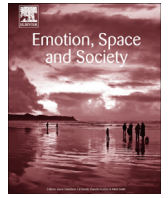




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## Motherhood disrupted: Reflections of post- prison mothers

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## ABSTRACT

Prison is a challenging place for most women but this emotional space is magnified when it is a mother who is incarcerated. The maternal experience for mothers in prison is often at best disrupted, at worst destroyed, by the location. This paper considers how maternal emotions and the maternal role are assembled and challenged through carceral space, and more specifically, how mothers themselves assimilate this experience whilst navigating motherhood post incarceration. The data presented is based on twenty recorded in-depth individual interviews with released mothers across England and Wales. The research findings highlight the significant emotional harm and turmoil felt by mothers themselves and on mother-child relationships, experienced during incarceration and long after their release. Furthermore, the findings emphasise the significance and value of compassionate and thoughtful management of carceral space in relation to mothering emotions. The paper concludes with reflections on the findings of the study and recommendations for future research and practice.

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'It's normal to have photos of your kids up ain't it ... school ones, baby ones, embarrassing ones I've got loads all over at home ... but I couldn't here – for my first six month I couldn't bear them up .... or look at them without breaking down – it was easier to cope not seeing their little faces staring at me ...but that made me feel terrible an' all ... what kind of mother don't have photos of her kids up?'. (Carla, 45)

## 1. Introduction

In the United Kingdom, over 13,000 women are received into custody annually (Prison Reform Trust (PRT) 2015), and research suggests that as many as 61% will be mothers of children under 18 (Caddle and Crisp, 1997:1). Given this figure does not include mothers of over 18s or grandmothers, it is safe to say that most of the UK female prison population are dealing with significant mothering-related emotions during their incarceration. Despite this, acknowledgement and exploration of mothers and mothering within the criminal justice system is an area of only recently growing scholarship.

The lived experience for mothers in prison is very different from that of mothers outside. Simple things that a mother outside might take for granted such as looking at photographs of her children, are

deeply affected by space and place in prison, as illustrated by the opening quote. Most profoundly however, mothers in prison are faced with the emotional and practical struggle of negotiating maternal identity and mothering whilst being imprisoned and therefore spatially separated from their children.

The relationship between motherhood and emotion is a powerful one. There are few ideals that elicit more emotion and arguably more judgement than that of mother and child. O'Reilly (2016) calls for motherhood to 'have a feminism of its own', where mothering emotions are respected, valued and understood. She suggests it is possible to recognise that, whilst aspects of gender are certainly constructed, "motherhood matters, and that maternity is integral to a mother's sense of self and her experience of the world" (2016:204). She argues that this focused feminism ought to be recognised as 'matricentric feminism' (2016).

Over time, researchers and academics (Mead, 1935; O'Reilly, 2004; Oakley, 1985; Rich 1995; Thurer, 1995) have explored the challenges faced by everyday women in terms of meeting the challenges and ideals of being a perfect mother or even simply a good enough mother. They suggest most, if not all, women feel pressure to conform to mothering ideals. If even non-imprisoned women, who, at least in theory can deliver in relation to these expectations, demands and ideals, feel such pressure; what then is the emotional impact of attempting to manage these expectations and ideals from prison; or subsequently as a mother who has been to prison? This paper unpacks these questions and contributes to both broader literature on women's imprisonment and the small

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but growing body of research which specifically considers the experiences of mothers in prison.

Women, prison and gendered aspects of incarceration have been extensively researched (Smart, 1976; Carlen, 1983, 2002; Worrall, 1990; McIvor, 2004). Research in this field has tended to focus on the different ways in which men and women are treated by the criminal justice system, (Walklate, 2001; Carlen, 2002; Gelsthorpe, 2004; Fawcett Society, 2004), and how differently men and women might experience custody (Carlen, 1983; Padel and Stevenson, 1988; Caddle and Crisp, 1997; Devlin, 1998; Chesney–Lind and Pasko, 2004).

There is also an increasing body of research on carceral emotions (Knight, 2016; Crewe et al., 2014; Crawley, 2004), and in relation to maternal incarceration, particularly in the USA (Flynn, 2014; Bloom, 1992; Baunach, 1985; Enos, 2001). Wahidin (2004) undertook valuable research on the older female prisoner population, but mothering, grand-mothering and emotion, although present in this work, was not its primary focus. The topic of maternal incarceration is garnering interest in the UK and Ireland (Epstein 2012; Masson 2014; Minson 2014; Moore and Scraton 2014; O' Malley and Devaney, 2015; Baldwin 2015a; Abbott 2015; Prison Reform Trust (PRT) 2015), although (except for Baldwin) this has not been specific to emotions.

