

Remeaning motherhood in prison: an exploratory study *

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Summary. *The goal of the present article is the study of perceptions, and meanings of motherhood inside a specific context such as the prison. This exploratory study is based on nine interviews conducted on imprisoned mothers already condemned. The results were analyzed with ATLAS.ti, a software specialized for qualitative analysis. They show the presence of three family codes which capture different aspects of mother-child relation: in particular it was visible that motherhood and children emotional closeness, during prison term, act as protective factors for those women, mitigating pain, fail and frustration connected to the everyday experience in prison.*

Key words: *motherhood, prison, intersubjectivity, ATLAS.ti*

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Introduction

The topic of motherhood in jail is closely related to the attempt to support the affective relations with the outside context and to promote the re-educational and socialization processes on the part of the prisoners. Following to the introduction of the Gozzini Law (Law n. 663/1986), remarkable attention was given to the possibility for convicts with definitive sentence to access alternatives to the incarceration, with the explicit goal of promoting social reintegration (Patrizi & De Gregorio, 2009). In this direction it is essential to understand – also through individualization of jail treatments including personality observation – the relational resources available for each prisoner in order to better set the aims of the treatment itself. According to the article 27 of the Italian Constitution, “*punishments cannot consist in treatments contrary to the sense of humanity and have to tend to the re-education of the convicted*”, the legislator, through the use of the term *re-education*, refers to a treatment oriented towards the possibility of promoting ways of life as an alternative to the deviant one, in order to promote the social integration.

The present article is focused on motherhood and is based on nine women interviews definitely convicted and actually restricted in a state prison located in the South of Italy. The interviews were realized in July 2011. Actually, the imprisoned women who reported to have at least one son were 1694 on a total of 2827 women (Source: Ministry of Justice, September 2013). The women' s narrations were analyzed in order to understand if the motherhood experience could add new meanings to the re-educational treatments inside the prison rather than being used with the single purpose of achieving benefits on the punishment.

In the attempt of understanding the motherhood experience in a jail environment, it is important to assert certain premises: the uniqueness and the peculiarity of the context raise ethical and methodological issues which have to be well detailed. First of all, the prison is a place not easily accessible for the majority of researchers, especially for security reasons but also for the reason of not interrupting ongoing treatments. Secondly, the results have to be read taking into account the construct of reflectivity, in other words the process through which the researcher and the object of study influence each other during the entire research process (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Chiarolanza & De Gregorio, 2007).

According to these premises the present study had the purpose of investigating the perceptions, the experiences and the meanings related to motherhood in a jail context. According to Salerno and D'Accardi (2004), we could claim that motherhood in jail has two different aspects. The first one refers to the relationship between the mother and her child, younger

than three years old, who lives with her inside the correctional institution: here the jail has the function of an intrusive and lowly accepted mediator within the relation mother-child. The influence that the jail can produce on the acquisition and maintaining of a parenting condition can have the effect of weakening prisoner's autonomy in her parenting role. Again, the jail effect could facilitate the formation of an anomalous bond within the dyadic relation, with an excessive dependence and an anxious style of attachment (Costanzo, 2013). The second aspect, analyzed in the present study, is defined by the *distance relationship* between mothers and children. In the context of jail, the custodial state is associated with the impossibility for the mothers to live daily with their children but also with the often hostile judgment which society reserves to these women. This produces negative consequences on the continuity of maternal identity and her competences (Salerno e D'Accardi, 2004). At the same time, Becker (1963) showed that an *idealized* representation of motherhood could emerge, expressed both as a negative difference from the traditional view proposed by the society, and as a difficulty to assign new meanings to the motherhood starting from an *honest* assessment of her own life conditions and competences. Convicted women express, through their behaviors, the dialectic between the social pressures to be a “good mother” and the possibility to express themselves without experiencing the social judgment regarding how to “be a good mother”.

Besides, mothers in the jail do not reflect upon their emotional states and this could prove to be a limit in the building of a new lifestyle. The *mentalization* process was introduced at the beginning of the '90s by a researcher group oriented to the attachment theory: Peter Fonagy, Miriam Steele, Howard Steele e Mary Target (Fonagy *et al.*, 1995).

