | AA   | Single         | 1         | 1            | VOP                            | RS          |
| Matt                            | 25  | AA   | Single         | 1         | 1            | Trespassing                    | CC          |
| Gerry                           | 38  | AA   | Single         | 1         | 1            | VOP                            | DD          |
| Chuck                           | 36  | AA   | Single         | 1         | 1            | Fraudulent use of Credit Cards | DD          |
| Jason                           | 33  | AA   | Single         | 1         | 1            | VOP                            | CC          |
| Tim                             | 28  | W    | Single         | 1         | 1            | VOP                            | RP          |
| Terry                           | 32  | AA   | Single         | 2         | 2            | Grand Theft                    | RP          |
| Ozzy                            | 30  | W    | Single         | 1         | 1            | VOP                            | RP          |
| Willie                          | 59  | W    | Divorced       | 1         | 1            | Possession of Marijuana        | CC          |
| Greg                            | 32  | AA   | Single         | 6         | 3            | Driving with Suspended License | RP          |
| Jake                            | 39  | AA   | Divorced       | 3         | 2            | VOP                            | DD          |
| Joseph                          | 26  | W    | Single         | 1         | 1            | VOP                            | CC          |
| Ray                             | 40  | AA   | Separated      | 2         | 1            | Driving with Suspended License | RS          |
| Lance                           | 41  | AA   | Married        | 3         | 2            | VOP                            | RP          |
| (Table continued on next page.) |     |      |                |           |              |                                |             |

| <b>Participant Pseudonym</b>   | <b>Age</b> | <b>Race</b> | <b>Marital Status</b>  | <b># of Kids</b> | <b># of Mothers</b> | <b>Offense</b>                                | <b>Father Type</b> |
|--|------------|-------------|------------------------|------------------|---------------------|---|--------------------|
| <b>Alexander</b>   | 29         | AA          | Single                 | 2                | 1                   | Petty Theft                                   | RS                 |
| <b>Billy</b>   | 21         | W           | Single                 | 2                | 2                   | VOP   | DD                 |
| <b>T.C.</b>  | 29         | AA          | Married                | 3                | 2                   | VOP   | RP                 |
| <b>Stephen</b>   | 42         | W           | Married                | 4                | 2                   | VOP   | RP                 |
| <b>Sky</b>   | 40         | AA          | Divorced/<br>Remarried | 3                | 1                   | VOP   | CC                 |
| <b>Andy</b>  | 35         | W           | Single                 | 3                | 1                   | Possession<br>of a<br>Controlled<br>Substance | RP                 |
| <b>Max</b>   | 28         | AA          | Divorced               | 4                | 4                   | Sale and<br>Possession<br>of Cocaine          | RP                 |
| <b>Eric</b>  | 30         | W           | Single                 | 1                | 1                   | Grand<br>Theft                                | CC                 |
| KEY: Father Types – RP (Resident father who lives with a partner), RS (Resident, single-father), CC (Non-resident, in close contact with child), DD (Non-resident, distant from children because of drug addictions) |            |             |                        |                  |                     |   |                    |

The sample was comprised of 25 men. While the author sought a racially diverse sample, problems arose in finding White fathers who were not violent offenders. Therefore only 8 men in the sample were White, while the remaining 17 participants were African Americans. The ages of the participants ranged from 21 to 59, with a mean of 33. Because most of the men with children in jail were single, locating married fathers was difficult. Sixteen of the interviewed fathers were single, three were married, four were divorced, one was separated, and one participant was divorced and remarried. The number of children fathered and claimed by participants ranged between one and six, with the mean being 2.1. Fifteen of the 25 participants reported one mother for all of their children. However, 11 of these 15 men had fathered only one child. Participants were incarcerated for a variety of offenses. However, a majority of the men (N=14) were incarcerated for a violation of probation. The rest of

the participants were arrested for trespassing, grand and petty theft, possession and sale of cocaine, possession of marijuana, fraudulent use of credit card, and driving with a suspended license.