The emotional trauma as a result of the actual physical separation of a mother from her child via incarceration is, to some degree at least, acknowledged and evidenced in existing research. What has been perhaps less appreciated, explored or evidenced is any relationship the prison space itself might have in terms of incarcerated maternal emotion. There has been little or no research specifically focused on the emotional impact of incarceration on mothers and mothering identity or the mothering role, particularly with specific reference to place, and in mothers' own voices.

Drawing on one key theme emerging in early analysis of current doctoral research,<sup>1</sup> this paper aims to show how the specific physical space of prison and the dynamics within, give shape to a powerfully stigmatised, painful experience of motherhood. Furthermore, it will demonstrate how the socio spatial configuration of prison can be impactful both in the short and longer term on mothers and their children long after the prison sentence ends. The paper will build on the existing work of maternal and carceral geographies and, through the lens of emotion, give voice to mothers (and grandmothers). It will discuss mothers' post-custodial reflections on their experiences, and how their maternal emotions and identity were assembled and challenged, both throughout their incarceration and sometimes long after release.

## 2. Methodology

The data for this paper was drawn from current doctoral research and includes the analysis of twenty in-depth face-to-face interviews with mothers who have experienced imprisonment. These voluntary interviews were recorded and all participants gave informed consent for their data to contribute to the PhD and publications. In line with Layders' (2004) adaptive approach, thematic analysis began early and was sustained throughout the fieldwork, thus enabling core themes and patterns to be identified and extracted from the transcripts (Bryman, 2012). These emergent themes and patterns could then be more deeply explored prior to the conclusion of the fieldwork (see Layder, 2013). Ethics approval for this research was granted by the Faculty Research Ethics

Committee at De Montfort University (DMU).<sup>2</sup> Further, the researcher is also a qualified social worker and a member of the British Association of Social Workers, and as such is required to abide by the code of practice of that body.

### 2.1. Sampling and recruitment

Criteria for the research participants was that the women identified themselves as mothers, (whether they had their children currently in their care or not), and that they had experienced at least one period of incarceration. The age of their children was not a conditional issue (several mothers in the sample were mothers and/or grandmothers of adult offspring). Purposive sampling was used to access the first line of participants. The researcher had permission and ethical approval to utilise existing professional contacts in Women's Centres (community centres working with women in the criminal justice system both as an alternative to custody and for supervision following release) and via charities working with women in and after prison. This proved fruitful in terms of securing participants. Some mothers were interviewed at the centres/charities themselves, others asked to be interviewed in their own homes. Posters describing the research, inviting mothers to volunteer were placed in the centres. In addition, an 'invitation to contribute' was placed in various publications that women in or leaving prison were likely to see. This led to several participant approaches and requests to find out more about the research - with most of those then going on to give an interview. The remainder of the participants were secured via snowball sampling - i.e. interviewees were asked if they knew of other mothers fitting the criteria who may be willing to be interviewed. Many did and several mothers contacted made direct contact. The sample comprised of 20 mothers from diverse backgrounds across England and Wales. The mothers were aged between 19 and 66 years, their children ranging from infancy to adulthood. The mothers had served sentences ranging from 6 weeks to eight years, their length of time out of prison ranged from 12 months to 24 years. Most of the offences the women were imprisoned for related to theft, fraud and drugs offences. Some of the women were held in open conditions, some in closed and some of the women would have experienced both.<sup>3</sup>

### 2.2. The interviews

Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min and although they were largely free-flowing, some of the participants required more prompting or more open questions than others. Therefore, a flexible and responsive interview position was adopted, meaning that some of the interviews became more semi-structured or conversational, although always participant-led. It seemed that for some of the mothers the topic was too overwhelming to talk about in an unprompted manner. One of the participants illustrated this by

<sup>2</sup> Alongside ethics approval provided through the researcher's university, approval was also granted by a national umbrella organisation that has responsibility for women's centres across the UK. In addition, approval and support was given by a national charity working with women in and after prison, who provided premises for interviews if required and a means of contacting women via their magazine and premises.

<sup>3</sup> The conditions in which a prisoner is held may affect the amount of free movement within the prison, the possibility and regularity of release on temporary licence (ROTL), the number and type of visits permitted, the amount and type of contact with other prisoners and the type of cell/room the women live in. **Closed Conditions:** Prisoners for whom the very highest conditions of security are not necessary but who present too high a risk for open conditions or for whom open conditions are not appropriate. **Open conditions** Prisoners who present a low risk; can reasonably be trusted in open conditions and for whom open conditions are appropriate. (MOJ PSI.39/2011).