With the term *mentalization*, we refer to the human being's ability to understand one's own and others' behaviors in terms of affective states and intentions which form its basis, and also the human capability of emotional regulation. Therefore an high reflective functioning allows the individual to understand mental states (intentions, feelings, thoughts, wishes and beliefs) in order to give sense and, most importantly, to predict others' actions. The process through which internal experience is mentalized has many functions: the possibility to understand that our and others' behaviors are connected, in a significant and predictable way, with feelings and intentions that are mostly unconscious. In this way, the reflective function can be considered the external expression of *mentalization* (Slade, 2010). The jail environment does not allow to think about maternity and its meaning, including the violation of the social rule of “being a good mother”. Thinking about the reeducation treatment focused on the maternity is often

difficult to realize: in this article we want to show that this aspect should be included in the treatments.

The present study has the goal to understand the interplay between the parenting condition and the jail treatment programs. Our purpose is to show how an intervention of re-socialization inside the jail has to imply not a simple adherence to the re-educative rules, but the building of a reflective path aimed to the progressive enfranchisement from a self-exclusive condition. In this direction, Beebe e Lachmann identified the *breaking and repairing of expected interactive sequences* principle that could facilitate the organization of these mothers' psychic life. According to this principle, there is also the possibility to represent relations as *repairable*, growing the expectation of keeping the relationship with the Other in the presence of tensions and incompatibilities as well (1998). Mothers' detention implies important consequences for children and families. In fact, it is emotionally damaging for the offspring and can arouse a breach in families, sometimes in an irreparable way (O'Brien, 2001; Bornstein, 2005). Shamai and Rochal (2008) developed their study with the view that motherhood in prison can represent a changing factor also due to the possibility of founding a continuity with life out of the jail in the relation with one's own children. On the base of these results, we developed the present work with the aim to reflect on the meanings that the motherhood experience assumes for women in jail. The present study analyzes the emotional dimensions related to motherhood in prison, the relational resources perceived by the participants and the possibility to recognize aspects of the Self in the relation with the Other. The goal is to understand if, and how, the identity as a mother and as a prisoner could assume a role of supporting the subject towards an achievable rehabilitative path, and also towards reflective processes connected to the relation with one's own children.

Method

Corpus data

We interviewed nine mothers, incarcerated in a State Prison in the South of Italy, all of Italian nationality with 25 and 60 years old (average 46,7 years old; standard deviation 9.2 years old); the detention period is on the average six years. To be included in the study, prisoners had to meet two criteria: to be convicted with a definitive sentence and to have children older than three years old, who, consequently, do not live with their mothers. It is important here to clarify that, the the presence of a no longer modifiable sentence has led to the impossibility of using an homogeneous group, especially in regard to the age of the sons of the detained mothers, that in the present study goes from 8 to 44 years old.

Method

The present study is based on the *Grounded Theory Methodology* (GTM) principles, formulated by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. The goal of GTM is to collect and analyze data as much as possible coherent with the real contexts. According to this methodology, hypotheses were formulated on the basis of available data, with the purpose to illustrate what is happening and also to build the explanation of a phenomenon; the term “grounded” underlines exactly this characteristic. The close interconnection between data collection and the following analysis generated from the data determines the researcher to constantly reflect on the research process, thinking each step, closely interconnected to the previous phases. So, it is important stressing that there is a co-construction of information and data interpretation. In fact, qualitative approach is characterized by *reflexivity*, that is the researcher's competence to recognize own cultural preconditions, the motivations that guide the study and the expected results. It has to be maintained during the research, through a continuous comparison between relevant data and emerging hypothesis.

In the selection of the instrument to collect data, we decided to use the narrative interview. As shown by Jerome Bruner (1991), meanings and personal reality are essentially built during the conceptualization and the exposition of one's own narrations: the stories represent a personal way of organizing, interpreting and making sense to personal events. At the same time, stories give oneself a sense of continuity. Narratives represent the preferred form of self expression that we utilized: so, the narrative interview gives to the researcher an elevated potential of access to his research object, both in cognitive and emotional terms. Again, narratives could be considered a tool for the building of the world and of the meanings connected with it (Atkinson, 1998).

