

MOTHERING BEHIND BARS: THE ROLE OF CONTACT MAINTENANCE PROGRAMS  
ON THE MOTHERING IDENTITY OF INCARCERATED WOMEN

by

REBECCA R. BROWN

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Approved by:

Major Professor  
Dr. Lisa Melander

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## **Abstract**

The number of women incarcerated within the American penal system has been increasing in recent years. Coinciding with this rise in the incarceration rate for women, there has been increasing concern regarding women parenting behind bars and how incarceration impacts a woman's identity as a mother. As such the purpose of this paper is to examine the connection between participation in contact maintenance programs at the Topeka, Kansas Correctional Facility and their resulting impact on identity work using a sample of 34 incarcerated mothers who participated in this contact maintenance program. Results revealed that through participation in contact maintenance programs incarcerated mothers begin to develop and sustain a more pro-social image of themselves as 'good mothers.' Foundational practices of parenting and the development and sustainment of the mother-child bond are reinforced to facilitate the development of a positive self-image and to lay the groundwork for successful parenting post-release.

*Keywords:* Contact maintenance program, Identity work, Incarcerated mothers, Incarcerated women, Mother-child bond, Mothering, Pro-social

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## **List of Abbreviations**

- Abbreviation 1. Women’s Activities Learning Center - WALC
- Abbreviation 2. Topeka Correctional Facility - TCF

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## **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

According to National Prisoner Statistics (NPS) data, there were a total of 1,571,013 state and federal prison inmates in the United States in 2012 (Carson and Golinelli 2013). Of that, the NPS found that 108,866 were women (Carson and Golinelli 2013). With 1 out of every 89 women indicated as being part of the American Criminal Justice System in 2009, incarcerated women are quickly becoming the fastest growing segment of the U.S. prison population (Waren 2009; Vainik 2008). Between 1980 and 2011, the number of women incarcerated increased by an astonishing 587%, rising from 15,118 to 111,387. If one includes local jails, this figure balloons to more than 200,000 (Phillips 2012). Coinciding with this rise in the incarceration rate for women, there has been increasing concern regarding the separation of these women from their children, with some studies finding that as many as 80% of incarcerated women have a child at the time of their incarceration (Mauskopf 1998), with another 10% entering prison after becoming pregnant (Weatherhead 2003). What this means is that there are an estimated 1.7 million minor children with an incarcerated parent as of 2009 (Schirmer et al. 2009), a growing portion of which is due to the incarceration of mothers.

These astonishing figures have led to resurgence in the criminological and family studies literature examining the implications of incarceration for both female offenders and the children that they leave behind. Current research has largely focused on the implementation of two programs aimed at addressing the issue of maternal absence due to incarceration. The first is commonly referred to as parenting-related prison programs or simply parenting classes, while the second is known as the enhanced visitation or contact maintenance program (Hoffman et al. 2010). Unlike the goal of general parenting courses, which focus on enhancing basic mothering

skills in a classroom setting, contact maintenance programs are interactive and include direct contact between an incarcerated mother and her child.

Through participation in contact maintenance programs, ties to the outside world are formed through physical interaction between incarcerated parents and their children. These interactions have been shown to improve separation-related coping strategies and decrease anxiety and problem behaviors exhibited by children (Hoffman et al. 2010). Additionally, incarcerated parents participating in such programs have been found to demonstrate increased levels of acceptance and empathy toward children and decreased levels of parenting-related stress (Landreth and Lobaugh 1998). For incarcerated parents, these moments of being able to step away from their role as “prisoner” and into their role as “parent” through participation in such programs allows for the development and maintenance of parental bonds between mother and child (Burgess and Flynn 2013).

Positive interactions between mothers and children are also crucial for an incarcerated woman’s development of her identity as she learns who she is as mother within a prison setting (Boudin 1998). This formation of one’s identity through a set of active processes that serve to construct a sense of one’s self in relation to their surroundings (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003) is known as identity work. One constructs their identity in part through social cues in their environment as a way to establish their place in society. For example, a common identity among female inmates as not only women, but also as mothers, aids in the development of a sense of belonging (Phillips 2007).

