SUPPORTING FAMILIES, PROMOTING DESISTANCE? EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF IMPRISONMENT ON FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

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INTRODUCTION

It is frequently suggested that families may be able to support the often difficult process of resettlement and reintegration, an insight that has fuelled both research and policy interest in the role of family ties in desistance. However, this argument has been criticised for constructing families as a potential resource to reduce reoffending, while failing to recognise their own legitimate support needs (Light and Campbell 2006; Codd 2008). Such critiques are important, as there is mounting evidence of the detrimental impact imprisonment can have on the wider family. Yet, there has been a tendency for these two areas of scholarship to evolve as parallel lines of enquiry. This chapter will argue that by acknowledging the central role of reciprocity in both desistance (Weaver 2015) and family life (Morgan 2011; Finch 2007), we can see that supporting families and desistance may not be *entirely* divergent goals. However, this approach can only go so far, as breaking down the bifurcated view of 'prisoners' and 'families' also forces a recognition that just as many of the men and women in custody are drawn disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds, so too are many of the families affected by imprisonment. This raises questions not only about their ability to support desistance, but also the true impact of this particular form of punishment.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The increasing interest in the role of family ties in desistance from crime has given rise to a range of theoretical perspectives as to how these relationships might support more positive and pro-social behaviours. For example, families have been seen as a means of increasing the social capital available to the offender (Farrall 2004; McNeill 2006); providing 'turning points' and informal social controls (Sampson and Laub 1993); reflecting back and strengthening new social roles and self-identities (Giordano et al. 2007; Patternoster and Bushway 2009); and offering opportunities for generative activity (Maruna 2004; 2001). As there is a growing consensus that desistance often requires both a favourable social environment and shifts in cognition and identity (Bottoms et al. 2004), a common thread running through this literature is that family relationships can support desistance by acting as a potential source of motivation, social and emotional support, or as a conduit to other resources such as housing, employment or financial assistance (for a further discussion of this literature see Weaver 2015; Mills and Codd 2008; McGillivray 2016).

However, desistance theorists have been criticised for seeing families *only* as a potential resource to reduce reoffending, despite a growing body of scholarship evidencing the often detrimental impact of imprisonment upon the family (Codd 2008; Halsey and Deegan 2015). While some may feel a sense of relief when a prison sentence is given, this is often very distressing, isolating or stigmatising for families (Comfort 2008; Condry 2007). Families may face practical problems such as increased financial strains or difficulties with housing, child care or other family responsibilities (Loureiro 2010; Nesmith and Ruhland 2008; Arditti et al. 2003). There may also be considerable extra expenses associated with legal proceedings, visits, phone calls and gifts for the prisoner (Light and Campbell 2006; Comfort 2008; Loucks 2004). Cumulatively, these difficulties can exacerbate the high levels of social disadvantage already

experienced by many families affected by imprisonment (Murray 2007; Halsey and Deegan 2015; Jardine 2015).

Yet, despite their mutual interest in how relational ties can shape the lives of individuals, these bodies of scholarship seldom overlap (for an exception see Halsey and Deegan 2015). This separation is understandable, but also limiting, as families are by their very nature inter-connected, fluid and shifting (Sanger and Taylor 2013; Smart 2007). These relationships may not fall into neat, or even stable, categories, but nevertheless are crucial to our sense of self and identity (Giddens 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). The work of Beth Weaver offers a means of breaking down this bifurcation, and developing a more nuanced understanding of family ties and their role in desistance. Drawing on Donati's relational sociology, Weaver argues that it is the *meaning* attached to relationships that will enhance or impede desistance, as the potential desister attempts to reconcile their own behaviours with desired 'relational goods', such as trust or feelings of connection (Weaver 2015; 2013). Importantly, the relationships that Weaver found to be the most supportive of desistance are those characterised by strong bonds of fraternity; or mutual concern, commitment and reciprocity (Weaver 2015; Weaver and McNeill 2015). This emphasis on the nature and character of relationships opens up new theoretical lines of enquiry, which this chapter will explore.