<sup>1</sup> This research was conducted as part of a doctoral project, Baldwin, L. 'Motherhood Disrupted: An interpretivist Study Exploring the Emotional Impact of Incarceration on Mothers (2014 – ongoing). De Montfort University

stating at the outset of the interview: 'You will ask me things won't you, ... I will need you to ask me questions or I'll go off on a tangent and just cry', (Mary, 64, mother of two).

Where additional questions were asked, it was most often to elicit additional information and extract additional memories/thoughts or feelings after an initial response or statement. This was a useful technique and particularly relevant in this study as the participants were reflecting on past events (incarceration) and assimilating this in their current context (back in the community).

Reflective research notes were taken after each interview and again after each interview was transcribed. Although the overall philosophy of qualitative research recognises that each interview will be as unique and individual as the number of interviewees and data will be self-generating (Rubin and Rubin, 2005), saturation was reached in terms of emergent patterns and themes.

### 2.3. Research constraints

The interviews took place outside the prison space and therefore are reflections reliant on personal memories and emotions which may have altered over time. However, for all the mothers the emotional legacy of prison was ongoing – they were still immersed in the feelings from their experiences. Feminist research (Oakley, 1979; Maynard and Purvis, 1994) values and respects the exploration of individuals, their experiences, responses and perceptions; and in relation to the current study, their memories and assimilation of their experiences. Whilst reflective post-prison accounts might not be as raw as accounts given whilst mothers are still incarcerated, it is possible that the persistence of such powerful memories and emotions reflects the depth at which they were felt. Indeed, the uniqueness, originality and richness of the data is informed by the very fact that the mothers are reflecting on their experiences and assimilating them in their current context. Therefore, the longevity of some of the mother's accounts in relation to the ongoing impact of their painful memories and the separation from their children is likely to be one aspect that could be considered as an 'original contribution'. The interviews themselves became emotional spaces (something worthy of future research), indicating that many of the emotions felt by these women remained with them following their release.

There are several emotional and mother-related issues not possible to cover within the remit of this paper; indeed, some custodial mothering and emotional issues are so distinct that they are areas worthy of research in their own right. One such area is Mother and Baby Units (MBUs), which are hothouses of intensified maternal feeling and emotions. These are places with specific issues relating to birthing and early mothering *inside* prison (for further discussion see Abbott, 2015; O'Keefe and Dixon, 2016). Further, this paper does not address issues surrounding mothers' child-focused offending (e.g. mothers who kill or offend against their own/others' children) and the impact this then has on maternal identity, emotions and relations.

### 3. Situated maternal feeling: prison space and the challenge to maternal feelings and emotions

Prisons are emotional spaces. For many, they are not places of emotional safety, especially for many incarcerated mothers. Carceral geographers and prison researchers have identified that prison, simply as a location, often triggers a plethora of emotions and feelings; feelings of safety, security, opportunity and even familiarity (O'Malley and Devaney, 2015; Kauffman, 2001), although perhaps more often, feelings of powerlessness, sadness, frustration and particularly disconnection (Moore and Scraton, 2014; Goffman, 1959; Sim, 1990). Disconnection was something several mothers

identified, not necessarily always connected to mother status or identity but simply as a prisoner. One mother illustrated the point poignantly:

'I couldn't make sense of the location and space outside – I would hear the seagulls and thought ... am I near the sea? ... I didn't know London was near the sea? ... But then I would smell when they cut the grass and it smelt like the country[side] ... Desperate to feel connected to the outside I remember once squeezing my hands through the bars ... I just wanted to try to catch a snowflake'. (Kady, 28).

Notwithstanding individual circumstances, it is not difficult to imagine incarceration presents significant additional emotional challenges for mothers. There is healthy debate over how best emotions are developed and understood, either as social and intersubjective or as biologically driven phenomena. There is a broad acceptance that emotions are for the most part socially constructed, and that emotions are engagements with a continuously changing world of social relationships (Boiger and Mesquita, 2012; see also Parkinson et al., 2005). Layder believes that:

'We don't and can't 'do' personal relationships on our own. To a large extent, how we respond or deal with a friend or a lover, or even a stranger, will depend upon how we think they will respond to us' (Layder, 2004:1).

Yet despite this largely accepted position, Boiger and Mesquita (2012) argue that situational context or places in which such emotion-producing social interactions occur has been somewhat neglected in the literature. Feminist geographers have laid important foundations in relation to understanding intersections between gender, space and feeling (Valentine, 1998). This has been important in relation to the development of emotional geographies and how placed emotions are generated by and expressive of wider social relations (Bondi, 2005; Held, 1995).

