

Prison, Fathers, and Identity: A Theory of How Incarceration Affects Men's Paternal Identity

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With incarceration and recidivism rates escalating and the failure of many former prisoners to reconnect with family post release, the cost to society and to children of incarcerated parents is quickly rising. While intervention on the family level is thought to have great promise in reducing recidivism, in order to effectively guide research and intervention, current theory must be evaluated for its sensitivity to the context of incarceration and additional theoretical work is needed to conceptualize how incarceration affects paternal identity. This paper proposes using identity theory to conceptualize how incarceration influences how fathers think of themselves. Using Burke's 1991 Identity Theory conceptualization, this paper explores how the unique context of prison interrupts the paternal identity confirmation process, which subsequently affects familial relationships and reconnection.

Keywords: fatherhood, incarceration, prison, father involvement, identity

Historically incarceration has been an uncommon experience in the United States. However, in more recent years the number of people experiencing incarceration is quickly rising to the point of becoming a normal event among some populations

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(Western, Pattillo, & Weiman, 2004). The effects of incarceration are felt most strongly within the family of the incarcerated individual—especially when a parent is incarcerated. An estimated 1.5 million children have at least one parent in prison (Martin, 2001), and in 94% of these cases that parent is the father (Hairston, 1995; Martin, 2001).

The vast majority of these incarcerated fathers (approximately 93%) will eventually be released. Each year approximately 600,000 men are released from prison, and many will attempt to reconnect with spouses, former spouses, partners, and children (Petersilia, 2003). However, after the father has been released, efforts to maintain or reestablish connections with family and remain active in family life are often unsuccessful. In addition, most released fathers can expect to face the problems of reconnection repeatedly since 67.5% of former inmates are rearrested within three years (Langan & Levin, 2002).

Much of this failure to reconnect with family has been attributed to the incarcerated fathers' own attitudes and behaviors—i.e., those who commit crimes are more likely to have antisocial and egocentric behaviors and attitudes (Western, Lopoo, & McLanahan, 2004). However, some attention has been given to the unique context of incarceration as being problematic for maintaining familial ties post release. Erving Goffman observes in *Asylums* (1961) that “total institutions [e.g., mental hospitals, prisons, etc.] are ... incompatible with [a] crucial element of our society, the family” (p. 11). Indeed, in recent research incarceration's “incompatibilities” with family have been shown to have a negative impact on family relations. Nurse (2004) found that the unique context of incarceration often becomes the means of severing familial ties. Western, Lopoo, and McLanahan's (2004) study also supports this notion. After controlling for race, employment, education, drug/alcohol abuse, and violence, they found that incarceration had a negative effect on family relationships.

While most of the negative effects of incarceration on the family are relatively visible, there has been little research or theory generated that describes *how* the incompatibilities between prison and family impact familial relationships (Hairston, 1995). The need to address this shortcoming in the literature is clear since the prison system in the United States has seen unprecedented growth in the past few decades. From 1972 to 2001, the prison population grew from 196,000 to 1.3 million (Western, Pattillo, & Weiman, 2004), with increasing proportions of federal and state budgets going to prisons. Bureau of Justice Statistics estimate that U.S. spending on prisons topped \$50 billion in 2003.

Incarceration's damage to familial ties is particularly problematic since such connections (particularly to children) are shown to be protective factors against recidivism and other negative outcomes post release. Studies have demonstrated that, while a father is incarcerated, the father-child relationship is particularly valuable because it can act as an important element of rehabilitation efforts. In many cases the father-child relationship acts as a “turning point” in the life of the inmate (Hughes, 1998; Pattillo, Weiman, & Western, 2004). In addition, father involvement has repeatedly been shown to have positive direct and indirect effects on a child's development (see Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004, for a review), and despite the unique context of incarceration, father-child relations continue to be beneficial to the child (Kazura, 2001).

With the many potential benefits of an incarcerated father's involvement with his children, several theories have been used in creating programs to promote positive father-child relations pre and/or post release (Hairston, 2003; Palm, 2003). While few of these programs have been evaluated (Bates, 2001; Hairston, 2001, 2003; Jeffries, Menghraj, & Hairston, 2003), those that have find results mixed with only partial success rates (for a review, see Palm, 2003).

One program that has undergone thorough longitudinal evaluation is Long Distance Dads (LDD), a program currently used at correctional facilities in 19 states. This program helps participants "develop skills to become more involved and supportive fathers" (National Fatherhood Initiative, n.d.). While the LLD program has been replicated at multiple sites across the country, a recent empirical evaluation of the LLD found no impact of the program on any of 20 outcome variables (The Behrend College's Center for Organizational Research & Evaluation, 2003a; 2003b). While there are multiple reasons why this evaluation failed to find positive program effects, the LDD evaluation cites the lack of instruments sensitive to father involvement in the context of prison as one possible reason (The Behrend College's Center for Organizational Research & Evaluation, 2003a).