The topics in the narrative interviews include: the speaker's own history as a mother; feelings in regard to motherhood in jail, the relation with their own children both before and during the detention; how everyday life in jail influences maternal identity on; the perspectives for their future as mothers and as women outside the jail. The length of the interviews was about one hour and forty-five minutes and, along the interview, the researcher noted down reflections about non-verbal communication, features' context and internal experiences, through the use of ethnographic notes. Again, it is important to mention that we have not received the authorization for recording the interviews according to the Regional Agency for Jail

Administration: so, interviews were hand written in a first stage and next transcribed.

Procedure

The interviews took place in a female section of a State Prison located in the South of Italy within June and September 2011. The meetings with the prisoners were held upon authorization of the penitentiary director, of the Supervisor Magistrate and of the Regional Agency of the Jail Administration. We obtained the authorizations to enter into the institute for interviewing the prisoners after five months (from February to June 2011), during which we provided to send the material concerning the study and the researcher's personal data to the State Prison Direction. This negotiation phase has also had the important function to underline the rigid rules, present in the penal system and its culture. It also revealed the necessity to communicate all the research details in an accurate way. The State Prison has also provided to give a list of the possible prisoners to interview, establishing as a criterion that prisoners were condemned with a definitive sentence¹. In any case, prisoners expressed and signed their written consent to participate to the study. The use of a recording device for the interviews was not allowed. Therefore we used manual annotations for reporting the contents.

All the participants have shared their story of mothers and prisoners through the narrative interviews (Atkinson, 2008). The interviews were then transcribed, codified and analyzed by ATLAS.ti software (Chiarolanza & De Gregorio, 2007), in order to identify the relational processes connected with the condition as mother and as a prisoner. We also want to provide a contribution that can promote the psychological well-being for mothers in jail and their children.

¹Through 'definitive sentence' is intended a sentence that is no longer subjected to appeal, because of the depletion of the three levels of judgment (I level, appeal, complaint in Cassazione). Therefore it becomes executive, or rather that the ruling contained in the sentence is applicable (Patrizi, De Gregorio, 2009).

Results

We coded all the interviews and we obtained 123 codes with 677 quotes. In this study, we analyzed 19 codes with a frequency equal to, or more than, 10. The codes were clustered in family codes that we showed in table n. 1.

Table n. 1 Emerged codes

Family codes	Generating criterion	Quotes
Intersubjectivity mother – sons	Reference to the capability to recognize Self aspects in the relation with the Other	48
Emotional aspects of motherhood in jail	Reference to the emotions reported by mothers in jail	47
Risorse relazionali delle madri detenute	Reference to the emotional and material support perceived by the interviewees	38
Total codes: 3		Total: 133

In table 1, we showed number quotes and the criterion which has produced the family codes.

The family codes named *Intersubjectivity mother – children* include the following codes, for a total amount of 48 quotes:

- trust between mother – children (21 quotes)
- desires for future with children (17 quotes)
- awareness of own actions' influences on children (10 quotes)

In this family code we considered the elements of the mother – child relation that refer to the affective dimension, the possibility to acknowledge the Self in the relation with the Other. With this code, we referred to the empathy and to the possibility to access and share each other feelings and understandings. Our participants showed during the interview a strong feeling of trust toward their children. Mothers seemed to have developed

the awareness of the negative repercussions that their actions have produced on their children lives, both in material and affective ways. Besides, mothers expressed a feeling of maternal pride for their children who displayed a strong commitment to the family and to their values; again children showed a great adaptability to the difficult situation caused by maternal detention.

I think it is better that prison happened to me and my children are fine. They had to adapt themselves to grow up quickly. I deprived them of their adolescence (interview n. 6, July 27th 2011).

Starting from the relations with their children, we observed that prisoners gradually developed the skills and the competences to recognize different Selves, particularly concerning the emotional aspect.

