

**Reflexivity in correctional research: researcher perspectives on parenthood in a study
with incarcerated parents**

ABSTRACT

As incarceration rates rise worldwide, increasing numbers of parents are separated from their children. Researchers have studied the psychosocial impact on inmates and their families extensively. However, few researchers have examined how their own perspectives affect the collection and interpretation of data, specifically about parenting in correctional settings. This paper considers methodological implications of conducting research with incarcerated mothers and fathers, employing critical reflexivity to explore researchers' individual and collective experiences in a study in Australian correctional facilities. Using ourselves as informants, we examine how the context and life experiences of 'researcher' and 'researched' interact during interviews in a unique and emotionally charged environment. Correctional research requires careful adaptations to collect meaningful data from inmates and recognise their vulnerability as parents. The emotional content of interviews also has implications for analysing and interpreting research data. Our focus on interviewees as mothers and fathers, rather than as offenders, generated greater understanding of the needs of parents in custody. Recognising researchers' feelings, experiences and perspectives on parenthood can enrich research with families affected by the criminal justice and child protection systems. These insights can also inform the understanding and practice of social workers, health practitioners, educators and students who work with marginalised parents and children.

Keywords

Prisoners; parent-child relations; parenting; qualitative research; interviewing; collective reflexivity

BACKGROUND

Incarceration is increasing dramatically worldwide: global prison populations increased 20% during 2000-2015, exceeding total population growth of 18%. More dramatically, the number of women prisoners rose 50% (Walmsley, 2016). These figures represent ever-increasing numbers of individual men and women in custody – many of them parents.

Consequently, researchers have investigated the impact of incarceration on parents and children, and examined initiatives to ameliorate the effect of family separation. The practicalities of conducting research with incarcerated individuals have been explored widely. However, outside the realm of ethnography, few studies highlight the research process from the researchers' own perspective. This paper examines how collective reflexive approaches to qualitative research in prisons can create new knowledge on parenthood to enrich research and practice with incarcerated parents.

As research settings, correctional institutions are secluded and highly regulated. Considerable literature offers aspiring researchers guidance on accessing inmates as participants, maximising cooperation and compliance, gaining credibility and optimising the validity of responses (Apa et al., 2012; Davies and Peters, 2014; Fox et al., 2010; Offender Health Research Network, 2010; Ramluggun et al., 2010; Reiter, 2014; Wakai et al., 2009). Ethnographic studies in particular offer valuable insights about prison culture and the complex relationships between researcher and inmate (Drake and Harvey, 2014; Piche et al., 2014; Rowe, 2014; Ugelvik, 2014).

Inmates' willingness to participate in research depends on their motivation, and rapport between interviewee and researcher (Apa et al., 2012; Jewkes, 2011; Shaw and Elger, 2015; Easterling and Johnson, 2015). Interviewing incarcerated men about sentencing and custody, Hall observed that participants regularly shifted the narrative towards what was important to

them, ‘speaking unprompted about families and loved ones’ (Hall, 2014: 1), attributing the focus on relational issues as reaction to the scant connectedness in their lives. Critiquing the absence of researcher emotion and subjectivity in much prison-based research, Jewkes contrasts scientific aloofness with the ‘breathtakingly frank disclosures’ of participants (2011: 67).

A small but growing body of literature specifically investigates the impact of prison-based studies on both researcher and researched. Liebling’s pioneering work examined the impact of research from both perspectives, depicting interviews with inmates as ‘traumatic encounters – long enough to empathise with some of their feelings, structured enough to limit our ability to respond with more than sympathy or occasional suggestions’ (Liebling, 1999: 150). This raises issues of objectivity, generalisability, and how experience and emotion can formulate knowledge. Others have explored researchers’ responses to the powerful emotions of both participants and investigators, and the pain inherent in correctional research (Arditti, 2002; Drake and Harvey, 2014; Jewkes, 2011; Quina et al., 2007; Yuen, 2011; Sloan and Drake, 2013). Within methodological literature about correctional settings, the role of critical reflexivity – or conscious reflection upon and transformation of practice – is relatively uncommon (Piche et al., 2014; Rowe, 2014; Sutton, 2011; Yuen, 2011; Walsh, 2009). Critical reflexivity is a valuable analytical tool, yet often absent from studies reporting only data analysis and statistical techniques rather than examining the relationship between researchers’ positions and research outcomes (Hickson, 2016).