Indeed, lack of theory is a significant barrier to program creation and evaluation since theoretical frameworks are essential in creating effective intervention strategies (McBride & Lutz, 2004). While several useful theories are employed in program creation (Palm, 2003), in order to more effectively create programs and evaluation tools, additional theoretical work is needed. In addition, the sensitivity of available theory to the context in which incarcerated fathers find themselves needs to be evaluated. In an effort to advance theory concerning incarceration's influence on familial relationships, this paper uses identity theory to describe the varying degrees of involvement fathers have with their children pre and post release.

In 1993 Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, and Buehler used identity theory to assess the varying degrees of father involvement after a dramatic life change for the family (i.e., divorce). It has since emerged as a useful framework on conceptualizing and measuring fathers' involvement with their children (e.g., Bruce & Fox, 1999; Maurer, Pleck, & Rane, 2001; Minton & Pasley, 1996; Pasley, Futris, & Skinner, 2002; Rane & McBride, 2000). Identity theory is particularly useful for its ability to conceptualize the degree to which, and why, parents enact or fail to enact roles associated with their parental identity. When considering incarcerated fathers, paternal role assumption is a particularly critical point since it has been linked to lower rates of recidivism (Hairston, 1991). Because of its ability to describe how identities and their associated roles are taken, discarded, and modified, identity theory holds promise for researchers and practitioners attempting to develop a better understanding of why fathers who are incarcerated succeed or fail in maintaining and/or reestablishing connections with their children.

It must be noted, however, that the emergence of identity theory has occurred through studies of more traditional populations (e.g., college students and middle-class families) and fails to consider many of the unique factors associated with incarceration. When applying theory to "exotic populations" like the incarcerated (Western, Pattillo, & Weiman, 2004), the theory must be examined carefully for its applicability to the distinctive nature of the population.

Burke's (1991) model of the identity confirmation process¹ will be used in the current paper to conceptualize incarcerated fathers' involvement with their children since it describes the processes of identity maintenance and change as well as what occurs when these processes are interrupted. Interruptions in the identity confirmation processes are conceptualized as a highly influential mechanism affecting father involvement. The forms of interruption caused by incarceration not only affect levels of involvement but are also likely to force changes in the incarcerated fathers' perceptions of themselves as fathers. Indeed, Clarke et al. (this issue) report that the incarcerated fathers in their sample displayed an "unsettled and fragmented identity" (p. 229).

This paper first describes identity theory and applies it to what is currently known about the experiences of incarcerated fathers, generating testable hypotheses. Next, the limitations of current theory in describing the mechanisms of incarcerated fathers' involvement with their children are discussed. Finally new directions are explored for research, practice, and identity theory as a framework for examining incarcerated fathers' paternal involvement.

AN OVERVIEW OF IDENTITY AND ITS CONFIRMATION

Burke and Tully (1977) define an "identity" as a set of internalized meanings applied to the self in a social role. The internalized meanings associated with roles define one's identity within the social role, and "this set of meanings serves as a standard or reference for who[m] one is" (Burke, 1991). For example, a man may hold (in relation to his child) the roles of provider, nurturer, and friend. The extent to which the man feels these roles are meaningful in making up "who he is" as a father defines the man's identity as a father. Further, *how* the man feels he should enact those roles makes up his behavioral standard as a father.

When enacting roles meaningful to the identity, this standard (hereafter referred to as "identity standard" in accordance with Burke's term) becomes the identity holder's basis from which decisions about how to enact a role are made, given the environment. The identity standard is created, negotiated, and modified by the identity holder and the individual(s) in their social group(s). According to Burke's model, when a behavior (a behavior within a role meaningful to the identity) is enacted, a feedback loop is established where the identity holder receives appraisal (or *reflected appraisal*) from others about his behaviors. This is similar to Cooley's (1902) looking-glass self in that a person sees his behaviors reflected back to him by those around him. Identity theory adds to Cooley's concept by suggesting that individuals see the reflection of their behavior and then compares what they see against their internal standards of behavior.

Maurer, Pleck, and Rane (2001) point out that the process of receiving and understanding appraisal is a process of interpretation, with the appraised person interpreting the appraisal given. Those giving the appraisal and those receiving the appraisal may or may not share the same meaning of the appraisal (i.e., those receiving the appraisal may not perceive it accurately). Thus, any appraisal given is mediated through the receiver's perception of the appraisal. Also, the impact of the appraisal is influenced by the relationship between the person giving the appraisal

and the identity holder. Those most closely tied to a person's identity are termed the *primary referent group*, and (in general) their appraisal is the most influential. For example, another inmate telling an incarcerated father he is a bad father will not have the same impact as the father's son telling him he is a bad father.