METHODS

This project sought to examine what it means to be a family in the context of imprisonment. A range of methods were utilised, including qualitative interviews with men and women in custody (n = 10 and n = 4, respectively), family members visiting the prison (n = 19) and over 350 hours of observation at the prison Visitors' Centre. Prison officers and Visitors Centre staff were also interviewed (n = 8 and n = 4, respectively). An analysis of the criminal justice social work files of some participants and the visiting data collected by the Visitors' Centre was also

conducted. While the project aimed to recruit *both* the person in custody and their family members, this proved methodologically and practically challenging. Access to the field was granted at two separate sites: HMP Greenock, in the west of Scotland, where the majority of interviews with prisoners were conducted; and the Visitors' Centre at HMP Edinburgh, where families visiting the prison were recruited. Towards the end of the project, a small number of interviews were conducted with prisoners in HMP Edinburgh in an attempt to capture this 'whole family' perspective, but this was only achieved in one instance. Thus the remainder of interviews were conducted with family members and prisoners who were unknown to one another.

When recruiting family members, the only selection criteria were that they were visiting someone they thought of as family in the prison and that they were happy to participate. The majority of participants were visiting a child (n = 8) or a partner (n = 7) although two children, a niece and a great aunt also took part. Importantly, despite HMP Edinburgh holding both male and female prisoners, with the exception of one father visiting his step-son, all the adults who participated in this part of research were women.[i] This strategy of 'hanging around' the Visitors' Centre also resulted in the recruitment of more marginalised families than had I sought access through a supportive organisation. Only three participants were engaged with formal support services, and for two of these participants this was their first contact with the criminal justice system. In contrast, families who reported multiple or prolonged contacts with the prison tended to favour informal support from Visitors' Centre staff.

Methodological decisions also shaped the sample of participants recruited at HMP Greenock. This prison holds male convicted and remand prisoners; female prisoners; and also provides a National 'Top End' facility, for prisoners sentenced to 12 years or longer. As participants were recruited through the prison social work team, this sample contained a disproportionate number of men from this latter group. It is important to recognise that the very

long sentences served by these men may have shaped their experiences in particular ways; although the themes explored in this chapter also flowed through the accounts of men and women serving shorter sentences.[ii] Nevertheless, this, and the small sample size inherent to qualitative projects requires that no claims to wider generalisability be made. Rather, the arguments presented here are intended to prompt critical reflection on the ways in which family life is understood in the desistance literature, explore new theoretical avenues, and to raise wider questions about the true costs of imprisonment.

WHO ARE FAMILIES AFFECTED BY IMPRISONMENT?

Social Marginality

Indeed, the findings of this research suggest a clear need for such further reflection. While families have been seen by desistance scholars as a conduit for social capital, this is problematic not only because this takes scant account of the needs and wishes of the family, but also because it suggests that families will have access to such resources. The accounts of families cast considerable doubt over this assumption. Of all 19 participants, only one was in stable employment, and as a result nearly all the families were dependent on benefits for their income and housing. Participants reported requiring welfare support for various reasons, including poor mental health, serious physical illness, learning difficulties, caring responsibilities, or addictions. While five women were in their late teens and early 20s, none were currently in training or education.

For the majority of participants this social marginalisation had been a consistent backdrop to their lives, as many described long histories of mental ill-health, periods of homelessness and negative experiences of school. Where participants suffered from poor mental health this had a serious impact on their wellbeing; limiting their social interactions, confining them to their homes, and in some instances manifesting in suicidal feelings or

behaviours. Perhaps unsurprisingly, feelings of depression or anxiety could be heightened by the imprisonment of a family member, as one participant explained reflecting on her experience of supporting a previous partner through multiple sentences:

> I've done it before with another guy who was in and out [of prison] and I'm never doing it again, that was how I ended up depressed. He used to put me down and say horrible things to me, he said that he was only going out with me for a joke. Then I was pregnant and he kicked me in the stomach. That was how I ended up depressed and I tried to take an overdose. (Chloe, partner in custody)

Similar themes flowed through the stories of men and women who were interviewed in custody. While some described, in their words, growing up in 'good' or 'respectable' families with parents who 'worked hard' or where they were 'a bad egg', almost half had experienced an extreme degree of social disadvantage. These participants told of parental drug use and bereavement through overdose, poor mental health of parents or carers, abusive childhoods, or experience of Local Authority care and their own drug or alcohol misuse. This had a profound impact on participants, with one describing the time he had spent in secure accommodation as teenager as *'the happiest I have ever been'* (Euan, 29, Life Sentence).