The final category for classifying participants was their residential status. Fourteen of the 25 participants lived with their children before coming to jail. Interestingly, four of these men were single, residential fathers. The remaining 10 men maintained residency with their children and a partner who may or may not be the child's mother. Among the non-residential fathers, six asserted that they still maintained close relationships with their children. The five remaining fathers stated that they have been distant from their children because of their drug addictions. All five of these men spoke deeply about their addictions to crack cocaine, and how it was the drugs and not incarceration that had kept them out of their children's lives. The ways that these men differed in their conceptualizations of fathering when compared to the other 20 participants will be presented throughout the analysis.

#### *Interview Process*

As each interview began, all 25 participants were asked to describe their life history and their relationships with their children. Although the responses varied from father to father, general trends arose in how these men talked about being fathers. The pilot research for this investigation (Tripp, 2001) offered insight into one of the multiple descriptions of fatherhood. While this earlier study focused solely on the actions that men associated with their identity as fathers, the data from the current research offered a broader view of fathering. It encompassed issues such as responsibility, the existence of a father-child bond, and the importance of a father's presence in a child's life. Men were asked to talk about their relationship with their children, their children's mother, as well as the ways in which incarceration has influenced these relationships. Additional topics included family histories, experiences with previous incarceration, and expectations for themselves and their families upon release.

Most of the participants were comfortable with the tape recording of our conversations, and some inmates used it as a narrative resource (e.g., one inmate wanted everyone to hear what he

was saying and spoke into the tape recorder, “Make sure you record that.”). Additionally, all participants were given the opportunity to create their own pseudonym. Most of the participants seized this opportunity, with some of the men claiming their own child’s name.

Given the grounded theory background (Glaser, 1978) that underlies the formation of this project, the focus of the interviews shifted, albeit minimally, throughout the course of the project. Initially, I sought to discover if the father identity was altered in different ways during multiple incarcerations. As it turned out, this was not a key element of any of my participant’s lived experiences. However, inmates did provide different narratives about themselves as fathers before, during, and after incarceration. While the incarcerated father identity did not seem to change through multiple incarcerations, the identity of father did change in subtle ways during incarceration. The conflict between the identities of father and inmate became apparent in the participants’ stories. In their stories I was able to examine how each man constructed his understandings of the current situation. Their texts allowed me to identify associations between their narratives and their identities as inmates and fathers.

## FINDINGS

The participants provided powerful narratives that painted a vivid picture of the conflicting worlds of home and jail. Five different topics appeared frequently in the interviews. First, inmates discussed the ways in which they regulated their contact with their children. More specifically, many participants articulated the reasons behind their reticence to have their children visit them in jail. Second, they used various identity management strategies to minimize their connection with the inmate identity and the stigma attached to incarceration. Many participants framed their lives in terms of the two distinct worlds of home and jail along with the conflictual identities of father and inmate. While some of the men described the two worlds specifically, all of the participants accessed these notions through their discussions of their father identity before and during incarceration. Their dual experiences were revealed as they discussed the ways that they were and were not fa-

thers. In their narratives these men continually linked incarceration with their negative assessments of themselves as fathers. Another strategy was to compare themselves with other inmates who were more inculcated into prison life, and citing themselves as being “better” for not falling into prisonization.

Third, the inmates framed this incarceration as “the last time”, portraying it as a turning point (Edin, Nelson, & Paranal, 2004; Elder, 1986, 1994; Rutter et al., 1990; Sampson & Laub, 1990). Many of the men connected their turning point with their desire to be better fathers. Others talked of this time in jail as a turning point in connection with a more general desire to improve oneself and one’s standing in life. Fourth, and in contrast with the distinction that many men made between being “in here” (jail) and “out there” (home), some of the men explained their behavior as inmates as being connected to their father identity. They described how their status as fathers has shaped some of the decisions they have made throughout the incarceration process, including sentencing. Here we begin to see how men exert the salience of their outside identity over their inmate identity. These strategies helped the men to sustain their father identity while making sense of their current status as inmates. Finally, men discussed their visions and expectations for their personal and family lives once they are released. These five topics provide a guideline for understanding the ways that these men manage and construct their own identities as inmate and father within the social location of incarceration in jail.