There are three core components in Burke's 1991 process model linking identity to behavior: (1) the identity standard, (2) the reflected appraisal, and (3) the mechanism that compares the reflected appraisal with the identity standard. The identity holder's behavior is a function of the difference between the reflected appraisal and the identity standard (see also Stryker & Burke, 2000). This is a cybernetic process where initial output from the environment (i.e., reflected appraisal) affects what will be put into the environment (i.e., behaviors meaningful to the identity). Subsequently, new behaviors will be appraised and then compared with the identity standard, and this new comparison between appraisal and standard is used as a reference for later behaviors. Burke uses the analogy of the thermostat to describe this process. A thermostat is set to monitor the temperature of the room in order to maintain a specified thermal degree. When the temperature deviates enough from the thermostat's specified degree, the air conditioning is activated and remains active until the room is brought within acceptable limits. In other words, an identity holder, desiring to keep reflected appraisal (the temperature) congruent with the identity standard (the thermostat) adjusts his behavior and/or standard of behavior until congruence is achieved. However, Burke notes that the changing of the standard to conform to the reflected appraisal occurs at a much slower rate than do changes in behavior to conform to the reflected appraisal. This full process is known as the *identity confirmation process* or self-verification process (see Burke, 2003).

For example, if a father who has a standard of being a good father (his identity standard) is told that he is a bad father (reflected appraisal), he will attempt to modify the situation in such a way that he will feel like he is meeting his standard. He may do this by changing his behavior or by lowering his expectations for himself as a father.

Within the identity confirmation process, there are two situations in which the identity holder may experience stress: (1) when there is a discrepancy between reflected appraisals and the identity standard and (2) when there is an interruption in the process (both discussed in more detail below). The amount of stress and the decisions of how to react to the stress depend primarily on how salient the identity is to the identity holder. Identity theory views the self as a hierarchy of identities where the vertical position of the identities is referred to as the identity's *salience* (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). The more salient an identity is, the more likely the behaviors associated with that identity will be enacted, and contexts will more likely be interpreted in relation to that identity. The identities higher in salience are also more likely to be important to the individual's sense of who he is. Thus, disruptions of highly salient identities cause more distress than disruptions of less salient identities. Likewise, discrepancies between reflected appraisal and the identity standard in highly salient identities cause greater distress than discrepancies in identities that are less salient (as Burke [1991] also hypothesizes). Take, for example, an individual who weakly identifies himself/herself as member of a church group and strongly identifies himself/herself as the caregiver to an elderly person. The loss of the elderly person (or disruptions in being able to care for the person) would affect this individual's

sense of self and cause more distress than would the loss of membership (or disruptions in membership activities) in the church group. The identity holder would lose more of a sense of “who he/she is” being unable to care for the elderly person than being unable to participate in the church group.

It must be noted that Burke’s work represents one of two major strands in identity theory with Sheldon Stryker leading the other strand. In a collaborative piece Stryker and Burke (2000) summarize the emphases of the two strands, saying: “The first, reflected in the work of Stryker and colleagues, focuses on the linkages of social structures with identities. The second, reflected in the work of Burke and colleagues, focuses on the internal process of self-verification” (p. 284). Although the linkages of social structure and identities are important to understand the effects of incarceration on the parental identity, due to size constraints, this paper focuses primarily on internal mechanisms.

DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN REFLECTED APPRAISAL AND IDENTITY STANDARD

When there is a discrepancy between the reflected appraisal and the identity standard, the identity holder experiences negative emotions and distress that increase as the degree of discrepancy increases (Burke, 1991; Burke & Stets, 1999; see also Stryker & Burke, 2000). For an example of this, we look more closely at the example of the father who feels he should be a good father (his identity standard) but receives appraisal that he is a poor father. In this situation a discrepancy has occurred between this father’s standard of behavior and the appraisal he received, and the father feels distress. The farther from his standard of fatherhood he is appraised, the more distress he will feel.

When these discrepancies between the identity standard and the appraisal occur, the identity holder can attempt to make appraisal congruent with the identity standard. There are five methods by which the identity holder can begin to bring standard and appraisal into congruence: (1) adjust behavior in an effort to make subsequent appraisals congruent with the identity standard, (2) change referent groups, (3) alter the identity standard, (4) abandon the identity, or (5) reject the appraisal messenger.

INTERRUPTIONS IN THE IDENTITY CONFIRMATION PROCESS

Burke (1991) defines an interruption as “the disconfirmation of an expectancy or the non-completion of some initiated activity” (p. 836). The interruption of an identity thus occurs when there is a break in the cybernetic process of identity confirmation such that the process is not able to come to a resolution. Interruptions differ from discrepancies in reflected appraisal in that interruptions do not allow for the confirmation process to fully complete, whereas appraisal discrepancies are viewed as part of normal identity confirmation.

Burke describes these interruptions as either due to the individual’s meaningful actions having no effect on the environment (i.e., individuals are treated as though “they are not even there”) or due to the individual not being able to correctly interpret the reflected appraisal (e.g., even though the individual is receiving appraisal that matches the identity standard, the individual interprets the appraisal as being

discrepant). Using the example of the thermostat, interruptions occur when either the thermostat cannot correctly read the room temperature or the air system is unable to affect the room temperature. Breaks in the confirmation process can also occur when the identity holder is so rigid in requiring reflected appraisal to match the identity standard that constant readjustments of behaviors interrupt other processes. For example, an individual could be preoccupied with confirming one identity to the exclusion of other tasks or identities.