One study of prison visitors (Arditti et al., 2010) highlighted reflexivity in research about non-incarcerated parents and children. Examining researchers’ own emotional responses to interviews generated deeper understanding of the personal, relational and economic impact on non-incarcerated family members (Arditti et al., 2003). Inspired by this work, we

employed critical reflexivity to help understand research with incarcerated parents themselves.

This paper aims to examine methodological implications of interviewing parents in custody. These encounters influenced our knowledge and practice as researchers and health professionals. Within wider research in correctional facilities in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, we analysed our individual and collective experiences and their effect on the collection, analysis and interpretation of data about parents' learning and support needs. We then reflected on how personal interactions influenced our understanding of incarcerated parents' experiences and our perspectives on parenthood.

METHOD

The Breaking the Cycle study

Australia's growth rate for incarceration outstrips upward international trends. The national prison population increased by 66% in 2000-2015 (Walmsley, 2016); numbers of female prisoners more than doubled over this period (Walmsley, 2015). In NSW, the most populous state, nearly half of incarcerated men had children, as did over 60% of incarcerated women. Parenthood is more common amongst Aboriginal Australians who have a disproportionate rate of imprisonment (Corrective Services NSW, 2014).

The Breaking the Cycle (BTC) study explored the learning and support needs of incarcerated parents in NSW, focusing on their relationships with their children. It aimed to help promote pro-social parenting, recognising the links between disadvantage, trauma, disrupted parenting and incarceration. BTC addressed how correctional programs and practices might support inmates' parenting resources, and enhance relationships with their

children. BTC also evaluated prison-based parenting programs offered to support inmates' parenting knowledge and skills, and facilitate interaction with their children (authors).

BTC involved semi-structured interviews with 129 parents in nine NSW correctional facilities, exploring family background, experiences of parenthood, and participation in parenting programs while incarcerated. We refer here to these 65 mothers and 64 fathers as 'interviewees'. The open-ended questions adopted an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach (Liebling et al., 1999; Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005) to examine parents' support needs, focusing on their strengths while also recognising the challenges of incarceration. Where possible, parents also completed three validated quantitative psychosocial instruments. BTC was approved by ethics committees of [university] and [organisation]. All parent interviewees gave informed consent.

Data collection: collective reflection and critical discussion

The current paper reports a sub-study within BTC: a collective reflexive process amongst the research team, sharing our individual observations about collecting, analysing and interpreting data from BTC interviews. For this sub-study, the researchers were the informants. Critical reflexivity enabled transparency about how our subjective experiences contributed to and influenced the research process (Savin-Baden, 2004). Assuming a reflexive stance and articulating researcher positioning establishes credibility, transparency and quality (Holloway and Freshwater, 2007). Reflexivity interrogates the inherent power relations between the researcher and the researched (Lumsden and Winter, 2014) and permits consideration of methodological issues, especially in research with marginalised groups (Salmon et al., 2010).

Figure 1 illustrates this reflexive sub-study (bottom row) within the broader BTC research.

The reflexive research practice involved acknowledging our personal positions within a broader social and cultural framework, as highlighted by Sandelowski and Barroso:

“Reflexivity... entails the ability and willingness of researchers to acknowledge and take account of the many ways they themselves influence research findings and thus what comes to be accepted as knowledge. Reflexivity implies the ability to reflect inward toward oneself as an inquirer; outward to the cultural, historical, linguistic, political, and other forces that shape everything about inquiry; and, in between researcher and participant to the social interaction they share” (2002: 216).