Central to this paper is the question of how maternal emotions and maternal identity are assembled and challenged through prison. Arguably the maternal experience of mothers in prison is often at best disrupted, at worst destroyed, by the location. Mary, for example, described prison as 'an assault on her ability to be any kind of mother at all let alone a good one', saying she entered prison as 'damaged goods'. As someone whose life before prison had been chaotic, she described how she came to prison as an 'already failing mother' (Mary, 66); her pre-existing guilt only magnified by her location: 'She stated simply, 'good mothers don't go to prison do they?' Mothers described feeling profoundly and immediately challenged as mothers virtually as soon as they entered the prison space;

'all my life all I'd done was be a mam ... my kids came before any man – we never had much but we had love, I was a good mam – well I did my best ... when I went to prison I felt like that was all wiped out. I'd failed ... Even worse because I'm a Nanna and a Mam – I'm meant to be respectable at my age ... I just looked round when I first went in [prison] and thought that's it, ... I've let them all down ... look at this place – how the fuck did I get to be here?' (Maggi, 55)

Whether or not mothers had their children in their care prior to custody or were to do so after release, it is clear that motherhood and mothering emotions represent an additional layer of complexity with relevance to working with most women in prison (Baldwin, 2015a, b). Enos (2001) and Codd (2008) describe the importance of maintaining a mothering identity and role during

incarceration, whilst recognising the impact that simply being placed in prison, of becoming a *prisoner*, has already had on a mother in terms of her self-esteem and ability to view herself positively as a mother. According to [Corston \(2007, 2011\)](#):

'Many women [in prison] still define themselves and are defined by others - by their role in the family. It is an important component in our self-identity and self-esteem. To become a prisoner is almost by definition to become a bad mother' ([Corston, 2007:20](#)).

In research focused on mothering from prison, even when the mother/child relationship is strong, present, maintained and supported, the enforced physical separation is still for many an unbearable pain ([Enos, 2001](#); [Datesman and Cales, 1983](#)). One mother described the 'agony' of being sent to prison as a still breastfeeding mother:

'I was locked in this horrible lonely, scary place with leaking breasts and no baby ... I held my pillow like it was my child and it was soaked with my milk and my tears ... I felt bereft, I have never felt grief or pain like it'. (Beth, 19)

Notwithstanding [Rowe's \(2011\)](#) reminder that women in prison, indeed mothers in prison, are not a homogenous group, the pain of separation interacts heavily in terms of emotions. Mothers describe feeling despair, anger, grief, loss, frustration, hopelessness, guilt, sadness and shame, even when they are in contact with their children ([Carlen, 1985](#); [Padel and Stevenson, 1988](#); [Devlin, 1998](#); [Enos, 2001](#); [Baldwin, 2015a, b](#)). [Datesman and Cales \(1983\)](#) describe this pain of separation as 'a profound hurt'. One mother described feeling 'pain to the point of numbness' ([Ursula, 48](#)).

Feminist scholars and prison researchers, even when not necessarily focused on women as mothers in prison, have argued that prison is a space that harms all women, viewing it as a gendered, violent institution where the situated power and control serve only to repeat the inequalities and challenges faced by women in wider society ([Scraton and McCulloch, 2009](#); [Moore and Scraton, 2014](#)). [Goffman \(1961\)](#), in his seminal work *Asylums*, highlights the concomitant power of the location and space in relation to what he calls 'total institutions'. He highlights the 'basic split' between what he calls the 'supervisory staff' and the 'managed group' (1961). He argues that although 'social control' is evident in society, it is so much more present in total institutions such as prison, where the unequal power relationship between the two groups facilitates one group – the staff – having 'detailed and restrictive' control over the other – the inmates ([Goffman, 1961](#)). He suggests that this 'grouping' is of relevance to the consequential feelings and emotions in prisoners, suggesting that staff tend to feel 'superior' and 'righteous', and prisoners may thus feel 'inferior, weak, blameworthy and guilty', which [Goffman](#) suggests results in 'formally prescribed' feelings of 'social distance' (1961:18).

Such effects were keenly felt by most mothers interviewed in this study, although the degree was somewhat dependant on the overall culture of the prison and the requirements of the place itself, such as whether it was an open or closed prison. One mother felt she had limited emotional support from officers, although this was not a universal experience, and felt that simply being in prison rendered mothers 'invisible' and 'unworthy' in the eyes of the prison staff:

'the officers didn't care – I wasn't a mother, I wasn't a grandmother who was feeling sad and in pain, I wasn't someone who had made a successful career and made one mistake – I was just a prisoner, the rest ... all gone' ([Queenie, 64](#)).