INCARCERATION'S INTERRUPTION OF IDENTITY CONFIRMATION

The central feature and purpose of incarceration is interruption. Incarceration is intended to interrupt those activities society considers injurious enough to warrant an individual's removal from society. This interruption is intended to end any immediate criminal activity as well as deter the individual (through societal isolation and, sometimes, rehabilitation efforts) from future criminal activity. Beyond interruption of criminal activity, incarceration also interrupts the individual's relationship patterns and processes. Indeed, Goffman (1961) noted that institutionalized individuals, including prisoners, "cannot possibly maintain a meaningful domestic existence" (p. 12). The interrupted ability to maintain a meaningful domestic (i.e., family) existence is the central feature of incarceration's effect on a man's identity as a father. It is here hypothesized that the unique context of incarceration so affects a man's confirmation of his fatherhood identity as to force a change in the nature of his identity as a father and subsequently a change (even crisis) in his sense of self.

Treated here are the processes for those incarcerated men who *have* an identity as a father. It is fully possible that an inmate has no identity as a father even though he may have fathered a child; however, the focus of this paper is on those individuals who do have an identity as a father and who have an active confirmation process when they enter prison. Active confirmation process is here defined as the father enacting meaningful behaviors for which he is appraised. Subsequent behaviors are then a function of the difference between the standard and the appraisal.

When a father enters prison, there is a general interruption of the confirmation process of the fatherhood identity. This interruption is due to the limits that are placed on the father's ability to enact roles meaningful to his identity as a father. These limits, and thus the general interruption, continue (in full or in part) until the father is able to resume enacting the meaningful fatherhood roles he enacted prior to incarceration (if this ever occurs).

This interruption has potential to destabilize the inmate's identity as a father. Incarceration changes his behaviors toward his child(ren) as well as how he is symbolically and physically connected to them. These changes are hypothesized to be highly influential in his resettlement into family life post release.

For men who hold an identity as a father, initial entry into prison triggers a comparison between the input from their situation (i.e., the reflected appraisal) and their fatherhood identity standard. Under normal circumstances, the father makes the comparison and, if discrepancy exists, has the option of modifying his behavior to reduce the discrepancy between appraisal and standard. However, the incarcerated father is unable to alter his behaviors to meet expectations. The cycle of enacting

meaningful behaviors, receiving appraisal for actions, and comparing appraisal to standard is disrupted at the point of enacting meaningful behaviors. For example, virtually all fathers entering prison lose the ability to financially provide for their children. The father's actions are negatively appraised because he is not able to provide; moreover, because he is incarcerated he cannot change his behavior to meet those expectations.

The inability to modify behavior to meet the pre-incarceration standard (separate from simply not meeting the standard) is also likely to be appraised, especially if blame for the incarceration is fixed upon the father. The reflected appraisal includes not only not meeting the standard but *also* not being able to modify behavior to correct for his failure to meet expectations. In the example of not being able to provide financially, the reflected appraisal comes not only from the fact that the father is not providing but also the fact that he has put himself in a position where he is unable to change the fact that he cannot provide for his family. In other words, negative appraisal may come in the form of "You *failed* to provide for the family" as well as in the form of "You have made it *impossible* for you to provide for the family." The second example is particularly problematic (and demonstrates an identity interruption) because the father cannot modify his behavior to change the appraisal. Despite the best efforts on the part of the father, he will still be unable to provide as he may have previously.

These interruptions have the potential to change the inmate's identity as a father. If the father is unable to change the reflected appraisal to meet the standard, then he must change his standard if he wishes to bring appraisal into congruence with the standard. To illustrate, if a father is used to nurturing his children and he is no longer able to hug them, play with them, go to their school events, etc., in order for him to decrease the discrepancy between the appraisal and the standard (and thus decrease the feelings of distress), he must change the identity standard.

Instead of decreasing the discrepancy, a father may decide to abandon the identity completely. While Hawkins, Christiansen, Sargent, and Hill (1993) conjecture that identity abandonment is an unlikely course of action, prolonged discrepancy (such as in the case of incarceration) may increase chances of identity abandonment. For example, in a study of newly married couples, Cast and Burke (2002) found that those couples who had difficulty verifying their spousal identity were at an increased risk for divorce (i.e., abandoning their identity as a spouse). Edin, Nelson, and Paranal (2004) found that nearly all of those men who had been incarcerated had their relationship with the mother of their child(ren) dissolve during the time of incarceration. While impossible for a man to cease being a biological father, the stress of years of not meeting the identity standard may cause some fathers to "give up" on their identity as a father.

Upon incarceration it is likely that identity interruption occurs on multiple levels, from the interruption of rituals that are highly meaningful to the interruption of automatic daily routines. Relationships once based on a multiplicity of interactions are now restricted to a few and likely far-between interactions whose timing, content, and context are dictated by prison regulations. While Day et al. (this issue) point out the difficulties researchers have in defining the couple relationships of prisoners, this is likely a mere shadow of the difficulty the couple has defining their

relationship. As an indicator of his difficulty, Arditti et al. (this issue) refer to the high ambiguity felt by incarcerated fathers as per their familial relationships.