These accounts of social marginalisation should not surprise us. It is well established that the prison population is disproportionately likely to have experienced unemployment, poor interactions with schools and other educational establishments, drug or alcohol problems, poor mental and physical health, victimisation or abuse (Malloch et al. 2014; Lewis et al. 2007; Sottish Prisons Commission 2008). Indeed, these connections between entrenched social problems and imprisonment were also observed by prison officers, many of whom emphasised the links between poverty and imprisonment and gave examples of having seen or heard of multiple members of the same family being held across the prison estate. Consequently, these participants were sceptical that families would be able to provide the practical resources or environment that might promote desistance:

> If families are chaotic as well themselves, that doesn't help. And the families love them, and they keep in touch with them and they say that they support them but when you're sending

> somebody back to a mother who is also a heroin user when the daughters also heroin user and trying to stay off it then that's difficult. (Nicky, Prison Officer)

Thus, it cannot be assumed that families can provide access to the stocks of social capital that have been suggested to aid desistance. Rather, the families participating in this research would require *additional* capital and resources – such as stable housing, routes into employment, access to affordable childcare and leisure facilities, opportunities to participate in education or training, and support with specific difficulties such as addictions – if they are to be able to participate fully in social and community life.

Fluidity

Yet, while participants shared a common experience of marginalisation, there are important differences in their account of their family lives that must also be recognised. It is immediately clear that there is no single model of families affected by imprisonment: Participants interviewed in custody described growing up in the care of parents who were together, parents who were divorced, parents who were separated by imprisonment, one parent alone, adopted parents, kinship care or Local Authority care. Where their parents had separated, some participants maintained positive relationships with both, while others reported fraught or minimal contact with their mother or father. Many emphasised that the care and commitment that characterised their relationships with the 'parental' figures in their lives was more important than the biological or legal status. This was particularly true for those who grew up in adopted or kinship care; however, other participants also noted how much they valued other male influences such as an uncle or an older friend who had taken the role of a father figure:

> He's 52 year old but I swear to god – he keeps himself fit in the gym, he's massive – and you're lucky if he looks older than 35. No word of a lie… I still phone him every week – every Thursday or Friday… [He's] not as close as my mum or anything but he's up there aye. He's like a brother – or as he likes to put it 'the father figure that I wish I'd had.' (Simon, 30, Life Sentence)

Similarly, while the majority of family members were visiting a partner or a son, their stories of their family life and how this had been affected by imprisonment were also highly individual. Five families included children from earlier relationships or who were co-parented by parents who had separated, for whom imprisonment could have a serious impact on their care arrangements. For example, the children in the Collins family explained that prior to their father's imprisonment he was their main caregiver, and they now lived with their mother, but in their father's house. The imprisonment of an adult child could also dramatically alter family life, as one mother explained that she had been forced to give up her job to care for her infant granddaughter when both her daughter and her daughter's partner were sentenced. Other participants told of how their children had been particularly affected by the imprisonment of a sibling or uncle, particularly where large age gaps had led to these individuals adopting a more parental or mentoring role.

> His younger sister, because he is so much older he's more like a father to her than a brother so it has been really hard for her. He came in when she was 12 and now she is nearly 16, and the visits have been stopped a few times and she is self-harming and everything. (Alisha, son in custody)

