



What does your dad do for a living? Children of prisoners and their experiences of stigma

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Children
Relationships
Parental incarceration
Stigma
Support

ABSTRACT

Stigma has frequently been described as one of the unintended consequences of parental incarceration yet little research has been conducted on this issue with children and young people. This article examines and conceptualizes the experiences of stigma for children who have experienced parental incarceration in the Australian Capital Territory, Australia. The article reports on the findings of a qualitative study designed to investigate children's experiences of parental incarceration. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 16 children. The results of this study demonstrate that stigma associated with parental incarceration manifests in children's lives in different and distinct ways. Despite these differences, children and young people describe three key strategies to manage the stigma that they experience: maintaining privacy and withholding information; self-exclusion and self-reliance, and managing peer relationships. The policy and practice implications of these findings are discussed.

1. Introduction

A significant and increasing number of Australians are affected by incarceration each year, with the national imprisonment rate reaching a ten year high (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). A recent prisoner health survey reported that 46% of prison entrants have children who depend on them for their basic needs (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015) and it is estimated that around 5% of all children will experience a parent imprisoned within their life time (Quilty, Levy, Howard, Barratt, & Butler, 2004).

Yet for a long time this group of children have remained invisible, neglected or forgotten (Robertson, 2012). Debates about our increased use of incarceration have focused predominantly on its value in reducing crime rates rather than the adverse consequences for children and families. More recently though, there has been an emergent interest from researchers, policy makers and practitioners about the impact and consequences of parental incarceration on children (Arditti, 2012; Murray & Farrington, 2008).

A range of studies, predominantly from Europe and the US, have drawn attention to and focussed on the social, emotional and behavioural impacts of parental incarceration on children (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003; Travis & Waul, 2003). Stigma and shame have frequently been described as unintended consequences of parental incarceration (see author's own work; Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, &

Kennon, 1999; Travis, McBride, & Solomon, 2003). Phillips and Gates (2011) report that very little research has been conducted on this issue, its role in the development of emotional or behavioural challenges or about how it manifests in children's lives and the impact of this. Drawing on data from a research project conducted in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT¹), Australia in 2013, about children's experiences of parental incarceration, this paper reports on a key finding about how the stigma associated with parental incarceration manifests in children's lives and the how children and young people manage the impact of this.

2. Background

Sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) defined stigma as a discrediting mark that sets individuals apart from others. Typically it is understood as a social process that connects individuals to a set of negative characteristics that result in discrimination and devaluation (Scambler, 2009). More recently Link & Phelan, (2001) have conceptualised stigma as a process consisting of key elements that include labelling, stereotyping, differentiating, devaluing and discriminating. Stigma is characteristically associated with having a negative impact on personal identity formation and may result in social exclusion which in turn may impact upon an individual's capacity to access resources and opportunities.

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¹ The Australian Capital Territory is the capital of Australia with a population of about 380,000.

The literature indicates that stigma is commonly organised into three typologies, felt or perceived stigma, enacted stigma and project stigma (Link & Phelan, 2001; Phillips & Gates, 2011; Scambler, 2009; Scambler & Paoli, 2008; Link, Wells, Phelan & Yang, 2015). Felt or perceived stigma is described as the internalised perception or fear of devaluation (Phillips & Gates, 2011). Enacted stigma is defined as experiences of direct discrimination where individuals may be ostracised from their community or prevented in some way from participating in or taking up opportunities available to “others” (Jacoby, 1994). The concept of project stigma developed by Scambler and Paoli (2008) refers to individuals feeling or experiencing perceived stigma, but only involves the act of avoiding enacted stigma. Those who experience project stigma do not experience any associated shame but rather show resistance and defiance in the face of the issue (Scambler & Paoli, 2008). Nevertheless, it is argued that the anticipation of rejection or devaluation can be as damaging to individuals as the experience of direct discrimination. Felt or perceived stigma can reduce self-confidence and may prevent full social interaction resulting in individuals becoming isolated and experiencing lower levels of support (Scambler & Paoli, 2008).

The majority of literature regarding stigma focuses on “primary stigma” for example those who directly experience stigma because of disability, mental illness or poor health such as HIV (Fielden, Chapman, & Cadell, 2011; Moses, 2010). Goffman (1963) suggests that stigma not only affects the individuals directly experiencing these, but that it also affects those who are associated with the “stigmatised”. Goffman argues that “courtesy stigma”, the stigma passed to otherwise “normal” people, is structurally embedded and dependent on the social location of both the stigmatised person and the people that they associate with (p.30). While Scambler (2009), argues that the concepts of primary and courtesy stigma do not differ in their basic social processes, others highlight that there is a notable difference between them. Courtesy stigma originates in kinship or family, while primary stigma originates from deviant behaviour, physical conditions or through group identity. Furthermore, Corrigan and Miller (2004) maintain that courtesy stigma is underpinned by notions of not only shame, but also of blame and contamination.