Changes in the fatherhood identity through modification of standards, salience, or abandonment has considerable implications for the fathers' relationships with their children and with those appraising the fatherhood identity (e.g., the mother of the child, other family members, etc.). By definition, these changes in fatherhood identity indicate changes in behavior or in expected behavior. As previously stated, the creation and modification of an identity standard is a process of negotiation with the self and those with ties to the identity. Therefore, the question becomes: "How does this process of renegotiation occur within the context of prison?" As will be discussed later, current theory and knowledge about the experiences of incarcerated fathers is insufficient to fully address this question.

Within the general interruption of identity confirmation, there are certain factors here conceptualized to moderate the degree to which incarceration's interruption of identity confirmation affects the father's identity and subsequently his relationship with his family. The moderating factors that will be discussed here are barriers to enacting meaningful behaviors within fatherhood identity, the length of prison sentence, the prison ideology of fatherhood, and the commitment and salience of fatherhood identity before incarceration (see Burke, 1991).

BARRIERS TO CONFIRMING THE FATHERHOOD IDENTITY

The prison barriers, to a very large degree, define the power incarcerated fathers have over their identity processes. Fathers who were once able to enact and receive appraisal for their fatherhood roles are now confined within the prison barriers which include, as will be discussed, more than prison regulations.

When examined from the perspective of identity confirmation, prison "barriers" are those things that severely limit or prevent the confirmation of an identity (i.e., limiting the enactment of role or the receiving of appraisal). This means that what barriers an incarcerated father experiences (as per his fatherhood identity confirmation) depend on what activities the father finds meaningful to his identity. If physical affection is not meaningful to a father's identity, then not being able to receive a daily hug from a child may not impact his identity confirmation. However, for a father whose identity is strongly tied to the physical affection he gives his child (possibly more likely with younger children or infants), not being able to be close to his child may severely interrupt identity confirmation.

It must be noted that, even with the *meanings* of the behaviors held constant, barriers are subjective. In other words, although a certain activity may hold the same level of identity meaning across several fathers, the barriers to that activity are subjective to each father. To one father a certain barrier may be overwhelming, while to another father the same barrier may not be as daunting. For example, one father may perceive the barrier of an uncomfortable visiting room enough to dissuade him from requesting visits, while another father may perceive this barrier as minimal or nonexistent.

The quantitative and qualitative natures of prison barriers determine, to a large degree, the amount of discrepancy between the identity standard and the reflected appraisal. Again, this level of discrepancy indicates how much distress the father

will feel as well as how the identity standard would need to be modified in order to bring it into congruence with the reflected appraisal, thereby reducing the distress. As barriers to enacting meaningful behaviors increase, so too does the difficulty of making the identity standard congruent with the reflected appraisal.

Barriers to identity confirmation include the high cost of calling family (calls can cost up to 20 times the normal rate, according to Hairston, 2003), inability to write letters due to illiteracy, limited number of visitors an inmate is allowed, long distances for family to travel to visit, uncomfortable prison visiting environment (Kazura, 2001), and the inability to keep track of children's daily routines (Barry, Ginchild, & Lee, 1995), among many others.

Moving prisoners from facility to facility and/or through various levels of security is another highly relevant barrier. Many prison systems regularly move their inmates from prison to prison as a matter of policy or as inmates are processed through various classifications (Phillips, 2001). The moving of inmates creates additional barriers for family communication since family may have to adjust their schedules (due to traveling to a different location, different visiting hours, different prison policy, etc.) to be able to visit the family member. Each move for the prisoner may cause additional interruptions in identity confirmation, since the newly established confirmation patterns may need to change.

One of the most common barriers to enacting meaningful roles in the prison setting is the large power imbalance (as per decisions on what father-child interactions will occur) between the father and those who are caring for his children. In order to enact most fatherhood roles, the father depends largely (if not wholly) on others (Kazura, 2001). Children must be brought to the prison, letters must be read to children that cannot read, collect phone calls must be accepted (calls are usually required to be collect), etc. If those on whom the father is depending to facilitate his interaction with his child are uncooperative, the father will have little ability to enact meaningful behaviors. For example, it is not uncommon for the guardian of an incarcerated father's children to refuse the father contact with the child. Children are not brought to visit, the father's letters are not delivered to the children, or children are not allowed to write to the father.

The restriction of a father's involvement with his children by a third party is a theme treated in much literature on fatherhood, focusing primarily on the mother as restricting the involvement. This restriction of a father's involvement by the mother is commonly referred to as "maternal gatekeeping" (see Allen & Hawkins, 1999 and Fagan & Barnett, 2003 for further elaboration of maternal gatekeeping). Fagan and Barnett define maternal gatekeeping as "mothers' preferences and attempts to restrict and exclude fathers from child care and involvement with children" (p. 1021). From the standpoint of barriers to identity confirmation during incarceration, this restriction plays a significant role. While prison regulations limit father-child contact, the mothers or other guardians of the children may restrict it even further. Arditti et al. (this issue) note several instances where the mother restricts the father's contact with his child(ren). For example, one father indicated he wanted to have visits from his son, but the mother would not allow it. "... because his mother doesn't agree [to let him visit], basically there's no way he can come without her consent, so it can't be done" (Arditti et al., this issue, p. 282).