#### *Regulation of Visits*

Visitation presents a curious situation for incarcerated fathers, as it is a period of time when their identities of inmate and father meet as one. The peculiarity of seeing one’s child while in jail caused many men to dislike and discourage visits from their children. Participants stated that they did not like their children to see them “behind glass,” (visitation at their jail is non-contact, with a glass window separating the kin). Michael, a 26-year-old single, residential father of one, noted that he did not want his son to see him behind the glass as “I really don’t like my son seeing me on the other side.” This statement brought out the implications of the two distinct

worlds of jail and home. When Michael talked about the other side, it entailed a separation from his son and brought forth his inability to fulfill the important father involvement component of accessibility (Lamb et al., 1985, 1987). While a visit would allow Michael to be in the presence of his son, he felt that he could not present himself to his son in a positive manner while he resides in his current social location. Michael engaged in the bifurcation of self (Schmid and Jones, 1991), as he focused on his jail identity because he felt that he could not properly invoke his pre-jail identity of father.

When asked to explain why they did not want their children to visit them in jail, many of the inmates stated that they want to minimize their children's familiarity with the criminal justice system (N=8). Tim, a 28-year-old, single, White father of one three-year-old boy recalled visiting his own father in jail when he was a child, and believed that a similar experience would be negative for his son. He noted, "I didn't want him to end up in the same boat I was in...now that I been in trouble I realize... how it affected me." As a result of his own experiences as a child Tim also asked his partner to keep their son from knowing that he is in jail. These actions reveal a father who is working at keeping his identities of inmate and father completely separate. Although not all inmates kept their incarceration secret from their children, many of the participants shared comments concerning their desire to minimize their children's contact with the jail. Tim felt so strongly about the separation of his two identities that he engaged in the presentation of falsehood to maintain them. Tim's account also makes use of the sensitizing concept of a comparative appraisal (Marsiglio, 2002), where a father evaluates and describes himself as a father through an evaluative description of the fathering actions of another man. When evaluating himself as a father, Tim compares his experiences and management of incarceration with his own father, finding in favor of himself. This comparative appraisal is one of the few narrative resources that Tim has to present himself as a "good father."

#### *Managing the Dual Identities of Father and Inmate*

The central theme of all of these men's lived experiences was the duality of jail and home. These two social locations accounted

for their conflicting identities of inmate and father. It is therefore appropriate that participants talk about these two very different places when describing their incarcerated father identity. When describing his everyday life, Lance, a 41-year-old married African American father of three children, stated:

That's what I miss most about my kids is the fun that I have with them. And then I think about them so much that it's like I'm really with 'em, like I'm walking through the house checking on everything, seeing what they're doing, and then BOOM. I, then I gotta wake up and come back to reality. Oh, Lord. Then you just add one more fire to the coals, and somebody want to push your buttons and you gonna take all of that feelings out. See this one dude, he kept on mouthin' off at me, and I said, "Can you fly?" He goes, "excuse me?" "Let me say that one more time. Can you fly?" I said, "Brother you better have an 'S' on your chest, cause if you can't fly you're grass." So I just walked past him and got on my bunk, but every time I walk past him he looks. I don't look at him, I go back to reading. I stay in my bunk now, let it all go. Cause society in here, it's a dog-eat-dog world, and everybody's out for themselves. But out there, you got your family, to keep you calm, and the love that my wife has, that my family has for me, that's all I need.

Lance referred to two places. "In here" refers to the jail, while "out there" refers to home and, as we will see later, freedom from the control of the system. Throughout his story Lance offered many examples where he mentally transitions between the world "in here" and "out there." These transitions revealed how Lance constructed his understanding of the institutional world he lived in, along with a code of conduct that he hoped to develop that would speed his arrival back home. As Lance transitions between his two worlds, his focus on the importance of his family revealed that the father/husband status is more important than his inmate status. However, Lance acknowledged that he was powerless to escape his position as an inmate and decided to formulate all of his future actions around his desire to return home as soon as possible. While Lance framed his accounts within the discourse of dual worlds and dual identities,

his words implied that his “outside” identity has governed the way that he presents his “inside” identity. This can be better understood when viewed through the frame of Stryker’s notion of identity salience (Stryker, 1968). Lance’s commitment to his outside identities (father, husband, etc.) caused these identities to hold a more salient position within his hierarchy of identities. Lance was less willing to perform the standard role of prisoner, via responding to another inmate’s challenge with violence, because his outside identities were more salient within his own hierarchy of identities, and therefore within his view of the self.