Incarcerated mothers, particularly those who are away from their children for a first ever significant period, have described the separation as 'like a physical deep pain that envelops you' ([McGregor, 2015:41](#)). Mothers in prison not only bear their own pain and feel their own emotions, but also describe feeling the pain and emotions of their children. [Ursula](#) illustrates the emotional transfusion often present between imprisoned mothers and their children:

'I was thankful that I was going to be able to speak with my daughter on her birthday and although feeling sad and separate I put on my 'mummy mask' and made the call to my daughter. I managed to get hold of her just before her party but was surprised to hear her sounding flat and sad. I asked her what was the matter and her innocent question nearly broke my heart. She said "Mummy I don't know where to say that you are?" In her bewildered voice, she went on – last year's party I said to my friends you were at work, Christmas I said to my friends you were at work – but I can't say you are at work again today can I – no one is allwaaaays at work, are they? I hung up after offering her some excuse – I can't remember what – I was so heartbroken.' ([Ursula, 48](#)).

[Ursula](#) went on to say that although she felt 'pain' and 'disconnection' for herself – her 'real pain' was hearing and feeling her daughter's pain and not being able to do anything about it. She felt this particularly keenly when the call had ended and she was back in her cell replaying the call 'over and over' in her head, knowing it would be another week before she would see her daughter. [Codd \(2008\)](#), [Datesman and Cales \(1983\)](#) and [Casey-Acevedo et al. \(2004\)](#) suggest even something assumed to be positive, such as visits from children, can in fact be a bittersweet experience for mothers in prison. Visits, if she has them,<sup>4</sup> result in a mother experiencing a vast range of emotions in a single day; from excitement, anticipation and apprehension prior to the visits, joy, happiness and contentment during a visit, then profound sadness, grief and feelings of loss when the visit is over. The findings from the analysis of this theme suggest that mothers' emotions are further influenced by the type of place and space available in relation to visits.

'In closed conditions visits were just made so difficult for no reason – it was so stressful the waiting, the wondering and shortness of visits. When I got to ... [prison name] ... it was so different – it was a really friendly room – not horrid for the kids ... there was a family worker to watch the kids and a play area with toys and colouring stuff for the kids to do things – it made me feel so much less guilty bringing them in to that environment – but in closed, well it was just pain' ([Rita, 35](#)).

[Moran \(2012\)](#) reiterates the importance of the liminal space and experience of visits, arguing that how the space within the prison is organised and managed has a relationship to the emotions and experiences, not only of prisoners, but also of their visitors. She suggests that visitors are drawn into the prison 'spatially and institutionally', temporarily subject to rules and regulations of the wider prison, not completely imprisoned, but not completely free either. For prisoners, this 'in-between' space offers reminders of, and face to face contact (albeit temporarily)

<sup>4</sup> Most mothers are located between 60 and 150 miles away from children, meaning that many mothers do not have their children to visit – [PRT 2015](#) and those that do may so only irregularly due to the prohibitive cost and distance involved.

with, their life outside (Moran, 2012). Codd (2004), Flynn (2014) and Moran (2012) all highlight, the more punitive and restrictive the prison visiting space is, the less positive an experience this is for prisoners and their visitors. The paper supports such observations. Mothers described how an oppressive visiting space, with what they saw as unnecessarily restrictive rules, such as not being allowed to have their child on their knee, or not being permitted to hug their children, would not only impact on their emotions during and after the visit, but would also make them question whether to have visits at all.

Baldwin (2015b) and O'Malley (2013) highlight the emotional turmoil that mothers in prison may experience regarding allowing children to visit. Some mothers, particularly those on shorter sentences, although they missed their children desperately, chose what O'Malley called in her Master's thesis (unpublished), the 'protective mechanism' of not allowing their children to visit, thereby suppressing their own emotional and maternal needs to protect their children from the experience of visiting a prison. The visiting space, although a source of joy is simultaneously for many, also a source of pain. Pryce (in Baldwin, 2015a) describes a fellow prisoner, a mother so profoundly distressed immediately following a visit with her baby, that she returned to her cell and attempted to take her life. Some mothers will not admit to their children that they are in prison, because of their own guilt and shame, preferring instead to tell children they are 'working away', in their eyes, protecting their child's innocence. In doing so, mothers are often absorbing their child's anger at apparently choosing work over them (O'Malley and Devaney, 2015; Baldwin, 2015a).

This paper supports such observations with participants describing how experiencing the pain and emotional management of this choice was preferable to their children managing the emotions of having a mother in prison or having to visit a prison. Paradoxically, such deliberate distancing was also a way in which mothers could retain a mothering role; putting the needs of their children first, like mothers are 'supposed to'. Also, however, it could be a form of self-punishment.