They felt really bad but now they settled into this situation. They just want that I'll go out of here. However I think that it wasn't easy for them. Emotional distress is evident on the faces of my children. My daughter wants to appear strong but I see that she is losing the best beautiful years of her life for my fault.

Parents' guilt is paid by the children and I'll never forgive myself for this. Even with my mistakes, I helped my children for the studies but I'd like to have a better life for them. Never this (interview n. 6, July 27th 2011).

The opportunity to join emotionally to the other also seems to have positive consequences on women's behavior, and on their evaluations on the future. In this direction, in the interviews the mothers narrated their desire to build a future which includes the child's presence as a central issue. Although all the participants to the study declare to have concrete and various plans for their own lives outside the jail, the only one characteristic that gives sense to the rediscovered freedom seems to be the possibility to stay together with their children and to work to maintain the relation with them.

When I will leave from here I will devote myself only to them (interview n. 1, June 16th 2011).

Like I told you before I think a lot about the time in which I won't be in this place anymore. I think that I would like to be a mom, as a mother should be (interview n. 5, July 15th 2011).

The family code *Emotional aspects of motherhood in jail* includes the following codes, for a total amount of 47 quotes:

- emotional distress for the distance from children' lives (24 quotes)
- concern for children' lives (12 quotes)
- anger for the children' lives (11 quotes)

This family code analyzes the emotional dimension which characterizes the experience of motherhood in jail. This dimension is composed by different emotional resonances, all connected to the condition of being a prisoner.

The inability to emotionally accompany their own children through the life's experiences produces a deep emotional distress in the women interviewed. This feeling is further increased by the awareness that the years spent far from their children will never be recovered and that lost time won't come again.

[...] However sometimes I think that when I will be out from here, I will find my children and nephews but the years spent here can't be recovered. Because we changed and we grew up without staying together (interview n. 9, September 28th 2011).

During their narratives, the participants showed a sense of helplessness and a constant worry related to children' lives and future. Furthermore the reported feeling of sadness reported in three narrations is linked with a deep sense of anger and frustration connected to the temporary loss of children's custody. This anger is oriented against the legal system and social services, considered among the main responsible ones for the loss of children's custody with consequences for these women's attempt to maintain a relationship with their children. Besides, our interviewed mothers expressed their feelings of anger to those relatives considered allies with the Court and with its decision to separate mothers and children. From the interviews, mothers' anger is connected to the sense of helplessness that the mothers developed inside the jail and to the awareness that they were not able to act any kind of immediate change for the loss of children custody.

In the 1996, social services decided to collocate my children in a miserable care home for children. [...] I feel anger against those who took away my sons. It is not right, especially for a mother (interview n. 4, July 15th 2011).

The family code *Relational resources of mothers in prison* includes the following codes, for a total of 38 quotes:

- support from relatives (15 quotes)
- positive effects of motherhood on life in jail (12 quotes)
- children' attention for protecting their mothers (11 quotes)

Quotes related to this family code underlined some elements that are perceived by the mothers as significant resources for facing the difficult conditions connected to the jail experience. First of all, it is important having emotional and material support from the own informal system which coincides, for the totality, with the extended family. Besides, in seven interviews on a total of nine, the children were given to the custody of the grandparents or to other members of the origin family. Members of the extended family took care of the children in each aspect of their lives, included the promotion of relational continuity between imprisoned mothers and children. In fact, members of the extended family are really interested in lives of their children: they are interested in accompanying the minors to meet their mothers in jail. At the same time they also promote the communication between child and their mothers through letters and phone calls, with the purpose to fill the gap imposed by the detention.

My sister-in-law is more than a sister for me. Furthermore she understood me because she also had a brother in prison. I felt more secure because I knew that my daughter Aurora was with her (interview n. 1, June 16th 2011).

We found in our data an important aspect. Mothers referred during their interviews that their children always advised them to protect their psycho-physical health during and after the detention period. It creates sort of parent child role reversal for the detention. The emotional closeness showed from the children to their mothers through visits, phone calls or letters seems also to conduct a positive and protective function against the social stigmata and negative opinions that are related to a mother in jail, thus weakening the feelings of failure and pain.