While Lance and other inmates maintained high levels of commitment to their pre-jail identities, other men dealt with the effects of incarceration through the suspension of their “outside” identity. When describing the duality of the incarceration experience, Ozzy, a 30-year-old single White father of one daughter, focused on the emotional sentiments that accompany doing time. While talking about the difficulty of seeing his girlfriend in visits and then returning to jail life Ozzy stated:

When you’re in here you just kinda, kind of stay in this state of mind, so to speak...it’s, your life’s in here, you know. Like going to court, you see the outside. When you come back it just really weighs on you, that, your life’s gone. You just have to accept that you’re in here, and this is your life now....it depresses me.

Ozzy’s words clearly reveal the emotional pain that accompanies removal from the world “out there.” He chose to adopt a different “state of mind” as a coping strategy. This coping strategy involves accepting one’s position as an inmate, and acknowledging one’s separation from one’s connections and relationships “out there.” While Ozzy was not specifically talking about the suppression of his father identity, he did offer a broad comment about distancing himself from his pre-prison identity. Out of all of the participants, it was Ozzy’s narrative that held the greatest resemblance to Schmid and Jones’ (1991) bifurcation of self. While many of the inmates described the dual worlds of jail and home, Ozzy actually talked about suspending his “out there” identity. In contrast to Ozzy, most



of the other participants revealed the ways in which they attempted to minimize their “in here” identity, as they worked at maintaining their many pre-prison identities, such as father.

*Differentiating One’s Self from Other Inmates*

Despite the negative effect that incarceration had on these men’s father identities, many of the participants struggled to minimize the negative stigma attached to their inmate status. Speaking in general terms, Greg, a 32-year-old African American father of six children, described how incarceration affects men who attempt to be good fathers:

This person could have been on the start to change his life, and then he come to jail on something simple... they got to start all over again and face that when he get out there on the streets with nothin’ man. It’s like he bare back, like nothin’ on his back. And it’s hard, man. But the judges, they, they think they doin’ their job. But it should be some moral thing to that, instead of just a judicial thing. They should have some consideration morally when it’s, when it’s um, when it need to be there. Get those peoples a fair shake in life, you know, especially if they’re trying to better themselves.

Greg went on to describe an identity strategy that many of the inmates used in order to help them maintain their status as fathers, while minimizing their inmate identity. Many inmates such as Greg differentiated themselves from other inmates in order to minimize their incarcerated identity. This reflects Schmid and Jones’ (1991) description of the identity minimization strategies used by inmates as they approach the end of their sentences. When Greg describes how the system is holding back men who are “trying to better themselves” he began to reveal his distinction between himself and other inmates. He stated:

This place is, it’s tryin’ me, man. I just have to, you know, I have to block everything out, ‘cause I don’t want to get institutionalized. And get like a lot of guys in here and be talkin’ crazy. They talk about all kinds of negativity. I don’t want to hear all that. And that, and I just don’t

want to hear, I don't want to be involved with it. I don't care none about what you been in here for. I don't want to hear. I don't want nobody come asking me what I'm charged with. I hate, I hate it, you know ... it's about to drive me crazy...but, I put, I brought it on myself ...and you want to have res. You want people to respect you. You don't want to be no imbecile like, somebody thinking that you just a jail-house type person...especially when you have six kids. You know? And that's, you know, and that that's why I had to start looking at it. And I, that's how, I'm bad, you know what I'm saying? What, what is my fiancée gonna be able to talk? She's gonna have to be the mouthpiece for our family now. She gone have to talk up, you know, saying, where's Greg? Well, he's in jail. And that's not good, man. That's just not good at all. That's another thing that kind of depresses me, you know? It's, it's, it bothers me, man. It bothers me big time. If you have any conscience in life so, you know what I'm saying? If you care...then it'll bother you. Some people just don't even care, man. I care a lot. That's why I just have to just isolate myself, man, and just pray.

Here, Greg offered an in-depth view of the process that many men struggle with to maintain their “out there” identity while resisting the assumption of an “in here” identity. Greg initially states that he does not want to get “institutionalized.” He implied that a lot of the inmates that surround him have fallen into this category. In subsequent comments he also referred to other inmates as “smelly,” “crazy,” “imbeciles,” “bad breathed,” and “niggardly.” Greg maintained his moral worth and dignity through his comparisons with other inmates whom he viewed as morally and personally inferior. Greg cited the negative qualities of his fellow inmates in an attempt to maintain his commitment to his “outside” identity. Despite his incarceration, Greg’s “outside” identity maintains its position as the most salient identity within Greg’s hierarchy of identities.