LENGTH OF PRISON SENTENCE

In a recent book chapter, Travis (2004) states that “overall, longer [prison] sentences make for more difficult adjustments [into family life] after release from prison” (p. 251) but admits that this positive association between sentence length and difficulties adjusting to family life is merely conjecture, with little empirical support available. In regard to length of sentence, identity theory is able to explicate processes of how time spent in prison affects a father’s identity and subsequently his family life.

As stated earlier, when a father enters prison, there is potential for a large discrepancy between the reflected appraisal and the identity standard to occur. The effect of the discrepancy and the subsequent distress it causes are, however, moderated by the amount of time this discrepancy lasts. Burke, speaking with a longitudinal view of the identity confirmation process, states that in the long run the “identity system moves toward congruence between perceptions and the identity standards” (Burke, 2003, p. 199). In other words, initial discrepancies between the identity standard and the reflected appraisals may not cause significant changes in either the standard or the behavior. However, if the discrepancy continues, over time behaviors and standards will adjust to congruence with appraisals. Therefore, if the prison term is long enough, the discrepancy between the identity standard and the reflected appraisal is theorized to gradually decrease. Inasmuch as the father cannot change his behavior to meet the standard due to incarceration’s interruption of identity confirmation, the father will modify the standard.

COMMITMENT TO AND SALIENCE OF FATHERHOOD IDENTITY PRE INCARCERATION

In this section commitment is first conceptualized and then linked to its moderating influence of interruptions to identity confirmation. In identity theory commitment is often conceptualized as having two components: *extensiveness* and *intensiveness* (Pasley, Futris, & Skinner, 2002; Stryker, 1987). The *extensiveness* of commitment is defined as the number of relationships tied to an identity. The extensiveness of a father’s commitment to acting in fatherhood roles is a function of how many relationships would be negatively affected were the father not to act in those roles. For example, by virtue of being a father, a man is likely also connected with the mother and grandparents of the child.

The *intensiveness* of commitment to an identity is the depth of the relationships entered by virtue of an identity. The intensiveness of a man’s commitment to his fatherhood identity is measured by the depth or value the father places on the relationships the father has with the child, the mother of the child, the grandparents of the child, and others who are connected to him because his is a father. If the father has little to no relationship with these individuals, he would be said to have a less intensive commitment to his fatherhood identity than a father who had strong ties with this extended system of individuals.

Burke (1991) states: “Interruption of the identity process causes greater distress when the interrupted identity is one to which the person is *highly committed*” (p. 841). If a father entering prison has high extensive and intensive commitment to his

fatherhood identity, distress would likely be severe. Not only is the relationship with the child interrupted, but each of the relationships the father has by virtue of his fatherhood identity is also interrupted, creating more distress. The distress caused by the interruption of an identity to which the father is highly committed is not likely to be felt in the same manner across individuals. For example, distress for one father may cause him to feel more motivated to maintain contact with family, but for another father, the distress may cause him to withdraw from the family to avoid the distress. If the distress and prison barriers weaken relationships with these individuals tied to the fatherhood identity, commitment to the identity decreases. As the commitment to the fatherhood identity is affected (either increased or decreased), so too will the father's decisions as per his fatherhood identity be affected. It is hypothesized that as commitment decreases the more likely it is that the father will choose to recast the identity standard with little or no negotiation from the referent group.

Burke also suggests that the distress felt when an identity is interrupted is positively associated with the salience of the identity. While there are a variety of definitions for salience, the central theme is that an identity's "salience" is a measurement of how important or central that identity is to the identity holder's sense of self. The higher the salience, the more likely other identities and situations will be interpreted in light of that identity and the more likely the identity behaviors will be activated across time and situations (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). A man with a highly salient fatherhood identity, for example, may see the prison regulations primarily in terms of how they affect his being a father instead of how they affect his friendships. On the other hand, another father may be more concerned that prison barriers interrupt his illegal activities.

Interrupting a highly salient fatherhood identity through incarceration causes great distress because it prevents fathers from acting in ways that are meaningful to their core sense of "who they are."

PRISON IDEOLOGY OF FATHERHOOD

If the incarcerated father modifies his standard of fatherhood, how is the new standard shaped? Taking from Stryker's social structural conceptualization of identity, the identity holder adopts identity meanings from their new social interactions (i.e., from their interactions with other inmates and prison staff). As the new inmate's identity as a father is disrupted, his new social context provides its own norms for behavior within the fatherhood identity. Norms, more than mere guidelines, are social rules that create the underpinnings for interaction. In his study of men's lives, Townsend (2002) noted that men were required to confront existing norms of masculinity whether the men chose to accept norms, rebel against them, or espouse alternatives.