Within teams, critical reflexivity requires members to be open to others’ ideas, beliefs and positions and to understand their joint experiences (Bassett, 2012). Our collective reflexive process emerged from frequent informal de-briefing conversations following the data collection phase and as we commenced data analysis. We later formalised these conversations into two semi-structured group discussions, to specifically explore our experiences and reflections within the research. We discussed complex methodological and personal issues about BTC’s social and political context and considered how our positions and backgrounds affected the research process and interactions with parents. We thus generated data on ourselves, reflecting on our individual and shared feelings and practice in the context of research findings. Group discussions between researchers have been documented in developing methodologies (Nind and Vinha, 2014). In addition to providing data for this paper, our conversations provided closure to the data collection and informed analysis of interview data.

Research Team

The five authors all worked or studied at the one university and conducted 108 of the 129 BTC interviews (all 65 women and 43 men). This research team designed and implemented the BTC research program, collected and analysed data, and wrote journal articles and reports. (The remaining interviews were conducted by casual research assistants, who were not connected with the university and did not participate in data analysis.)

The researchers were all female; four were mothers and the fifth was expecting her first child during the study. Ages ranged from 32 to 62. Two researchers were Aboriginal. Three were full-time academics; two were part-time research assistants. The multidisciplinary team comprised two nurses, two social scientists and one student midwife. Two visited only female prisons; one visited only male prisons; the other two interviewed both mothers and fathers. Four had previously visited correctional centres, to conduct research, provide clinical services in prisons and/or visit family and friends.

Data Analysis

The researchers' focus groups both lasted approximately 90 minutes. Discussions were digitally audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. The transcriptions constitute the data for this sub-study, with anonymous excerpts to illustrate the arguments. We did not specifically consent to participate; this process was central to our practice as researchers.

We used thematic analysis, consisting of reading and re-reading the transcripts, discussing and comparing data to identify categories (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This enabled us to foreground the data's richness. We then jointly re-examined and condensed categories into four themes: use of appropriate methods; impact on interviewees; emotional content of interviews; and influence on data interpretation. Writing this paper together further contributed to analysis, extending the reflexive process and challenging our ideas and construction of our research on parenting.

FINDINGS

Appropriate methods – engaging incarcerated parents

Entering a correctional centre allows researchers access to a specific group of mothers and fathers in a world witnessed by few outside the correctional system. Although non-custodial staff (e.g. welfare officers, educators and Aboriginal programs officers) facilitated access and provided background information, we were heavily influenced by our expectations, as BB articulated:

I had been to a maximum-security men's prison before... But I actually found it intimidating going into the maximum-security women's... I didn't expect it to be so similar to the men's I guess or [that] the women would be treated that way (BB)

The unique features of prison as a research setting foiled our intentions to interview parents in a spirit of professionalism, collaboration and engagement. The rhythms and structures of prison life meant that encounters were often rushed or truncated, awkward and not as confidential as we would wish. Power discrepancies between researchers and interviewees were more blatant than in other settings, typified by our capacity to leave the prison's confines afterwards. The correctional environment involved seemingly arbitrary waiting times and rule changes. Once, three researchers were permitted to carry only one audio-recorder because our letter of authority specified 'recording device' not 'devices'. Although laughable, this incident exemplified how petty rules dominate inmates' lives. It also illustrated the enormous difficulties for family visitors, and why some inmates reluctantly chose to spare their children much scrutiny and distress by forgoing visits.

As researchers, we discovered tensions between the inflexible research space and interviewee autonomy. Our usual attempts to enhance rapport with the parents contravened

institutional discipline and safety policies, which precluded relaxed, confidential or respectful interviews:

There weren't enough rooms so they put the woman in the little holding cubicle with just the little bench and they went and got a big comfy chair for me to sit outside in the doorway and I just found that really uncomfortable. [I thought] I'm not going to get any authentic information from her sitting here like this and I said, 'I am happy to go in there with her and sit next to her'. [They replied] 'No you can't do that'. (BB)

Having consented to the interview, the parents answered our questions cooperatively and frankly. Although specifically advised that they could refuse to answer any question, none took this option. We were impressed by their candour and willingness to trust us with personal stories.

