

Paternal Post-incarceration Experiences: An Ecological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores the experiences of fathers as they reconnect with their children after incarceration. Through the use of grounded theory and qualitative interviews, the research seeks to gain a better understanding of the processes involved as fathers make this transition. An ecological framework will be employed which will provide insights on the possible environmental factors that enhance or hinder these fathers' experiences.

INTRODUCTION

The rate of incarceration in the United States, as well as the rate at which prisoners are being released from state and federal prisons back into the community has been a serious cause for concern among various stakeholders (MacDonald, 2013; Raphael, 2011; Wright, Zhang, Farabee, & Braatz, 2013). Of the approximately 2.3 million prisoners that are incarcerated annually, 90% of the 700,000 prisoners released back into the society are fathers (Trusts, 2010; Anderson-Facile, 2009). Over the years, the issue of fatherlessness and the significant roles that fathers play in the lives of their children have been explored and documented extensively by scholars, social scientists, and family life practitioners alike (Blankenhorn, 1995; Carlson, 2006; Cook, 2015; Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Nease & Austin, 2010; Samuel, 2016; Snarey, 1993). When fathers become incapacitated because of incarceration, their roles as fathers during this period become dormant. Scholarship over the last decade has focused on the reentry experiences of ex-offenders including restrictions and barriers involved in the reentry process (Hoskins, 2014; Trimbur, 2009), consequences of reentry on communities and families (Petersilia, 2001), the risks and needs of the returning prisoner population (Austin & Hardyman, 2004), and the importance of support to prisoners after incarceration (Duwe & Clark, 2012; Spjeldnes et al., 2012). Most of these studies tend to be general in scope, with little or no focus on fathers, which make up a significant proportion of the returning prison population (Trusts, 2010). Furthermore, scholarship over the years tend to be deficient in providing a qualitative approach that utilizes grounded theory as it's methodology, while integrating the ecological framework as the lens through which post-incarcerated fathers' experiences can be understood. This necessitates the present study, which explores the experiences of fathers as they *seek to* resume parental roles after incarceration.

RESEARCH AIMS

The aim of this research is to explore the perceived relationship experiences that fathers have with their child (children) prior to, during, and after incarceration. The three underlying questions (aims/objectives) that participants of this study will respond to are as follows:

- 1) In looking back, how would you describe your relationship with your child (children) prior to being incarcerated?
- 2) Now thinking about your period of incarceration, how would you describe your relationship with your child (children)?
- 3) Since you've been released, how would you describe your relationship with your child (children)?

METHODS

Participants for this study are being recruited and screened through various institutions within Southern California. These include reentry organizations, universities, faith based organizations, family, and community agencies. Advertisement fliers, emails, and snowball sampling are the primary strategies through which participants are being recruited for the study. In order to participate, participants should be biological fathers who were once incarcerated for a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 15 years, provided financial support to children prior to being incarcerated, released after serving two or more years with no re-arrests within 3 years of release, and have a child or children aged 3 to 18 years between periods of incarceration and release. After screening, participants are allowed to participate in an interview, which lasts for 45 to 60 minutes.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF PARTICIPANTS

- To date, 6 post-incarcerated fathers have been interviewed.
- These include 3 African Americans, 1 European American, 1 Latino American, and 1 Native American.
- The average age of participants is 45, with a minimum age of 35 and a maximum of 56.
- With the exception of 1 participant who identifies as Muslim, other participants identify as Christians.
- 3 participants (50%) have some college education (SC), while the other 3 (50%) has either completed high school (HS), has less than high school education, or has greater than an associate level education.
- Participants have a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 20 children borne to a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 6 mothers.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Using grounded theory as the methodological approach, and the ecological lens through which the experiences of participants can be understood, a number of themes and ensuing categories have developed from the present study. The conceptual model in **Figure 1** indicates that as post-incarcerated fathers attempt to reconnect with their children after incarceration, their adjustment and interaction with various facets of their environment evokes various experiences. These include a range of emotions such as fear, anxiety, stress, and frustration. Throughout the process, support or non-support from family, the community, as well as the judiciary system, either hinder or enhance their reintegration experiences. Furthermore, the level of progress experienced by these men in reintegrating with their children depends on how estranged or engaged participants are with their spouses (children's mothers), children, mentors, or family members. Notwithstanding, their experiences indicate a level of maturity through renewed perspectives on parenting (fathering), taking responsibility for misdemeanors, and seeking reconciliation with family members.

CONCLUSION & IMPLICATION

The reintegration experience of post-incarcerated fathers into the lives of their children after incarceration is a dynamic, and somewhat complex process. The present study indicates that as these men adjust to various facets of their environments, they are confronted with various challenges. These challenges are embedded in the different ecosystems in which these fathers live and interact. Some of the challenges experienced by this group include unemployment, lack

of financial resources, and lack of support from various segments of the community in which they reintegrate. Emerging themes from this study indicate that as these men prepare to reconnect with their children, and in some cases resume parenting roles, they are confronted with issues regarding their emotions, relationships, support, and their level of maturity as they make this transition. Results of this present study will inform policy makers, family scientists, government, and families about the processes involved in the experiences of post-incarcerated fathers as they transition back into the lives of their children and families, and experience satisfaction and wellbeing in so doing, and also contribute to the wellbeing of their children. The provisions of policies and infrastructures may serve to facilitate a smoother transition for these men. The present study also offers important implications for theory development, practice, and research.

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