2.1. Children of prisoners

Early studies about children of prisoners found that shame and stigma associated with incarceration are more likely to be experienced by the caregiver of children with an incarcerated parent rather than by the children or their incarcerated parent (Johnston, 1995). Other earlier studies considering parental incarceration also found that shame or stigma were not significant factors in producing the negative “effects” of parental incarceration (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993). Morris (1965) and Johnston (1995) suggest that as parental incarceration is frequently more common amongst particular groups and therefore this experience is widely shared, the experience of stigma is reduced or nullified for individuals positioned in that particular group.

Conversely, other studies directly involving children have described that the stigma associated with parental incarceration does have significant consequences. In a study by Bocknek, Sanderson, and Britner (2009), the children interviewed expressed feelings of isolation, and reported having few friendships and troubled relationships at school. Children and young people in studies by Boswell (2002), Katz (2002), Lee (2005) and Chui (2010) all described experiences of bullying and shaming when people became aware of their incarcerated parent. This was most frequently carried out by peers but also from teachers and neighbours. In Katz's study (2002), children reported being stigmatised by their friends about their parents' incarceration more frequently than describing them as a source of support.

Nesmith and Ruhland (2008) describe how it is not uncommon for children whose parents are incarcerated to want to maintain a level of secrecy about this. Many of the children in their study revealed an effort

to keep their parent's incarceration private and demonstrated considerable anxiety about being found out. While some children in this study benefited from telling others about their parent in prison, others remained isolated and fearful of social stigma.

How much children know about their parent's incarceration is also linked to the concerns about children being subjected to stigmatisation (Manby, 2014). Parents and caregivers often do not discuss parental incarceration with children because of the often difficult emotions experienced by parents and children, associated with this (Bocknek et al., 2009). Chui's study (2010) describes that in order to deal with the stigma associated with parental incarceration children will lie about their parent's whereabouts in order to protect themselves. Research also highlights that families who demand that children do not disclose information about their parent's incarceration also infer to children that incarceration is a stigmatised issue. Hagen and Myers (2003) in their study about secrecy and social support for children with a mother in prison report that children who are at greatest risk of behaviour problems are those who have low levels of social support and who also speak with anyone about their mothers' incarceration. However, they also state that secrecy alone did not predict behavioural outcomes for children.

The possible ongoing harmful effects of stigmatisation for children with a parent in prison have been considered in a small number of studies (Boswell & Wedge, 2002; Sack, 1977; Sack & Seidler, 1978). Such effects can be detrimental for a range of reasons including a lowered self-esteem, a heightened risk of bullying and peer victimisation and isolation from family and friends (Murray & Murray, 2010). A number of other studies have indicated that children, when asked, are often unable to identify support figures who they would talk to about their parents' imprisonment in times of stress or trauma (Bocknek, et al., 2009; Lösel, et al., 2012; Flynn, 2011, Loureiro, 2010).

A recent report from Europe concerning the mental health outcomes for children of prisoners describes that the stigma of having a parent in prison can cause children of prisoners ‘to be labelled and rejected by peers, and children may feel they are different from others and withdraw from social contacts’ (Jones et al., 2013, p. 484). The differences between how children experience and manage perceived or felt stigma and difference compared to how they may experience and manage active discrimination is less understood but important if we are to support children of prisoners to not take on problematic beliefs and attitudes that may impact their wellbeing.

3. Methodology

This paper reports on the findings of a qualitative study commissioned by SHINE for Kids.² The overall study sought to identify the needs of children living in the ACT who had or were currently experiencing parental incarceration. To develop knowledge in this area, data were sought from a number of sources including parents and caregivers, stakeholders that included government and not for profit services and children and young people. This paper concentrates on the findings from children and young people to explore how stigma manifests in their lives.

3.1. Ethics

Approval for the study was provided by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee. In order to ensure the rights and interests of children and young people were upheld in the research process, particular care was taken to address issues such as informed consent, protection and confidentiality (Powell, Fitzgerald, Taylor, & Graham, 2012; see authors's own work). Child friendly information letters and

² SHINE for Kids is a not-for-profit organization for children and young people affected by family member involvement in the criminal justice system.

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