These findings resonate with a growing body of evidence which points away from a single model of family life, highlighting that families may include (but are not limited to): children from both current and previous relationships; families spanning multiple generations, households and countries; and also friends as family (Finch 2007). Yet while participants' family lives do not fit into neat categories easily defined by blood or marriage, this is in direct contrast with the depiction of family life in the desistance literature, which is often highly gendered and grounded in a traditional nuclear image of the family. For example, Maruna entitles his summary of social control theories as 'A Steady Job and the Love of a Good Woman' (Maruna 2001, 30); a phrase which is evocative of what Bottom's et al. (2004; Shapland and Bottoms 2011) describe as the 'English Dream', or a stable job, a partner and possibly becoming a 'family man'. Given this tension, criminologists must strive for greater

conceptual clarity when utilising ideas of 'the family'. Failing to look beyond the boundaries of the traditional nuclear family not only risks underestimating the true impacts of imprisonment; but also perpetuating (and grounding our theorising within) a model of family life that is not relevant to many members of contemporary society.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS, RECIPROCITY AND DESISTANCE

One way of achieving this greater conceptual clarity is by directing our attention towards what these relationships *mean* to those involved, rather than the material supports they might provide. Indeed, where participants did express an optimism that they would desist or a positive change in their attitude and behaviour in custody, this was often attributable to a realisation that to continue their offending behaviour may be distressing for their family and jeopardise these relationships. As Alex explains, the fear of losing the support of his family provided him with considerable motivation to avoid any disciplinary issues and to continue working toward release:

> I wouldn't do anything to jeopardise getting out… I want out the door so there is no point in doing anything stupid and plus, if I do anything stupid I'll lose my family. I'm on my last warning with my family as well. (Alex, 26, Order of Life Long Restriction)

Importantly, for Alex, this highly valued family support comes from his aunt, his grandmother, his brother and his cousins rather than from his parents (with whom he has no contact) or from a partner. Focusing on the meaning, then, allows us to look beyond the nuclear family and see which relationships are most important to participants as *individuals*.

This more individualised approach also helps us to understand why and how family relationships can become more or less supportive of desistance over time. Weaver's work is helpful here, as these changes in attitudes and behaviours are perhaps best thought of, as she argues, a result of a reflexive re-evaluation of how continued offending might jeopardise an individual's 'relational concerns' (Weaver 2015). This process of re-evaluating the desirability

of continued offending in light of the costs to valued relationships is evident in the account given by Adam, who received a life sentence at the age of 17 following a violent offence which he attributes to his involvement in 'gang culture and knife culture'. In the early years of his imprisonment Adam had continued offending within the prison, becoming involved in using and dealing drugs, and assaults on other prisoners and officers. This was despite enjoying the ongoing support of both his parents, who Adam counts as the most important people in his life:

> My dad has always been my best pal. My dad is like my best pal, and my dad, and my brother [in one] and my mum is my emotional outlet, I can talk to my mum about anything that I am feeling. Whereas my dad is my pal and I have a laugh and a joke [with him], so they have both got their own sort of distinct roles in that they both sort of cover everything that I need to and if I never spoke to another human being ever again and just talked to my mum and dad I would be quite happy. (Adam, 32, Life Sentence)

After a number of years in custody, Adam's parents impressed upon him that they were growing older, supporting him was becoming increasingly demanding, and that they felt it was time he began working towards his release. Adam describes these conversations as something of 'an epiphany' for him, and realising that he risked losing these relationships he has subsequently avoided any further offending or disciplinary issues.

Similar themes also run through the accounts of those serving shorter sentences. Ian had served multiple short sentences since he was 16, with most of his previous offending being related to his drug and alcohol use. Like Adam, Ian had previously enjoyed the support of his family, primarily from his adoptive mother, sisters and son. However, having recently lost Ian's father and brother to illness, his mother was no longer willing to support Ian whilst in custody. This had led Ian to re-evaluate his family relationships, and the impact that his offending was having on them:

> I know it will make a difference, I know it will make a difference. See whenever – like my problem has always been drink and drugs… and I've always known before I've come out that I'm going to try and come off drink or come off drugs, whichever one of the two it is at the time, but I've also known that when I go out I'm going to go and have a drink first. But this time, I would say from a month or two after I got sentenced I knew I wasnae going down that road. My mum is 63 coming January, and anything could happen – her blood pressure has been through

> the roof with me… .she ended up on heart tablets, blood pressure, no sleeping, going to the hospital. I sat and broke my heart one night on the phone, just realising that obviously how much it had affected her, and I don't think I could do that to her again. (Ian, 34, short-term sentence)

For these participants, then, the fear that continued offending either within the prison or in community may cause them to lose the support, esteem or time with their family caused them to reflect on and re-orientate their current behaviour and future plans. While no definitive statements as to whether or not their family relationships are *in fact* supportive of desistance can be made, as participants were interviewed whilst still in custody, their accounts strongly suggest that family relationships can become more (or indeed less) supportive of desistance over time. We see, then, that the nature, quality and meaning attached to family relationships is not fixed. Further, in keeping with Weaver's theorising, it seems that where these relationships become more orientated towards *mutual* and *reciprocal* concerns they also create a greater motivation to work towards desistance.