An important narrative linkage to note is that Greg transitioned from a critique of “jail-house type persons” to a description of himself as a father of six children. This excerpt represents the core of the conflict between the opposing identities of father and

inmate. Greg wanted to present himself as a good father, but his narrative resources are diminished as he is sitting in jail. He spent a great deal of time in his interview wavering between a critique of himself, while at the same time maintaining how he was not the “jail-house” person that he continually denigrates. Greg’s conflict is further evidenced by the vocabulary he chose. When he began to speak of the world “out there” Greg spoke with a reverent and humbled tone. When speaking from his “out there” persona Greg appeared to be embarrassed by his current situation. When talking from the position as a father and partner Greg used words such as “depressed,” “bothers me,” and “conscience.” Greg used a very different vocabulary and tone to describe each social landscape, as he used a vocabulary of superiority to explain jail life and humility to construct his place “out there.”

#### *Incarceration as a Turning Point*

Given these men’s distaste for their experiences and identities as inmates, it is not surprising that nearly all of the participants noted that this would be their last encounter with jail life. Many of the fathers described their current and future life paths within the frame of a turning point (Edin, Nelson, & Paranal, 2004; Elder, 1986, 1994; Rutter et al., 1990; Sampson & Laub, 1990; Strauss, 1969). While there were a variety of ways in which each of the men described this incarceration as a turning point, almost all of the participants linked their “last time” in jail to their father identity. However, the manner in which these men connected their father identity to their final episode as an inmate varied.

Because father presence was one of the key issues that men cited when describing their inability to fulfill the father role, it is not surprising that many fathers linked their desire to be in the home with their children with their “final” incarceration turning point. Jeff, a single 26-year-old African American father of two children, referred to his current incarceration as “the last straw” because he doesn’t “want to miss part of my child’s life anymore.” In order to avoid this situation Jeff said that he will “do whatever it takes to stay away from here.” Similarly, James and Tim noted that this will be their last incarceration so they will not be “taken apart” or “away”

from each of their children. Sadly, many of these men will likely return, as all of these men were repeat offenders who had committed crimes as fathers. Research also bears out this probability as a study of prisoners released in 1994 saw 67.5% of the sample rearrested within 3 years of their release (Langan & Levin, 2002).

Some of the inmates with drug problems noted that this incarceration is an opportunity to “get focused” so that they can avoid repeating their past “mistakes.” Jake, a 39-year-old African American divorced father of three daughters, noted that while in jail “you don’t have to work...your basic human needs are taken care of by the system, so if you can’t utilize that time to get yourself back together then you gonna be right back in here.” Given these circumstances, Jake felt that this was an ideal time to make important changes in one’s life that will lead to “being productive” outside of the jail’s walls. Along with the opportunities provided by inmates’ free time, the separation from drugs and associates within drug circles also presented an opportunity for inmates with drug problems to experience turning points. Participants remarked that incarceration is an opportunity to “wake up” because their mind is “clear” or not “clouded by drugs.” Unlike the other fathers, fathers with drug problems centered their turning point visions on a subject other than their father identity. However, they noted that they desired to improve their relationship with their children once they overcame their drug problem. The men with drug problems did not cite imprisonment as the main barrier between them and their children. Rather, they saw their drug problem as the barrier (N=4). Justin, a 38-year-old African American father of two children notes, “Because of my lifestyle (doing crack cocaine) I try not to be around them.” Gerry, also a 38-year-old African American father talked about his crack cocaine habit, noting “I know that’s why I separate myself from my family.”

The final way in which incarcerated fathers organized their construction of this time in jail as a turning point was to recognize God as the key in their desire for a major life change. Chuck, a single 36-year-old African American father of one child, stated that he is “trying to live for God, trying to be a better person.” Other

inmates used Christian discourse to construct their turning point by using typical Christian phrases such as “turning my life over to God” and “God’s will” to describe their attempts to change their future actions. The organization of turning points around religion also fit in with how many inmates separated themselves from other inmates. One of the inmate sub-groups that was given positive reference was the Bible study group that some of the incarcerated fathers attended.