A few parents thought that being interviewed might benefit them, helping restore their children or obtaining prison privileges. We carefully dispelled these impressions and offered them the chance to withdraw; yet most persisted with the interviews. DD speculated on other possible motivations:

I made that clear and said, 'you are very free to go'... I also had the feeling that people were there for something to do rather than actually motivated to participate in the research, which is typical of people in prisons. Boredom is obviously quite high. (DD)

Interviewees' perception of researchers, or our self-revelations, may have influenced willingness to participate:

Every time I had a woman identify themselves as Aboriginal, I identified myself as an Aboriginal research assistant, not just a research assistant. I had a few that said that they were happy that I was there because they could just speak to me as if they were

speaking to another tidda [sister] and that they felt that I wasn't going to judge them because they knew. I think that was helpful in getting them to speak openly (BB)

Adopting an AI approach, the interviews asked 'what are your strengths as a parent? What do you do well?' Some parents balked at the notion of parenting 'strengths' and struggled to answer. Several, especially fathers, responded: 'I don't know; I can't think of anything'. This response illuminated interviewees' unfamiliarity with being addressed positively as parents, especially while in custody. Many required prompting or rewording to help them respond. Some reported having no parenting strengths (lamenting 'otherwise I wouldn't be in here'), although most were ultimately able to identify a personal quality, such as patience, listening skills, or loving their children.

The quantitative component of BTC interviews also proved challenging. We anticipated that some parents' limited literacy would require reading aloud the questions and response options. However, some interviews uncovered deeper comprehension issues:

There were a couple of times that I just abandoned it [quantitative items], because I just felt like I was leading them [to answer] and they were being so compliant that I thought 'this is a false process'. (EE)

The fundamental concepts of the quantitative instruments proved inappropriate to marginalised people with often chaotic personal histories. EE recalled using a validated measure of family adaptability and cohesion (Olson, 2011), where underlying assumptions confused interviewees who did not share the concept of 'family'.

One man I interviewed... there was no family in his life that had been there functioning for long enough. Cognitively... he understood the questions and he understood the purpose of the survey, but we just couldn't work out a family in his life to answer those questions about. (EE)

EE revealed deleting his quantitative responses from the dataset, focusing instead on the deeper meaning of his incomprehension for our qualitative findings.

Impact on interviewees – doing no harm

We anticipated the potential impact of raising sensitive questions about parenthood, with individuals whose histories involved instability, stigma and removal of children.

I didn't want to do any harm to these prisoners when I was interviewing them. Because my concern is that we raise these issues and a lot of them [the parents] use words like guilt: 'I am guilty, I feel like I have done the wrong thing for my kids being in here. This is really selfish' ... Some of them they were really tough on themselves and they got really distressed... I was very concerned that at times it might leave them upset and distressed because of talking to them. I don't think we did because hopefully we were able to take them on that journey but also close off before we left them – but they seemed at times to be very vulnerable (AA)

Many parents appreciated the opportunity to talk about their children. One mother was initially disappointed when EE confirmed that she would not receive privileges for agreeing to be interviewed:

I thought she might leave, and I offered her that option. But she didn't. In the end, we went through all her stories and she had a cry and she said 'I feel much better after this talk'. (EE)

The interview questions specifically focused on interviewees as parents rather than offenders. We aimed to convey respect for their expertise about their children. DD outlined how some fathers grasped this role and explored new insights:

I found a couple of men get more enthused about being a father as we proceeded through the questions... it gave them an opportunity, some of them who had not done parenting

courses, it actually gave them time to reflect on being a dad and what they were going to do about their kids... I remember one fellow at the end we had a chat and he said 'I want to do this with my kids and I want to do that, now. That's really good – Thanks!' So [the interview offered] that space to unload, to actually consider being a dad. (DD)

We were often humbled and grateful for the parents' contribution to the study, but CC identified a reciprocal element in qualitative research incorporating interviewees' narratives:

Talking about the importance and the treasure of peoples' stories... but listening is a gift too (CC).