Reciprocity and Imprisonment

Yet, while participants' accounts demonstrate that the relationships can become increasingly reciprocal over time, they also provide clear evidence of the damage to mutual family ties caused by imprisonment. Perhaps most tangibly, the prison and its operating procedures curtail freedoms and create practical barriers to family contact. For example, visiting times may clash with school, work or caring commitments; particularly as families must allow sufficient time to abide with security procedures. Families may have to travel considerable distances to the prison, and as one participant who was struggling to maintain contact with her children noted even relatively 'local' prisons can be almost impossible to reach by public transport. Consequently, many family members found visiting the prison to be both daunting and time consuming:

> You have to go to the station and get all the different trains and you end up going early because you don't want to miss the visit. And then you end up waiting in the rain! (Lynn, son in custody)

> I hate going up, I absolutely dread it. I mean I love getting to see him, but the waiting and the queuing and the getting searched and associating with people you would never associate with otherwise, I hate all of that. (Leah, husband in custody)

Similarly, while many participants utilised phone contact as a means of maintaining relationships, the schedule of a prison day and the necessity to share this resource with other prisoners can create problems for families who work irregular shift patterns, or parent who wish to talk their young children before they go to bed. This unpredictability of when the person in custody might be able to phone caused some family members to limit their activities outside of the home, for fear that they might miss a call:

> Becky: He might get his phonecard tomorrow and he might be able to phone me, but he has only got my house phone and not my mobile.
>
> CJ: You could give him your mobile?
>
> Becky: Yes but that is more expensive, the thing about the house phone is that you have to be in or you will miss it. It would be good if they gave you a time to phone, but sometimes they give you a time to phone and then they don't phone! (Becky, son in custody)

Barriers to maintaining mutual and reciprocal relationships are not only institutional and practical, they are also emotional. While being separated by imprisonment was experienced as extremely distressing for families, many participants attempted to protect the person in custody by concealing any problems or difficulties they were experiencing. For example, Bill described his step-son's imprisonment as creating 'a big hole in my life', which had exacerbated his mental health problems to crisis point, culminating in multiple suicide attempts and the imposition of a multi-agency care plan. However, Bill went to great lengths to conceal this distress from his step-son, despite visiting nearly every day:

> I started calling myself two face because when I go in I put a brave face on because I don't want him to worry but sometimes I do come out and I cry. (Bill, step-son in custody)

Thus, rather than sharing these emotions, conversations at visits tended to revolve around neutral topics and participants felt that 'you never talk about anything personal' (Ross, 39, life sentence). While this can be a useful strategy for ensuring a 'good' visit (McDermott and King

1992); the mundane nature of day-to-day prison life can leave few topics left to discuss. A lack of privacy and the relatively short duration of visits can also be a factor here, preventing the discussion of sensitive, distressing or contentious matters. The dual challenge of finding enough to say to achieve a 'good' visit despite the monotony of prison life, whilst also not leaving personal matters unresolved, is neatly articulated by Tracey, who felt she had both 'too much' and 'not enough' to say when visiting her partner:

> Because like half an hour visit is like nothing do you know what I mean, you find nothing to say to each other. No you find too much to say to each other and you have never got enough time to say it, do you know what I mean, half an hour is just not long enough. So it is a bit of a nightmare that way. (Tracey, partner in custody)