Narratives about drug addiction and finding God, along with the descriptions of schooling and learning trades, were examples of turning points that were not organized around a desire to improve oneself as a father. They were turning points that focused on a desire to improve oneself more generally. However, some of these general turning points were eventually linked to the inmate’s desire to be a better father as training and schooling were being pursued to improve one’s earning potential. Talk about improving oneself as an earner was frequently linked to the father as provider concept. These men wanted to be able to provide financially for their children after their release.

#### *Connections between the Father and Inmate Identity*

Thus far I have examined how inmate identities influence the identity construction and management of the “incarcerated father.” However, inmates’ commitment to their family identities (father, husband/partner) also shaped and regulated their behavior within the jail and the courts. The salience of these men’s outside or pre-incarceration identities shaped their behavior as inmates, along with the ways that their desire to be good fathers affected the choices they made within the criminal justice system.

While some of the men connected their father identity to behavioral changes they made prior to incarceration or will make in the future, Lance described how his desire to be reunited with his wife and children has affected his behaviors in jail. Previously I noted how participants regulated their associations based on their father identity. In Lance’s case he explained how he attempted to minimize conflict with other inmates because of his commitment to his family.

As noted earlier, Lance's commitment to his familial identity influences the way that he takes on his identity as an inmate.

As Lance explained how disciplinary reports (DRs) work in the jail he described how inmates who get into fights are written up and placed in the box. The box is solitary confinement, and inmates in the box cannot receive visitors. When asked if he had received any DRs Lance responded:

No sir. I got threatened. One dude told me, "I'll break your neck." And I stood there, and I looked at him, and I thought about it, and I said, "Hmmm, you gonna break my neck huh?" Took the cap off my bottle of water, jumped off my bed, took a drink, and AHHH (refreshing drink noise), and walked away. And the next day another dude messed with me and I walked away. And I was called the p-word. I don't want to use it but you know what I'm saying. He called me all them names cause I wouldn't swing. Long as he talking, that's fine and dandy with me. I'm thinking about my wife and my kids. Cause see when you get a DR that could push your sentencing back, can push everything back. I want everything to keep going forward

Lance explained that his focus on his wife and children helped him to avoid confrontations that would deter his release. This is a difficult task for Lance; he explained to me that he loses his temper frequently. However, his desire to finish his incarceration and return to the life and identities (father and husband) that he loves has prompted him to revise how he interacts with other inmates. His identity as an inmate is influenced by his commitment to this identity as a family man. This passage is another prime example of Stryker's (1968) identity salience where the high level of commitment to one identity regulates the behavior in another identity. This passage also provides an example of the dual representation of the father and family identity. As father is one of two family roles mentioned, the other being husband/boyfriend, father and family identities have been used interchangeably throughout this paper, as participants seemed to hold them as inextricably linked.

*Probation and "Paper"*

Besides avoiding fights and confrontations in jail, there is another way in which the salience of the father identity has shaped these men's behaviors as participants in the criminal justice system: sentencing choices. Because many of the participants were incarcerated for a violation of probation (N=14), men frequently had sentences and regulations hanging over their heads. The criminal justice process often allows offenders to choose between probation and incarceration. While probation would appear to be the obvious choice for men who desire to be at home with their children, participants in this research offered a completely different construction of their experiences.

Many inmates condemned probation as too controlling and as a dangerous and stressful way to carry out everyday life (Petersilia & Deschenes, 1994). Lance referred to probation and house arrest as "traps" that limit your choices and power to make daily decisions. He also noted that men on probation frequently end up in jail due to the complexities that define the system. This negative view of probation was shared by most of the inmates (N=11). Consequently, many inmates focused on the goal of "getting off paper." Being "on paper" is slang for being on probation or house arrest. Therefore many inmates chose correctional pathways that would terminate their "on paper" status. Rather than continue with probation or house arrest, some of the men chose shortened incarceration sentences to end their involvement with the criminal justice system. Michael explained that he chose incarceration:

Instead of getting that (house arrest) reinstated for two years, that way I don't have to worry about answering to nobody and walking a thin line no more, and I can just instead be with my peoples... Yeah, at first I wanted to just take back the papers and just sit on it for two more years, but it was kind of a steep choice. Because of house arrest, I can't really do with my son what I wanted to do with him, neither. I couldn't take him certain places. I couldn't take him to school. I just had to go to home and work and certain areas. So I had to weigh the situation whether or not I would be better off for me in the short time or him

in the long run, and by doing this it's better off for both of us in the long run... I could be there when he wanted at different stages in his life. This way I won't have to worry about him, or come back to the jail and answering to the society, or the system at all anymore. So that it would just be between me and him and I won't have no barriers... Yeah, it was a hard choice, but my grandmama told me that is something I had to make on my own. It's just between me and him, and I choose this right here.