When my children come to visit me they always repeat me: "Never look back, don't think about it anymore, you will be out from here very soon!" It seems like I am removing my appendix (interview n. 2, July 14th 2011).

Again, in all the interviews it emerges how these women live their motherhood. In particular, mothers whose children live out of the prison consider this fact as a resource, useful to face the daily difficulties derived from detention and feelings of pain and anger generated by this condition. In all the narratives, being mothers seems to help the prisoners keep in touch with themselves, struggle with the feelings of defeat and frustration. Again, they do the best for maintaining a good behavior inside the jail, to get permissions and jail term reduction, useful for soon rejoining their children and relatives.

This is the only thing that let me go ahead ... think that outside from the jail I have my children. Then you try to behave well, not to get admonitions, because it isn't worth being away from my children (interview n. 6, July 27th 2011).

This family code underlined how the resources come only from the informal relational system, showing the total absence of the role of institutions in terms of resources.

Discussion

Results showed that feelings connected to the detention experience are also influenced by the motherhood. Being aware about the impossibility to share daily activities with their children created in all the narratives disease and psychological discomfort. Also, motherhood and children's emotional closeness are protective factors during detention time for these women. In fact, emotional distress, feelings of failure and frustration were perceived as less intense thanks to the closeness of their children. Our results seem coherent with the Bourdin study (1998) which stresses the importance of motherhood as a factor of hope, incentive to the change and spirit of survival inside the jail. In particular, mothers included in this study imagined their future together their children. This increased the awareness of the consequences of their actions which led to the jail but at the same time this increased maternal distress and a feeling of guilt for having

damaged their children. We found in our results that detention time had for the prisoners a catalyzing role for the reflective processes, also for the children risks. In several interviews mothers valued the jail experience not only as a punishment but also as social rehabilitation, an opportunity to reflect on their own choices and on the consequences both for themselves and for their children. In a paradoxical way, jail experience is an opportunity to reach a new awareness for the mothers. So, the intersubjectivity activate the acknowledgment process of the Self in the relationship with the Other. But in this case, the building of an intersubjective field is limited by the jail condition. In particular jail condition limited the relationship in the daily activities and in the exchange of emotions. In the narratives, we found negative feelings connected to the motherhood: we interpreted this result as the missing participation of these mothers to the reflective processes in the jail from social and re-educational services. The unavoidable emotional distress for the separation from the children activates anger and anxiety. In fact, they are well aware that their inevitable absence will influence in a negative direction the life quality of their children and their future. Another significant result was represented by the support given by the members of the extended family. In this direction, affective and material support offered by the family protected the persons below the age of 18 years through visits, phone calls, letters but also through narratives. So, the extended family promoted new forms of interaction between mothers and their children, always with the agreement of the Jail Administration. In fact, members of their family were selected by the Court as foster parents. They usually took the children into care: this could be considered as an important protective factor against emotional distress and worries. Starting from these results, we hypothesized a third statement about motherhood in jail. In this case, motherhood is expressed through the members of the extended family that could positively influence the mother-child relationship.

We can conclude that the results indicate that mothers who participate to our study showed trust and hope in the future. Notwithstanding the jail, mothers have expressed in their narratives the possibility of building a future together with their children through positive instead of deviant behaviors. Our research could be considered as an exploratory study connected to the motherhood in jail. It is necessary that we propose new studies to develop answers for some unexplained questions and methodological issues present in this research work. For example, the sample size, the participants' age, the involved children's age, the period of detention have limited our analysis.

But it is important to stress that this study opens the possibility to think about the re-socialization interventions with the goal of supporting the evolution of these mothers. Jail experience for these mothers could represent a first step in the building and maintenance of maternal identity through the mentalization process. Working with the re-educational processes means also working about the motherhood and the consequences that maternal jail experience has on the children' narratives. This could be much useful also to contrast arguments supported by the prisoners to justify their deviant and illegal behaviors.

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