Participants who were interviewed in custody also reported limiting family contact to more superficial interactions, whether by refusing visits, reducing the frequency with which they phoned home or simply concealing their own anxieties and concerns in an attempt to manage their own feelings of distress, guilt or powerlessness. These participants described how they did not want to 'burden' their families and that in order to survive their sentence they 'needed to keep their head in the game' (Simon, 30, life sentence).[iii] The complexity of these competing pressures and emotions on those in custody is well articulated by Tracey, who I interviewed while she was visiting her partner but who had also served custodial sentences herself. As she explained, she withdrew from phone contact and visits due to feelings of guilt, a desire to protect her family and fears that being emotionally open would leave her vulnerable within the prison environment:

> Because I done that – my family were only fifteen minutes away in a car but I never took a visit for the first six weeks because I just felt 'nuh, I've let them down, I've just totally let them down'… and my mum didn't understand the jail system so she just thought I was busy, so that was a good thing, ken my dad didn't understand it either so I could just like say 'oh I couldn't' – if I didn't want to speak to them one night because I was depressed or feeling down and my mum would hear it in my voice – I would just say I couldnae get on the phone last night… because if she heard me upset then she would get upset and I hated it. And I think that is why a lot of lassies choose not to take visits either because I think they get themselves dead upset and then when the cons see that… you still start thinking 'oh I'm going to get victimised.' (Tracey, partner in custody)

However, while families were anxious as to how the person in custody was coping and recognised that the prison was a lonely and frightening place to be, some found these strategies difficult. For example, some participants felt that the person in custody did not fully appreciate the impact of their sentence upon the family, and that prison allowed them to 'shut out' any issues or problems that they did not want to engage with, rather than offering their support to their family:

> I don't think he did at the beginning [realise how many people his sentence affected], at the beginning it was all about him. But I think what prisoners sometimes forget is we are actually having to deal with the real world and the people on the outside. The only people he is seeing in there are the people who want to see him… he's not had to deal with the co-accused, he didn't have to deal with the co-accused's family, he didn't have to deal with the victim – I mean I still get snide comments and things like that from people, and I don't even know who they are. (Susan, son in custody)

It is clear, then, that imprisonment creates considerable emotional, practical and institutional barriers to maintaining relationships. Further, these barriers can often only be overcome by the efforts of the family, as the lack of freedom and resources accessible to prisoners, the rigid but sometimes unpredictable nature of the prison day and the time-consuming nature of prison visiting function together to reduce the role the person in custody can play in actively maintaining family life. It is the family who must travel to the prison, ensure they are home when the prisoner is likely to phone and adjust (their often already limited) budgets in order to maintain contact. For example, Sophie, a young mother of two, noted that although she was on a limited income, keeping her partner informed as to how their new-born baby is developing required that she also supports him financially throughout the duration of his sentence:

> That's a nightmare because I've got to spend so much money every week to get him to phone me and to get him, like ken his shower gels and his baccy and his food – I've got to pay for all that even though he's in here and it's his own fault that he is in here. I can't turn round and be like I am not giving you that because he phones me and he wants to ken how the kids are in the morning and how they're all doing and if anything's happened overnight… So that's probably the worst part it's– It's like, well if I can't put money in for him he can't get in touch with me, so how am I supposed to speak to him? (Sophie, partner in custody)

This must be done whilst maintaining daily family life, coping with their own distress and also that of other family members around them. Consequently, many felt they were also being punished, and the sentiment 'we do the sentence too' was commonly expressed. These feelings that families are burdened and punished not only illustrate the far-reaching consequences of imprisonment; they also clearly demonstrate that mutual and reciprocal relationships – most likely to be supportive of desistance – are profoundly undermined by this form of punishment.

SUPPORTING FAMILIES, PROMOTING DESISTANCE?