Interview content – raising emotional issues

Focussing on parenthood inevitably unearthed painful issues. Some interviewees described harsh family histories and abandonment throughout their own childhood. Many left home as teenagers; others experienced violence, parental incarceration or multiple bereavements. Responding both as empathic researchers and as mothers, their stories often saddened us. These encounters continue to reverberate:

I thought I was empathetic but after becoming a mother, when I reflect on the stories I heard, my empathy is different and deeper (BB)

A few interviewees lived with their young children in Mothers' and Children's Units (prison nurseries). However, most reported the trauma of losing children through institutional removal, substance dependence, family breakdown or, occasionally, death. Most were separated from their children through incarceration, often exacerbated by minimal contact: foster carers denied visits or communication; ex-partners moved away; frequent transfers between prisons made visits unfeasible or unaffordable; some could not afford phone calls or simply didn't know their children's whereabouts. Their diverse experiences highlighted the immense difficulty of parenting from afar, compounded by poverty, health problems and

wider family disruption. Although we did not specifically seek negative experiences, distress and loss were frequent and fundamental themes. As health professionals and researchers, we had to look objectively beyond our own reactions. However, strict neutrality was sometimes impossible when hearing these parents' narratives.

As parents, we often identified with interviewees' strong attachment to their children, moved by the loss of not only their children but also their parental persona:

As a mother... that's normally your primary identity, that's where you start. We might be academics or researchers or students or nurses or whatever – but Mum is first always.

(CC)

AA found two situations professionally confronting as a nurse. She interviewed one young mother living in a Mothers' and Children's Unit with her six-week-old daughter, recently diagnosed with a heart condition. The mother was distraught, exhausted and reported being bullied by other inmates. She stated that she could no longer cope with the baby and might return to the main gaol, relinquishing her baby and her place in the special unit. The second interview involved a mother of four imprisoned only days earlier. She had no idea where her three eldest children were, and her youngest had been admitted to hospital for 'failure to thrive'. She stated that she had previously consulted several health professionals about this infant's wellbeing, but '*no-one would listen and now they were blaming her*'. AA reflected:

As a nurse, I found it very difficult when they were telling me things and talking about their distress and feeling that I really didn't have any power within the system to do anything about it. So, I found that abnormally distressing because in a normal situation in the community I would have been more proactive... At the end of the interview I would have referred them on to other places. Whereas the same level of referral wasn't

available in the prison... I had to keep pulling myself back from promising things that I could never achieve, that I would have normally promised to someone in the community. But in this situation, I couldn't make any promises to this woman; I couldn't act as her advocate because it wouldn't have been allowed (AA)

This extract illustrates AA's empathy with these mothers' circumstances, and also her professional powerlessness to support these women effectively, illuminating the inherent dilemmas of the nurse-researcher role in this setting.

Data analysis and interpretation - understanding parents' stories

We recognised the impact the deeply affecting content would have on how we analysed and interpreted the interviews. The interviewees' stories and their present situation in custody enabled us to comprehend parenthood in a broader sense and to develop a deeper understanding of the complexity and variety of their relationships with their children. Although lacking the sustained, intimate interaction achieved during ethnographic prison studies, our briefer connections nonetheless generated strong responses to parents' narratives. We often felt motivated to highlight their experiences within the correctional system.

The encounters reflected not only our efforts to enhance rapport but also our common bond as parents, articulated here:

I remember one interview with a woman really heartened me, as a researcher and as a person... We were discussing communicating with her children from gaol. She talked about making them each a little exercise book with quizzes and puzzles and drawings to colour in. She sent these off to the kids... That made me happy because I thought I am looking forward to using this, because it's a good example [of incarcerated parents sustaining connection with their children]. But it also touched me because here's a mother doing things that I recognise, things that I would have done for my kids (EE)

In interacting and identifying with this woman, EE resolved to emphasise her act of motherhood within the research findings. The woman's actions not only reflected sensitive parenting, but also illustrated her creativity and humanity. EE wished to demonstrate this genuine, almost mundane activity, especially to outsiders who invariably label inmates 'bad' parents.