The emotional legacy of the guilt and shame of their incarceration was apparent in all the mothers interviewed. Several of the released mothers whose children or grandchildren were very young at the time of the sentence had not yet disclosed that they had ever been a prisoner; one grandmother described it as her 'dirty little secret' (Queenie, 64). Another mother, whose baby was born during her sentence and lived with her for the first four months on the MBU, had yet to tell her six-year-old child the circumstances of her birth. She gave her reason for this as protecting her daughter, but also stated that she was protecting herself from 'more shame, pain and guilt'.

'I don't want her to have that stigma – you was born in prison – I don't want her to be that girl ... at the same time, I don't want her to hate me ... but I fully expect she will and I'll deserve it ... I put her there ... me ... I did that' (Kady, 28).

She was hoping to never need to tell her.

#### 4. Emotion and the organisation of prison time and space

Mothers in this research differentiated between prisons, describing how they were responded to very definitely from place to place, and identifying interesting variables (worthy of further research) such as location-specific cultures and atmospheres (Crawley, 2004; Hochschild, 1983a, b), sometimes even between wings of one prison. One mother suggested this was perhaps related to the gender balance within specific prisons, but stated she very definitely felt her mother identity together with her emotional

and physical experience was influenced and additionally challenged by place:

'In ... [name of prison] ... it felt like we [the mothers] ... were basically looked on as bad mothers, actually worse than that ... mothers who didn't *deserve* to have kids. I know of one woman who's visit was taken off her for 'bad behaviour' she was told exactly that ... in those words, sometimes it was the male screws, and there was a lot more of them there ... especially in charge who were like that ... but I have to tell you the women, especially if they didn't have kids were sometimes worse. But in ... [name of 2nd prison] ... it was different again ... if a woman was new and had kids they kept an eye and they knew how important phone calls home and visits were to us mums. My officer even knew when it was my kids' birthdays, in fact she knew their names – I was gobsmacked in my first week when she asked me how [son's name] was, and how was he coping ... made me emotional her asking you know, even now thinking about it does – I don't ever remember being asked if I even had kids at the other place. I wasn't a mother there ... just a prisoner' (Rita, 35).

Location and situational factors played a part within the prison itself in terms of how 'safe' it is to explore mother-related emotions. Several mothers talked about how mothers were much warier of exposing their maternal emotions in closed conditions, being mindful of each other's pain if mothers were then locked up alone. It was felt that in open conditions mothers were more likely to form informal supportive groups, where their experiences and maternal emotions were more safely and openly discussed. In this environment, mothers also gravitated towards and supported other mothers, emotionally and practically, helping with additional phone cards for children's birthdays, for example. However, even this informal support was often carefully managed to minimise further harm to each other in terms of their maternal pain and emotions. This mother, speaking after a particularly upsetting visit from her children, illustrates the point:

'I was so upset after that first visit, she wasn't dressed in anything I'd pick, she was frightened, she looked untidy and I felt like she hated me ... but what's the point to speaking to anyone – no one cares. I knew I'd just have to deal with it- you want to speak to other mothers but you don't want to upset them either, especially if they haven't even had a visit ... we all feel it ... ' (Tanya, 27).

Rita, a mother of four, spoke extensively about her differing experiences in open and closed conditions, and of how relevant the prison space was to her mothering world. In closed conditions, women in her experience, were locked in their cells 23 h a day, and for three days in a row she remembers being out of her cell for only half an hour of each day. Many found the 'first night centre' a relatively safe space, but one which 'gives you a false sense of security' as they then found the wings a shock, especially those serving their first sentence. Expanding on her experiences, Rita described the additional emotional challenges of closed conditions:

'I once went 10 days without any contact [with my children] at all in closed, because ... and how stupid is this ... the only time the phone on the wing was allowed to be used was between 3 and 4pm in the afternoon – well where are children between 3 and 4? ... coming home from school that's where! I thought I would go mad with frustration ... and what made it worse was in our cells there were phone sockets ... actual phone sockets ... imagine how that felt locked in your cell for hours and hours

staring at something that with a little piece of wire would allow you to hear your children's voices ... you just feel so disconnected, not part of their lives, their lives were going on without me – I was torn, I wanted their lives to go on and them to cope of course I did ... but I just felt redundant, pointless ... like I had no purpose' (Rita, 35).

Rita went on to describe how, in order to cope, she got a job in prison, meaning she was out of her cell for longer. The restrictions related to contact still existed, so it wasn't that the change of space made her feel better; it was simply that working gave her the opportunity to be active until she was 'beyond exhausted', thereby making the space of her cell more bearable when she was locked in. Rita, like Ursula, maintained that in closed conditions mothers were much more 'careful what you said', suggesting that discussing the topic of motherhood was 'risky' as 'you didn't know what you were triggering in them ... whether they had their kids or not 'cos you didn't get time to get to know them in closed' (Rita, 35). Rita described a very different experience when she was moved to 'open' conditions, where she was in a room with two other women – both mothers.