Michael's rationale was similar to the opinions of many inmates who have chosen incarceration over continued and lengthy periods of probation or house arrest. Their problems with probation and house arrest seemed to resemble the continuation of "in here" (jail) problems "out there" (home). These men felt that the programs of house arrest and probation limit their power as individuals and their ability to fulfill the father role as they deem necessary. Michael has chosen incarceration so that the "barriers" that the criminal justice system has imposed on his father-child relationship will be removed. These statements appear to represent a parallel version of Schmid and Jones' (1991) bifurcation of self, except in this case the individual maintains his identity as a prisoner while in the outside world. These men's descriptions of the "traps" and concerns of probation revealed a social space where men attempt to return to their pre-prison identity but are unable to fully relinquish their incarcerated identity as they attempt to meet their continuing sanctions. Indeed, many of the men viewed the completion of their sentences as a new beginning. Greg expressed this sentiment when he explained that getting off paper and finishing this sentence will be like "wiping the slates clean." By completing the incarceration process these men felt they would be able to assume the mantle of fatherhood properly and independent of the identity spoiler of "inmate."

#### *Release and Reunion Visions and Expectations*

When participants spoke about their release from jail, their sentiments were positive and optimistic. The men spoke about the ways that they were unable to fulfill father roles and noted how they would, upon release, be able to be with their children, and could resume the unfulfilled dimensions of fathering that they had



missed. When participants were asked to talk about returning home after previous periods of incarceration, a few of the men spoke about a difficult period of readjustment where their children felt awkward and did not engage in the typical actions and sentiments that they recalled as normal behavior prior to their incarceration. However, all of the men asserted that these distinctions were only temporary and that with time their relationships with their children would return to normal.

The offenders with drug problems discussed ways in which they would like to be reunited with their distant children. These release visions differed from those of other inmates who held close relationships with children that they saw either daily or frequently prior to incarceration. The men with drug addiction problems focused on the ways in which they would create or repair their relationships with their children once they had overcome their addiction. An important difference to note is that these inmates were not planning to reunite with their children immediately following their release, but that their reunions focused on overcoming their addictions first.

Chuck, one of the fathers with drug problems, desired to get off drugs and then reunite with his son. However, Chuck has not seen his 17-year-old son in ten years. As a result of his prolonged absence from his son's life, Chuck stated that he has spent a lot of time envisioning what their reunion might be like. He spoke of strategies he would use to help his son understand his drug problem and explained how he had learned from his older brother's mistakes. When Chuck envisioned his father-son reunion, he stated that he would treat his son like a man, and would address him with respect. He stated that his brother was "an ass-hole" towards his son and that the strategies he was considering would keep him from falling into the same pit that his brother had encountered. Chuck talked about how he was preparing himself to reunite with his son through his visions of what future interaction would look like, and through his focus on what he believed would be important issues to address in order to repair his relationship with his son.

The overwhelming theme of the other inmates' release visions focused on immersing themselves in the family and in their

children's lives. They focused on ways in which they would be better fathers and talked about the positive events that would come along with their release. While some men focused on specific things they would do as fathers once they were released, others looked generally towards the future and how their lives as fathers would progress. At the end of my conversation with Greg he seemed to be giving himself a pep talk for his post-release father activities as he stated:

It's gonna be all right. Everything will be all right. It's gonna work out right, I know that. I ain't gonna get down or nothing like that. I kinda know that it's all gonna work out. Basically it's all gonna work out. It is, and I'm excited about it, you know. I really am, you know. Spend time with him [son], take him places, and, you know what I'm saying. Just expose him to positive things. I want you to tape that.