Some male interviewees revealed awareness of their shortcomings and a desire to improve as fathers, eliciting DD's response:

I certainly know that I was heartened – and I then raised it in analysis – by men's declarations of honesty in terms of 'I know I stuffed up. I want to do it better' ... I realise that I have made the judgement that these men are guilty. Instead of suspending that – they could be innocent, how do I know? In a way, by them actually saying that they want to do better as a father, I felt heartened, I felt lifted. Whereas when they just complained about being in gaol and the lack of courses, I felt [flat] ... The individual you are talking to, it makes a difference. (DD)

DD recognised these fathers' optimism, consistent with AI principles, as key for data analysis. Their desire to be better fathers yielded additional incentive to write recommendations for facilitating incarcerated parents' connection with their children.

Working within correctional environments also made us ponder the veracity of interviewees' responses, in a different way from experiences in other research settings. Although we specifically avoided discussing their crimes, we were aware of assumptions about interviewing offenders. AA contemplated one mother's account:

She said she was falsely accused, that she wasn't in the place they were saying she was at the time. I don't know what the crime was and it's really hard because my

professional self as a nurse was saying 'this seems a very feasible story that she's telling' ... For me it's around the judgment issue, about whether I am sympathising or empathising with her because she is middle-class Anglo Saxon [as I am] as opposed to some of the other women who obviously have been on drugs and they don't speak as well... it's a real dilemma that I have to really struggle with to make sure that I am not making a wrong judgement about her innocence saying, 'yeah she is innocent and the authorities have obviously got it wrong' ... I suppose it's just that internal thing that I think we sometimes as professionals and researchers have to deal with, when we are put out of our comfort zone (AA)

CC contrasted engaging and empathising with interviewees during the study and potentially interacting in different circumstances, highlighting that empathy can be contextual:

With qualitative research, we take them at face value – it's subjective, it's their opinion. Story-telling literature says that people will present themselves in the best possible light. While we might have felt a great deal of empathy and 'that's terrible for you', if [the same woman] was standing over you in a bus or trying to rob you, you really wouldn't care about her story. But in this protected space, you're privy to a story that you're never going to hear otherwise (CC)

BTC included mothers and fathers, examining their experiences of parenting and of education programs in custody, incorporated in other BTC output (authors). Through reflection, EE identified that she perceived some gender differences during the interviews:

It's only a sense – and I have absolutely no evidence for it – but sometimes I felt that what the men told me rang truer than what the women said, though not always... I dare

say the men haven't had to spend nearly as much effort as the women have in convincing [child protection agency] that they are good parents (EE)

BB suggested to EE that the mothers may have been more reticent in their responses *'maybe the women felt a little bit more judged by you because you're quite possibly a mother yourself'*. This exchange indicated the influence of both the interviewer and the interviewee's pre-conceptions about each other. It also revealed greater insight into the experiences of incarcerated mothers who frequently experience judgemental authority figures and understandably respond warily, in order to maintain custody of their children.

DISCUSSION

In considering our research methods, we reflected on how these encounters influenced us as researchers, health professionals and parents. We argue that this experience can affect how data is collected, and subsequently interpreted. Critical reflexivity was vital in examining our research practice and interactions with interviewees. Moreover, these reflections are pertinent to research and practice with other parents separated from their children or facing psychosocial disadvantage or stigma.