By placing ideas of reciprocity at the centre of conceptions of family life and theories of desistance, we can see that supporting families and promoting desistance may not be the divergent goals that they initially appear to be. Both require a shift in focus away from what family relationships 'are' to what they 'do'. Indeed, participants themselves emphasised the key role they felt reciprocal family contact could play not only in promoting their own wellbeing, but also supporting successful resettlement:

> Just to be able to have that bit more openness and support from the family. And it being a two-way thing, because I know that my sisters and my brother they go through things that they need support with, my mother goes through things that she needs support with, so just to help build and ground on that, it would help folk not reoffend again. (Lorna, late 20s, short-term sentence)

Participants had a number of suggestions as to how they could be better supported in playing a more active role in family life, including: help to make and send gifts at Christmas; being able to access their child's school curriculum; having direct contact with the school and being kept informed of their child's progress; more affordable telephone contact that would not require financial support from their family; and having their own phone in their cell. Often their suggestions were highly individual, but relatively straightforward to address. Indeed, where participants were able to access Children's visits or family days that allow greater freedom to interact with their families, these were highly valued. Discussions with the Visitors' Centre team also revealed that allowing this more active and individualised participation in family life

could provide and sustain motivation to engage in pro-social behaviours, as this extract from my research diary illustrates:

> We also discussed a session that the Visitors' Centre Team had done with the female prisoners. They told me that one woman had said the children's visits had helped her repair her relationship with her daughter…[as] they were able to arrange for her to make contact with her daughter's school and help to arrange her place in college; they had allowed her to braid her daughter's hair, and for her daughter to have a birthday cake and presents on a visit…The Visitors' Centre Team gave me a feedback sheet from this woman where she writes 'I wouldn't give up these visits for anything, this is the first time I have had anything that makes me want to behave in the halls! The prison programmes I had done in the jail never made me think about my behaviour like these visits! In these visits I can ask for specific things like hair bands to do my daughter's hair – I have never been able to do her hair in five years.' (Fieldnote 1 November 2013)

Similarly, some of the men who were serving life sentences were eligible for escorted and unescorted leaves to visit their family at home. These men highlighted that while such leaves have the benefit of allowing time away from the prison, more importantly they gave an opportunity to do 'normal family things' such as making a cup of tea for their mother. Interestingly, for participants such as Simon, these leaves gave him a new insight into the distress his family had experienced coming to visit him:

> Because when they are up here visiting you they are the ones that are leaving the jail, and you don't see and you don't feel how they are feeling, *and you don't think about how they must be feeling* having to leave you here, you know what I mean… Whereas, me going out there for SELs [Special Escorted Leaves] and me walking away… the tables have been turned now because it is me that is walking away, and is me is experiencing what my mum and everybody else who has been in visiting me has experienced when they are leaving the jail. I've experienced it when I'm leaving their house and coming back here, do you know what I mean. It's no nice… wouldn't wish it on my worst nightmare put it that way, and I've got a few nightmares out there. (Simon, 30, Life Sentence)

Thus a more creative re-imaging of how family life might be continued and supported despite imprisonment has a number of potential benefits. Family visits or home leaves could reduce some of the distress that family members reported at being unable to continue some of their 'everyday' family lives and traditions such as braiding hair, sharing food, walking the dog or marking significant events such as birthdays, Christmas or Eid. Such leaves, and many of the other suggestions given by participants, such as more flexible access to telephones, cheaper

calls and the ability to make and send gifts for their family rather than relying on others to purchase these would also reduce the caring and financial burdens placed on family members. Finally, as Simon's account suggests, promoting more active family contact could also create greater emotional openness and an awareness of the impact of imprisonment on family members. This appreciation for the distress of their family is an important first step on the road of the relational model of desistance proposed by Weaver (2015).

However, while measures that improve the *quality* of family contact may be supportive of both families and desistance, it is important not to overstate the role that families can or should be expected to play in the desistance process. While reciprocal family ties may prompt a re-evaluation of future plans and relational concerns, they are unlikely to be able to alter the social context and material conditions that men and women in custody will return to upon release. For these reasons, members of the staff team at the Visitors' Centre were sceptical that families from the most deprived communities would be able to support resettlement. As one participant noted, these families lack social capital and the power to influence wider structural factors such as poverty and unemployment:

> Because definitely that group of people seem to get support from their family, but they keep coming back. I mean, how much support can a family give somebody to get them out of poverty, to get them a job? Because the family doesn't have the power to create employability out there, do you know what I mean. (Charlie, Visitors' Centre Team)