### CONCLUSION

The experience of incarceration and the management of identities are processes that vary within each individual. However, the themes discussed above offer some insight that will help to advance our understanding of the ways that men deal with the "massive assault" on the identity that accompanies incarceration (Berger, 1966). Four distinct notions can be gleaned from this study. First, visits are difficult for inmates in a variety of manners. Second, while incarceration causes many men to become "prisonized," many men in this study displayed strong commitment to their pre-incarceration identities. Third, as other studies have shown, incarcerated fathers hold high expectations for their personal and family lives upon the completion of their sentence. Finally, the difficulties of probation and parole that have been discussed by other scholars (Petersilia, 1995) were noted by the participants in this study.

During visits with one's children the conflicting identities of inmate and father must be simultaneously managed. Many of the men in this study describe this experience as onerous, and seek to avoid it via forbiddance of their children's visitation to the jail. While many of these men continue to allow their wives or partners

to visit, these experiences are not described in such painful words, as are visits with their offspring. Nonetheless, these men also describe difficulties when speaking of visits with their partners. Yet, as mentioned above, these identities are easier to assimilate as the men seem more comfortable exposing their negative qualities or identities to the women that have remained committed to them during their incarceration.

As noted, each individual holds his or her own account of incarceration. However, similar strategies could be found among these men, as all of the inmates with drug problems focused on their attempted recovery from addiction. The men in this study displayed the suspension of their pre-jail identity in various manners. However, many of the participants described their incarceration experience in terms of their efforts to maintain their commitment to their pre-jail identity. When compared with the identity processes described by Schmid and Jones (1991), the results from this study can be understood in four ways. First, the participants in this study were not first-time offenders as were the men in Schmid and Jones' study. This distinction means that these men entered this sentence with knowledge of incarceration and familiarity with an incarcerated identity. Second, many of the men who described their experiences through their commitment to their outside identity were older men who described themselves as "out of place" within the younger culture of this jail. Third, this study was conducted in a jail, not a prison. While these men dealt with the pains of imprisonment, they were not dealing with overly lengthy sentences and lived within a community that varied greatly from day to day. While this distinction does not cause these men to be bereft of an incarcerated identity, it places them within a social location that bears fewer difficulties than those experienced by men in prison. Finally, as seen in Schmid and Jones' (1991) research, some of these men did suspend their preprison identity. However, unlike Schmid and Jones (1991), the degree and the propensity to suspend preprison identities varied. While some men did create "inauthentic" identities through impression management, others held fast to their preprison identities in an attempt to avoid prisonization.

Other studies that have examined the identities of the incarcerated have also found that incarcerated fathers have high expectations for themselves as fathers once they are released (Nurse, 2000; 2001). However, these high expectations are frequently not met by real life experiences (Nurse, 2000; 2001). Unfortunately, the data collected for this study is not longitudinal, and post-release follow-up interviews are not available from the men in this study. Future projects need to examine the connection between the maintenance of pre-incarcerated identities, or a lack of prisonization, during incarceration and post-release familial and social success. Following fathers through the process of incarceration and release could help scholars to develop a better understanding of how fathers and families make it, or “make good,” in a post-incarceration social world (Maruna, 2000).

Finally, this research has created another series of questions that can accompany the issues of probation and parole. Many of the participants in this study were on probation, and were subsequently arrested for violation of probation. These men described their lives prior to arrest as “good” or “all right.” Most of these men were maintaining employment prior to arrest and were supporting their families and providing for their children. Returning to jail caused some of these men to lose well-paying manual labor jobs, and caused one man to lose his home. While these men were responsible for their own actions that led to their re-arrest, probation was portrayed as random, arbitrary, and as “a trap” that is difficult to escape (Petersilia and Deschenes, 1994). These conceptions of probation led some men to seek out longer jail sentences so that they could get “off paper” and so that they could truly complete their sentence once they walk out of the jail. Ironically, the perils of probation have led these men down pathways that will keep them separated from their children and families for longer periods of time. In a sociopolitical culture that rallies around the need for two-parent homes, there is little within the justice system that answers this call. Perhaps calls for increasing the number of two-parent homes in America need to be met by a call for changes in the justice system that will assist incarcerated fathers that are trying to “make good,” (Maruna, 2000) rather than laws that make it more difficult to be an American father.

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