Being able to examine exactly how participation in contact maintenance programs impacts an inmate’s identity as a parent is an area that has been largely overlooked in sociological, criminological, and family studies research up until this point. As such, the purpose

of this qualitative study is to examine the connection between participation in contact maintenance programs at the Topeka Correctional Facility and their resulting impact on identity work. To do this, one-on-one interviews with a sample of incarcerated mothers were conducted to answer the following overarching research question: How does participation in the Women's Activities Learning Center (WALC) program affect an incarcerated woman's identity as a mother? With societal expectations dictating that a woman's role is to be the primary caretaker of her children (Snyder and Carlo 2001) and the increasing female prison population (Waren 2009; Vainik 2008; Phillips 2012), there is a need for research into both the daily operations and efficacy of prison-based contact maintenance programs, as well as their influence on the development and sustainment of an incarcerated woman's identity as a mother (Hoffman et al. 2010). This gap in the literature has led to the development of many additional research questions regarding incarcerated mothers, participation in contact maintenance programs, and the concept of identity work. In particular, it is imperative to explore whether there is a divide between an incarcerated woman's identity as a prisoner and her identity as a mother. Such research is essential for promoting the positive benefits of such programs for not only the children involved but for the inmate as well (Loper and Tuerk 2011), which may encourage more institutions to integrate contact maintenance programs into their facilities as a way to not only facilitate the parent-child relationship but also to improve incarcerated parent's perception of themselves and their role in their child(ren)'s lives.

## **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

### **Mass Incarceration and the ‘Invisible Population’**

With an unprecedented 3.8% annual growth of the United States prison population in the past two decades (Miller 2006), there are now more people incarcerated in the United States than ever before. Of the 1,518,535 men and women under the jurisdiction of state and federal authorities in 2007, the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that 809,800 of those are parents of children under the age of 18 (Glaze and Maruschak 2008). A large percentage of those parents are mothers who were their children’s primary caretaker at the time of their arrest and subsequent incarceration (Vainik 2008). Traditionally, families have experienced the upheaval of the loss of a father to the criminal justice system. Although this loss often resulted in some restructuring in the family dynamics and familial relationships as the mother and her child(ren) began to learn to cope with the father’s absence, an increase in the rate of incarceration of women due to such things as the “war on drugs” has changed the face of families impacted by incarceration entirely. No longer is it simply the father ‘doing time;’ it has increasingly become more common for mothers to serve time as well. This has led to a change in the familial structure as the child(ren)’s primary caregiver changes from the mother to a surrogate source (e.g. father, grandparent, foster family, etc.) (Christian 2009), and in some cases a breakdown in familial relationships. Furthermore, infrequent communication and prolonged periods of separation may also result (Hoffman et al. 2010; Vainik 2008).

This breakdown in the familial unit has led one recent researcher to coin the term the “invisible population” in reference to the family members of those left behind when convicted criminal offenders are sentenced and subsequently incarcerated for any period of time (Brink 2003). When examining female offenders in particular, this “invisible population” is largely

made up of minor children. When a child's primary caretaker is absent as a result of incarceration there are few options for placement of those children. According to figures reported to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 84% of parents with minor children who were incarcerated in state prisons reported that at least one of their children was in the custody of the other parent and 15% of incarcerated parents identified their child's grandparent as their current caregiver. Another 6% identified other relatives, and 3% reported that they had at least one child in a foster home, agency or other institution (Glaze and Maruschak 2008).<sup>1</sup> Incarcerated mothers were 5 times more likely than incarcerated fathers to report that a child was residing in foster care at a rate of 11% to 2%, respectively (Christian 2009).