'We all bonded over motherhood – it felt lovely to be able to talk about our kids – it wasn't all we talked about – but it was mostly – it made us all feel 'normal'. [...] we had nothing in common at all other than we were mothers – we probably wouldn't have spoken outside, yet in prison we walked in the grounds – about three miles a day every day – just walking and talking. Closed conditions you can't do that – it makes it harder ... and for what for, for nothing ... most women don't **need** to be in closed conditions ... what were we going to do? Shoplift them or fraud them to death?' (Rita, 35).

After the interview ended Rita, reflecting on her conversation, stated:

'you know what, I really don't know how or even if I would have coped if I had stayed in closed conditions – I really get why mothers in prison kill themselves'.

Rita's view, and experience in relation to open and closed conditions was not exceptional. Mothers in the study were emphatic that prison, and in particular those categorised as closed prisons, presented few opportunities to 'indulge ourselves and talk about our children' safely. When asked if they would value a 'safe space' to do this, such as a group mothering course or programme, without exception all said yes. Rita described the importance of having a space that is less challenging to mothering emotions, not only regarding open and closed conditions, but safe spaces within places. Rita described attending parenting classes, which she didn't feel she needed but valued as being 'given that space to be a mum ... basically we were just sitting around a table and talking about our kids in a safe space'. (Rita).

Stewart (2015), a prison psychotherapist, highlights the importance of a safe space for mothers in prison, quoting a mother who attended her mothers' group describing the benefits of the group to a new member: 'It means we can get together like normal mums who just want to spend time together and think about having a baby.' (cited in Baldwin, 2015a:175). Stewart goes on to say that in her experience it was important that mothers had this space; a brief piece of normality where they could be 'just mothers' and be in a 'role that transcends any other label, especially that of prisoner' (Stewart in Baldwin, 2015a:175–176). Moran (2012) reiterates the importance of how prisoners spend their time in prison. She

suggests that in carceral spaces 'time and space are unusually tightly bound together' (2012:307). Viewing this discourse through a maternal geography lens offers appreciation of the significance of compassionate prison space and the use of mothering support groups and role based activities.

Interestingly, the cell or room space elicited mixed emotional responses. It was felt by some mothers to be a lonely space where fear and loneliness took hold:

'I hated bang-up, it was time alone to think, and I didn't want to think, it made me feel unstable and unpredictable to think too much – I could hurt myself then, and I did' (Lauren, 26).

Yet for others it was a place of sanctuary and safety where they were reminded of 'home':

'I used to retreat to my room and kind of hide. You make your space comfortable ... you make it homely ... you make it home' (Kadyn, 28).

Nussbaum (2001), drawing on the work of Sen (1985), asserts that the creation of compassionate spaces in institutions will have positive effect in terms of emotional wellbeing and affiliation. She goes on to suggest that a 'compassionate institution' will create socially sentient spaces that can assist in meeting the needs of vulnerable and suffering individuals, but that this requires 'institutional structures' rather than being reliant on individuals, something Goffman (1961), Sykes (1958), and Moore and Scraton (2014) suggest is not possible in relation to prison. Women's relationship with their individual space and its relevance to their emotional wellbeing was also something observed by Quinlan (2011) in her study of women in Irish prisons. Quinlan suggested that this individual space serves as a reminder of their relationships to others and their place in relation to the world (2011:221). She quotes 'Anna' who states 'I like my little room: I can't say I don't like it, cos I do'. 'Anna' goes on to say how she can close her door and think of 'home' (2011:222), again something described by several mothers in this study. However, Quinlan also argues that, whatever the organisation of the individuals' space in terms of facilities and style (e.g. room or cell, bare or equipped/homely), the emphasis is always on security and is therefore felt to be firmly located in and controlled by the prison regime. As one fastidiously tidy and organised mother in this study painfully observed, after her room on the MBU was 'spun':<sup>5</sup>

'... they threw all her stuff man ... my baby's clothes everywhere. They took all my stuff down ... everything off the walls, they took my comfort didn't they? ... It was like ... remember where you are ... don't get too comfortable ... it wasn't the mother and baby unit no more ... It was just prison ... make no mistake it was prison' (Kady, 28).