As the destabilized fatherhood identity interacts with the norms of the prison context, new meanings for fathering behavior begin to emerge. Phillips's (2001) recent study is a striking example of prison norms affecting identity. Phillips interviewed prisoners in order to understand how their masculine identity was influenced by prison. She found that the culture of the prison had distinct norms of how the ideal man should act. The inmates Phillips interviewed referred to the ideal man as being a "stand-up man." The stand-up man was defined by his readiness to fight,

avoidance of prison staff, and stoicism. This ideal type or norm influenced how the inmates behaved since those who follow these norms were rewarded and those who did not were sanctioned. How an inmate was perceived vis-à-vis the prison norms determined how that inmate was treated. The rewards and sanctions were powerful motivators to conform to masculinity norms. Violation of the masculinity norms in prison appeared to elicit sanctions beyond what may be expected in other contexts. Phillips found that prisoners who violated norms were often subjected to physical or sexual assault, theft, or other degrading acts.

While Phillips did not examine how fatherhood in particular was affected, it is clear from her study that prison norms of masculinity have serious implications for father involvement by becoming the basis for a new standard of fatherhood as the previous standard begins to shift. The norms Phillips observed in her study, if adopted, most likely lead the incarcerated father away from an identity that supports children's positive development. Further, Clarke et al. (this issue) speculate that identities forged in prison will "hang over" after release and hamper familial relationships. Prison ideology and norms may also be considered a potential *source* of interruption for identity confirmation as fathers may be reluctant to enact fatherhood roles that would bring sanctions from the other inmates.

A proposition made by Ihinger-Tallman et al. (1993) can be used to make a connection between the ideology of the prison and commitment. They propose that "the more a father is embedded in a network of relationships that are premised in his being a father and those relationships are important to him, the more he will be committed to the status and roles of fatherhood" (p. 561). A father embedded in a prison culture that regards fathering as unimportant would be less likely to be committed to his fatherhood identity (holding all other things equal) than a father in a prison culture that regards fatherhood as important.

LIMITATIONS OF AND NEW DIRECTIONS FOR IDENTITY THEORY

While current identity theory provides a much needed framework for conceptualizing father-child relations pre and post incarceration, there are many gaps to fill to make full use of the theory. These gaps are the result of the population from which identity theory is generated and to which it is generally applied (e.g., college students and middle-class families) as well as the initial conceptualization of identity interruptions. Burke's (1991) conceptualizations of how interruptions occur in the stages of the confirmation process (both in the "enacting meaningful behaviors" and "receiving reflected appraisal" stage) are not inclusive of the interruption that is hypothesized to take place upon incarceration. In addition, many of Ihinger-Tallman et al.'s (1993) propositions of how identity changes occur are also not sufficiently inclusive to apply to incarcerated fathers.

Burke (1991) considers what occurs when meaningful behavior has no effect on the situation (i.e., people treat the identity holder "like they are not even there"). However, what Burke does not consider is what occurs when an identity holder is no longer able to enact meaningful behaviors. It is true that these two situations (being treated as though one is not there and not being able to enact meaningful behavior) both constitute a break in input to identity confirmation (as Burke defines them) and produce the

same result of not receiving reflected appraisal. However, the psychological implications and consequences for identity are likely to be drastically different. Understanding these differences is key to understanding how incarceration affects fathers.

Burke's (1991) conceptualization of interruptions occurring at the "receiving appraisal" stage of the confirmation process is not inclusive of the situation of the incarcerated father since it includes only the identity holder not being able to interpret the appraisal. The incarcerated father may enact a meaningful behavior (e.g., write a letter or gain skills to improve his ability to be a father), but the referent group is unable to give appraisal in the usual manner or at all. For example, a father may write a letter to his child, but the child may not be able to respond because his/her guardian will not allow him/her to respond. Or the usual appraisal for meaningful behaviors may be a hug, but it is impossible for the father to receive that appraisal. The confirmation process is thus broken due to the inability to receive appraisal in the usual manner or at all.

In conceptualizing how fathers adjust (or do not adjust) their identity as a father post divorce, Ihinger-Tallman et al. (1993) place emphasis on choice. "We suggest that fathers reinforce, reconfirm, or change their father identity by choosing from various alternative behaviors based on feedback from significant others" (p. 561). While Ihinger-Tallman et al.'s work accentuates the choices a father is given post divorce, the situation of the incarcerated father accentuates the dearth of options available. Incarcerated fathers are severely limited in their ability to enact behaviors and receive feedback on those behaviors.

Ihinger-Tallman et al. (1993) state: "A father will make choices favoring enactment of father role behavior ... when father status is more salient than other statuses" (p. 562). For the incarcerated father, however, it may be that all salient roles have been removed from the realm of enactment. How does the father adjust his fatherhood identity if he perceives that there are no salient fatherhood behaviors to choose from? This dilemma may not be limited to incarcerated fathers. Fathers who lose custody or visitation rights may also share this experience.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

The elaboration of identity theory here is intended to help guide research, practice, and policy. While there are numerous applications for each, two particular practice implications will be mentioned along with several research questions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Many of the intervention strategies suggested here are not new; however, bringing these into the framework of identity theory gives understanding as to *why* these strategies may be effective and lends specific suggestions on *how* they can be enhanced for better outcomes.