Like others, we were conscious of the correctional environment on our ability to engage interviewees to collect meaningful data (Apa et al., 2012; Davies and Peters, 2014; Ramluggun et al., 2010; Drake and Harvey, 2014; Arditti et al., 2010). We often felt uncomfortable interviewing in settings subject to rigid, sometimes dehumanising protocols. Although we felt vulnerable, critical reflection highlighted our extremely privileged position, far removed from the parents' exposure to the all-pervasive regimented environment (Brooks, 2014).

Interviewing incarcerated parents raised methodological considerations for the research.

Despite pilot-testing and using questionnaires validated with incarcerated populations, the experience with quantitative instruments highlighted some interviewees' inability to respond meaningfully (although willingly), and the need to adapt methods and timeframes to engage offenders effectively (Holt and Pamment, 2011). Rephrasing or even abandoning questions demonstrated commitment to what Guillemin and Gillam term 'ethics in practice' (2004), as we responded authentically to issues arising in fieldwork. This experience demonstrated the superiority of qualitative research methods for addressing research questions. We recognised limitations in interpreting the quantitative data, given for example varying understandings of such fundamental concepts as 'family'.

Our encounters reinforced other authors' observations about inmates' openness within research, 'how unfailingly, candidly, honest both prisoners and prison staff can be' (Jewkes, 2011: 66). Research interviews can offer incarcerated parents the rare opportunity to know that outsiders believe that they can make a valid contribution (Jansen, 2015; Quina et al., 2007). Certainly, regardless of their underlying motivations, most BTC interviewees appeared to respond genuinely, cooperatively and comprehensively.

Qualitative research interviews constitute a fleeting but potentially revealing interpersonal encounter, where both parties listen and share (Broadhurst, 2015). Questioning interviewees as mothers and fathers, and connecting temporarily as parents, may have contributed to their generosity in answering questions. Discussing their own children, they became the 'experts'; we respected that knowledge offering interviewees a brief sense of competence (Jansen, 2015) a rare experience within prison – or the child protection system. The interviews also granted space where interviewees could reflect on another dimension of their lives. This approach, we believe, facilitated an open conversation and helped generate detailed and moving accounts of the parents' experiences. Identifying commonalities between the researcher and the researched through disclosure may have enhanced rapport. This

contrasts with the impersonality of much prison-based research which focuses on interviewees' offences or their incarcerated status, and often 'neutralises complex human relationships' (Jewkes, 2011: 63).

Recognising the potential impact on interviewees, we endeavoured to embrace a respectful, non-judgemental research practice, providing a supportive atmosphere for parents to focus on their parenting experiences without fear of reprisal. Crucially, our approach and critical reflexivity shifted the focus to interviewees as parents rather than offenders. It allowed us to wonder why they participated so openly, potentially exposing them to further scrutiny. The research ideally gave them an opportunity to focus briefly beyond their current circumstances, offering a chance to be heard as parents and to have their insights and competence acknowledged and respected. Providing opportunities for marginalised people to evaluate systems imposed upon them can be empowering and validating (Berger, 2015).

Prisoners are marginalised and subject to a punitive and intimidating regime. Their situation is often exacerbated by mental and/or physical illness, low literacy or substance dependence. As parents, they are further subject to loss and isolation; discussing parenthood risked exposing powerful emotions. We were careful of this when establishing ethical frameworks for BTC. We realise that many of the most haunting interactions we jointly discussed were our encounters with mothers. As women ourselves, it is likely that we reflected particularly on our own parenting practices in relation to these female interviewees.

We were also deeply moved by many accounts that starkly demonstrated the vulnerability of these parent/child relationships and the injustices that several recounted. In gathering and reviewing data, we focused on exploring how the interviewees perceived being a parent, rather than on specific parenting activities and choices. This approach may enhance research and practice with families marginalised for other reasons, such as substance use, sexuality or family dynamics.