## 5. Conclusion

This paper suggests that the principles of 'matricentric feminism' proposed by O'Reilly (2016) could and should be applied to criminology, generating a matricentric feminist criminology that recognises the specific impact of the criminal justice system on women who are mothers, particularly how the affective impacts of prison are stretched outside of the prison time, space and walls. The power, pains and presence of the prison featured heavily in the

<sup>5</sup> The process of robustly searching a room for contraband often by a designated prison search team and most often leaving the room/cell in a state of disarray.

women's narratives, suggesting that prison as a physical space, accompanied by the control, the relationships within, and the long lasting emotional impact of being an imprisoned mother, played a significant role in the 'spoiled identities' of the women in the study. The mothers perfectly illustrated Goffman's suggestion that prisoners can feel a change 'from a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one' (1963:3). This paper showed how this applies in specific ways to women prisoners who are mothers; mothers who are affected by the prison space itself, affected by the limiting of their mothering role because of that space, by the impact on their emotions and how the effects of prison follow them through the inside space and beyond.

Prison magnifies challenges to mothering. Many mothers in the study reflected on the significance of being separated, of not being 'at home' where sense of place, sense of self and feelings of safety were all inextricably linked to their mothering role, mothering emotions and actions. Prison space very clearly is not home, but this research shows that there are spaces within prison where mothers feel safer discussing their children and mothering emotions, especially those related to guilt, remorse and hopelessness. These places are likely to be prisons classified as open prisons with open conditions, free movement and access to support and other mothers. They may be specific group settings, their cells or rooms, or shared spaces with other mothers. Within those spaces there are additional factors that may magnify or reduce challenges to maternal feeling: relationships and interactions with prison staff, for example. Mothers described feeling 'worse' as mothers if staff were openly judgmental, rejecting, or unsupportive in relation to their role and identity as mothers. Stating that positive relationships and supportive conditions conducive to maintaining their mothering role was key in their emotional management; both during their sentence and after their release. Contact – including its possibility, quality, regularity, style and the design of visiting space – and communication with home and children was again key to mothers' emotional management, and quite probably that of the children. For mothers in prison, it is much more of a challenge to feel the commonly associated, publicly expressed feelings of joy, happiness, competence, fulfilment and pride surrounding one's children; although all may still be present, they are often accompanied by guilt, anxiety, judgement, shame, sense of failure, hopelessness, frustration, grief and pain.

Released mothers described feeling that their 'good mother' identity was forever tarnished, and they struggled with similar emotions to those experienced whilst still in prison, often despite being re-united with their children. Release brought its own set of maternal challenges. Even for mothers no longer in contact with their children, the acknowledgement of their mothering identity and maternal emotions was again significant in their emotional management of their imprisonment and subsequent release.

All the mothers referred to in this paper, regardless of the conditions they were held in or of their relationships with prison staff, found that simply being in the physical space of prison magnified the challenges to motherhood, and many of those challenges or emotional consequences followed the mothers post-release. The most significant emotional challenges posed to mothers in prison were generated by simply being apart from their children – the pain of separation, along with the guilt and perceived 'failure' as a mother for not 'living up' to mothering ideals with the emotional affect and effect of prison stretching far beyond the prison walls. Illustrated eloquently by Dee describing how the 'guilt' and 'pain' does not simply end with the sentence.

'The effects of that place haunt me, the physical scars on my arms only remind me of the pain and heartache I felt in when I was in there- just not being with my kids man .... But worse for

me are the mental scars that no one sees, everyone thinks 'I'm over it .... no one knows, but I'm wrecked really. I still have nightmares from that place you know. I'll always be that terrible mother that went to prison ... nothing will take that away'. (Dee, 24)

Surviving motherhood requires strength, surviving prison additional strength and resilience, and surviving both – which, it must be said, most women in this position do – is a testament to that strength. Additional punishment in the form of emotional harm, uncompassionate responses and uncompassionate organisation of spaces for mothers in custody is not and should not be an inevitable feature of incarceration. If we are to continue to imprison mothers, then the penal system needs to respect and account for their maternal needs and responsibilities, and to explore ways in which maternal identity and relationships can be enhanced, protected and maintained through matricentric thinking.

This paper demonstrates how the affects and effects of prison set in motion shifts in relationship dynamics, particularly those with children, which are marked by pain, separation and distance (both physical and emotional), for many years or even generations to come. Prison is not 'simply' a geographical location with an impact that ends as mothers are released. It is important to understand prison as a socially, emotionally and physically dynamic place that can and does have a far-reaching and profound physical and psychological impacts on mothers and their families.

Recommendations for further research include continued analytical focus on how the relationship between space, place and emotion can give rise to new cross-disciplinary understandings of maternal feeling, along with research around the design and value of compassionate institutions. By highlighting the findings to those responsible for penal and criminal justice policy and practice, positive change for mothers in the criminal justice system may occur. Judicial and sentencing frameworks for mothers should also continue to be revised, thereby decreasing the number being separated from their children in the first place. Developing a matricentric criminological understanding of the ongoing impact of prison in relation to mothers is crucial to the development of more active and compassionate support for mothers during incarceration and, significantly, post-release.

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