Due to the interruption caused by incarceration, it may be impossible for a man to enact roles meaningful to his identity as a father. However, it is clear that roles leading to positive child and father outcomes ought to be maintained as a part of the inmate's

identity. This means evaluating those positive roles a father associates with his identity and discovering new ways to enact those roles. For example, it may be beneficial to encourage fathers not to feel as though being in prison has ended their ability to provide for the family. Learning new skills through prison programs and personal study could be seen as their job, in which they work to “provide” for their family. This new providing comes by gaining new skills they can use to find employment upon release. While some prisons do allow inmates to be paid for some types of work, if fathers are not compensated well (many work programs pay less than a dollar an hour) and/or the father is not gaining new skills, the work may only help to pass the time and have little or no affect on maintaining or enhancing a man’s fatherhood identity.

In addition to the role of providing, it may also be possible to establish regular patterns of enacting the role of playmate, nurturer, and role model. Genisio (1996) reports on a father-child program in which incarcerated fathers were able to maintain relations with their children by reading to them. Also, as a means of being a role model, a father might write in a journal (or in some other way communicate) about how he is able to “make the best” of his difficult situation, thus feeling like he is setting a positive example for his children.

Some fathers may react best to a “normal” routine of enacting their identity. They may start their “work” at a regular time in the morning, and when they are finished in the afternoon, they may do something that develops another fatherhood role (e.g., playmate, nurturer, etc.). While far from matching a daily routine out of prison, this may give the father a sense that he is performing his roles in congruence with his identity standard.

While the above may assist the father in continuing to enact those roles that are meaningful to his identity, identity theory posits that this is only half of the confirmation process. The father must also receive appraisal from his primary referent group, the family. In this the practitioner has much less influence, yet receiving supportive appraisal from the family is critical to the establishment of a positive fatherhood identity. If the family does not give positive appraisal of the father’s attempts to enact fatherhood behaviors, it is likely that he will discontinue those behaviors. One important way that may increase the likelihood of positive appraisals from the family is if the family and father together negotiate the standards for fatherhood while in prison. Again, one of the key ways identity standards are created is through interaction with the referent group. Indeed, it may be incorrect to think an identity standard for fatherhood *can* be created by the father and practitioner. The fatherhood identity standard is inherently tied to the children and likely to the mother of the children. Without the family’s assistance, the creation of a new fatherhood identity standard may simply be superficial.

ADDITIONAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS

It is acknowledged that this paper only skims the surface of identity theory and the issues surrounding father incarceration. Also, this paper has treated paternal incarceration only from the perspective of the father. Other crucial questions are: How does the father’s incarceration affect the child’s identity in relation to the father, how does the child receive appraisal, and what factors emerge that influence the child’s sense

of identity vis-à-vis the father? In addition, more in-depth qualitative research is needed to understand the different ways in which fathers frame their incarceration as per their children and how that changes over the course of incarceration. While this paper has used Travis's (2004) hypothesis that the longer the sentence the harder it will be to maintain family ties, there may be cases where strength of family ties increase over the period of incarceration. Indeed, in Maruna's (2001) study of released inmates, many reported that while in prison they "saw the light" and that prison was a turning point for them in "going straight." This suggests an interesting line of research for identity theorists in exploring how incarceration may influence inmates' identities to be more likely to follow social norms. This, then, raises the issue of how the family will react to a "changed" father. A father no longer on drugs, for example, may gain a new and much higher level of consciousness about his children while in prison. How will a family adapt if this father who may have been uninvolved prior to incarceration determines to be involved post release? Will the family continue to expect behavior similar to pre-prison behavior, or will they expect new behaviors? And, how are these family expectations created, and how do they influence the reconstruction of the post-release confirmation process?

Finally, if there is a change in an inmate's fatherhood identity, it is important, as mentioned earlier, to understand how that change carries over when he is released. Are the changes to identity relatively stable, or are they simply a symptom of being in an institution that promotes certain identities? And, once released, does a former inmate's identity go back to what it was prior to incarceration?

CONCLUSION

While incarceration does, in the immediate sense, often succeed in interrupting the injurious activities of the incarcerated, it also interrupts the continuation or assumption of many activities that are beneficial to society. Indeed, fathers are unable to enact many of the supportive roles they play while incarcerated. This not only negatively impacts the child but also has great potential for negative impact on the father since he is unable to confirm his identity as a father.

The context of incarceration has illuminated several ways in which the identity confirmation process can be broken that have not yet been explored. The implications of these interruptions are likely considerable; however, much research is needed to understand their effects. Unfortunately, with the rise in incarceration, there has not been an equal rise in understanding how it affects the individual and the family. This paper is the first step in understanding how the unique context of incarceration affects a father's identity and in turn his involvement with his children. Efforts are currently being made to assist incarcerated fathers in improving their relationships with their children, but until more theoretical frameworks are elaborated and tested, the ability to systematically improve these efforts is seriously limited.

NOTE

1. This model continues to be used in the literature (see Stryker & Burk, 2000, p. 287).

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