The importance of this observation cannot be understated, and again highlights the need to recognise that 'prisoners' and 'families' are not entirely distinct or separate groups; they are indeed intimately connected to one another. Therefore, just as potential desisters will likely require support to overcome structural disadvantages such as poverty, localised unemployment, unstable housing or local drug markets (Farrall et al. 2011; Bracken et al. 2009; Farrall et al. 2010); so too do the families who support them. Indeed, family members questioned how they could return to work or college when they could not afford childcare, whether their history of addiction would count against them, how they might cope in the future with their poor mental

health, and how they could build a life for themselves when so much of their time and other resources are consumed by supporting their son or partner in custody:

> Having money is really difficult because I can't get a job obviously because they're too young for me to leave them. And childcare is the most expensive thing in the world – it is more expensive than renting a house having childcare… For Rosie just to go into nursey it would be £300 a month which I can't afford even on the benefits, I can't afford that. Because obviously I still got him [the new baby] to feed, me to feed, and I've got the house to keep and I can't afford things like that. So it's like I want to get out and have a job and provide for them, to make more money for myself, but at the same time, I can't because it's too expensive. And… we're not having any money that [my partner] used to bring in… Now I don't even have that. So it's like me keeping four people on that money. (Sophie, partner in custody)

Such entrenched barriers and social inequalities cannot be overcome by families alone. Thus, the most productive means of supporting both families and desistance must be to recognise and address the socially precarious position of many these families, and the sheer volume of their scarce resources that they direct into the prison system.

CONCLUSION

By drawing directly on the lives and accounts of families affected by imprisonment, this chapter has raised questions about some of the key theoretical assumptions underpinning much of the literature on family relationships and desistance. It is clear that families are diverse, fluid and highly individual; encompassing, as stories like Alex's illustrate, treasured relationships with parents, adopted parents, grandparents, aunts, cousins, siblings and more. Thus, when researching or theorising the connections between family relationships and desistance we cannot simply rely on broad categories or vague depictions of family life, nor assume that similar relationships (for example with parents or partners) will be experienced in similar ways. Rather, we must embrace a relational perspective which allows for both individual variance and a recognition that the nature and quality of family ties may shift over time.

By adopting such a lens, we can see that it is not family relationships *in and of themselves* that will promote desistance, rather it is the meaning the individual attaches to them

and the resulting potential costs continued offending might bring. Indeed, for the participants who reported a positive change in attitude or outlook, this was motivated by a growing incompatibility between further convictions or disciplinary offences and their relational concerns. The likelihood of such reflexive re-evaluations are increased where open, trusting and reciprocal relationships can be maintained. Yet it is also clear that imprisonment undermines relationships of this kind, and that the bulk of the effort required to maintain family ties must come from families. While improved family contact and measures that encourage prisoners to take an active role in family life may relieve families of some of this burden, criminologists must nonetheless recognise that those serving custodial sentences may not necessarily leave with these relationships intact, and therefore available as a source of support.

Furthermore, adopting a relational perspective also forces us to recognise that just as much of the prison population are disproportionately drawn from the poorest communities, so too are their families. Consequently, these families cannot be assumed to be able to provide social capital or other practical supports, as evidenced by participants' stories of addictions, poor mental health, poverty and the greater strains placed on these scarce resources by the imprisonment. Thus if we wish to support desistance, a more productive approach will be to build stocks of social capital within the poorest families and communities. This will require taking steps to limit the extent to which this is eroded by supporting a family member in custody, and well-resourced and appropriate supports for families are important here. More crucially, a recognition of the burden placed on some of the poorest families by imprisonment should cause us to reflect on the true costs of this form of punishment, and to question whether both families and desistance might be better supported by limiting its role in the criminal justice system.

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[i] This is not a surprising finding, as the gendered nature of prison visiting and family support is well established in the literature. See, for example, Condry (2007), Comfort (2008), Codd (2008) and Halsey and Deegan (2015) here.

[ii] In Scotland a short-term sentence is defined as under four years in custody; a long-term sentence is four years or over; whereas prisoners serving life sentences or Orders of Lifelong Restriction can only be released on the conclusion of the “punishment part” of their sentence at the discretion of the parole board. These terms will be used throughout this chapter.

[iii] See also Schinkel (2015) here for a discussion of similar findings.