The AI approach also facilitated cooperation, generating rich research data and deeply emotional exchanges, for the parents recounting their distress and for us witnessing their pain. Yet researchers' feelings are rarely reported (Herland, 2016). The nurse-researchers on the team, particularly, experienced a frustrating tension between wanting to support the interviewees professionally and adhering to requirements of the correctional system which facilitated the research. Intervening would have broken our undertaking to maintain confidentiality. Other reflexive researchers have explored similar feelings and tensions in the research process (Arber, 2006; Arditti et al., 2010; Yuen, 2011). Managing both the inmates' emotional responses and our own reactions to their stories was sometimes challenging. However, positioning ourselves emotionally is important to researcher reflexivity (Berger, 2015). Moreover, affective reactions can provide a powerful analytic catalyst to understand the situation of marginalised groups (Yuen, 2011; Herland, 2016).

The study generated new understanding of what parenthood meant for mothers and fathers in custody. Certainly, they described events and relationships which were complex, sad and sometimes harrowing, and the many overwhelming constraints on their ability to connect with their children. Through briefly encountering such vulnerability in this rigid environment, we sensed further dimensions of their loss. Less frequently, we also heard more positive perspectives on parenthood in adverse circumstances. Interviewees demonstrated resilience and resourcefulness in sustaining relationships with their children and in maintaining their sense of motherhood and fatherhood (Easterling and Johnson, 2015) which we resolved to accentuate in our findings.

The reflexive process also allowed us to look more deeply into the data, considering the impact on interpreting the information obtained. Through empathising with the parents' accounts of relating to children from custody, we recognised the detrimental impact of institutional policies and procedures (authors). BTC results also highlighted institutional

policies which, although rare, facilitated connection with their children, as well the valuable insights about parenting attributable to prison-based education programs (authors). This further aligned with BTC's underlying AI approach, promoting parenting strengths and achievements in the correctional context.

Limitations

A major shortcoming of this sub-study is that we adopted the collective critical reflexive process towards the end of data collection rather than establishing formal mechanisms for reflection throughout BTC. We had used informal opportunities to explore our reactions, prior to using the collective critical reflexive process to analyse our feelings and findings as a group. Our reflexive activities were therefore retrospective without benefit of ongoing formal discussions, journals or documented fieldnotes.

CONCLUSION

This study underlined the value of collective reflexive processes for examining researchers' individual and joint experiences, generating a richer understanding of parenthood in custody. It builds on earlier work exploring the emotional impact of family research in correctional contexts (Arditti et al., 2010), focusing on our perspectives on interviewing incarcerated parents.

Joint reflection allowed us to examine our individual experiences, biases and assumptions. Confronting settings such as prisons clearly influence researchers' inter-relationship with interviewees who are stigmatised and, ultimately, with their findings. Critical reflexivity motivated our discussions, contributing to this sub-study and offering an end-point for data collection. Our collective conversations allowed a rare transparency as we examined the emotional impact of the interviews on our research, professional and personal

selves (Arber, 2006; Savin-Baden, 2004), and a mechanism to ensure the team's emotional safety.

Recognising our belated adoption of this process, we recommend that researchers working in correctional or other institutional environments establish formal reflexive processes early in research. This can strengthen practice in research endeavours other than qualitative ethnographic or phenomenological designs where reflexivity is more common; it can also enhance studies where interactions with potentially vulnerable parents are briefer.

Initially, reflexivity requires declaring pre-conceived notions about research objectives, individual researchers' existing attitudes and beliefs about interviewees and their world. Secondly, regular reflection during data collection can identify how interviews are affecting individual researchers, and thus the data they collect. This may facilitate adapting methods to better suit the research context. Finally, it is important to reflect on how findings are interpreted during analysis. The reflexive process can provide humanity, methodological rigour, richer analysis and a measure of transparency in research.

Reflexive approaches contribute to and strengthen not only research practice, but also the practice of clinicians, educators, allied health practitioners and others who encounter parents who have been in custody. Growing numbers of parents live apart from their children, not only due to escalating rates of incarceration. Many are involved with the criminal justice, parole and child protection systems significant consequences for their parental roles. Professionals who work with parents and children in vulnerable circumstances will also benefit from reflecting on this practice and on their own understanding of parenthood.

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