This disruption of the family structure has the greatest impact on children under the age of 18 who face the transition to a new living arrangement and caregiver, often far removed from the location where their parent is incarcerated. This period of transition brings with it new stresses that can impact children in a wide variety of ways (i.e. behavioral or emotional problems, school problems, etc.). Murray and Farrington (2008) evaluated the limited number of existing empirical evidence on the effects of parental incarceration on children in an effort to answer the question of whether these children experience aversive outcomes as a result of parental incarceration, and if so what those outcomes are. They discovered that parental imprisonment is associated with antisocial-delinquent behavior among youth with incarcerated parents and an increased risk of mental health problems, drug use, and unemployment (Murray and Farrington 2008). Although parental imprisonment has been found to be associated with these increased risk factors, it does not imply that a causal effect exists. This association may

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<sup>1</sup> These figures add up to more than 100% as a result of some inmates having multiple children living with different caregivers.

simply be the manifestation of shared circumstances and/or disadvantages experienced by both parent and child (e.g., residing in an impoverished community or neighborhood).

These environmental, social, cultural, and genetic risk factors are compounded by the breakdown in communication that often occurs once a parent has been incarcerated. Distance between where the parent is housed and where the child is living, the separation of sibling groups, a lack of economic resources, and inconsistent reliable transportation often makes frequent visitation difficult, if not impossible (Reed and Reed 1997). One study examining the trends of incarcerated parents and their children in 2004 found that over half of incarcerated parents housed in a state funded correctional facility had never received a visit from their child(ren). The same was found to be true of nearly half of parents incarcerated in a federal facility (Schirmer et al. 2009). This problem is further exacerbated for children who are placed in foster homes as incarcerated parents find it difficult to keep up with their child(ren)'s whereabouts due to a lack of information from caseworkers (Reed and Reed 1997). As a result, not only are incarcerated parents separated physically from their children, but also a strain in the social and emotion connection begins to develop as parents are essentially excommunicated from their children's lives.

### **Mothering from Behind Bars: The Internal Struggle**

As of 2008 female offenders constituted 7.5% of inmates incarcerated in the American penal system (West and Sabol 2009). Because they comprise a relatively small part of the incarcerated population, relatively few studies in the fields of criminal justice and corrections have focused on female offender's experiences, particularly the experiences of incarcerated mothers (Enos 2001). With separation from children being reported as one of the most stressful

aspects of a woman's prison experience (Loper 2006), the concept of "mothering from behind bars" is a topic that warrants further exploration.

Demographically, women who become incarcerated are commonly poorly educated single mothers from a minority background who are living in poverty and struggling to be both the sole financial and emotional providers for their children (Loper 2006; Luke 2002). Despite the stereotype of incarcerated mothers as being characteristically unfit due to their violent tendencies (Loper 2006), these women are more likely to have been arrested for low-level drug or property offenses than violent offenses, and are more likely to have at least one current or previous drug conviction in their criminal history (Loper 2006; Luke 2002). These women are also unlikely to receive reduced sentences for their low-level drug or property offenses as a result of their unwillingness to inform on their boyfriends or husbands either out of loyalty to their partner, or due to a lack of knowledge on the events that police are seeking information about (Luke 2002).

Although incarcerated, "mothers do not stop being mothers because they have been convicted of acts that society finds abhorrent" (Luke 2002:236). Rather, an incarcerated woman is faced with the challenge of fulfilling the maternal roles that society prescribes her while remaining aware of her inability to fulfill those roles in the same fashion that a non-incarcerated mother would (Celinska and Siegel 2010). In an attempt to maintain some semblance of traditional parental authority as an aspect of their maternal identity (Brown and Bloom 2009) and remain actively engaged in their children's lives, incarcerated mothers work to have continued input in "decision making about their children's future and stay abreast of their children's whereabouts and their progress in school" (Celinska and Siegel 2010:461).

Despite the objective of remaining involved in decision making activities surrounding their children's future, communication between incarcerated mothers and their children's caregivers is often strained and infrequent resulting in confusion about their legal status and responsibilities. This is especially the case when an incarcerated woman's children have entered the foster care system (Beckerman 1994). The communication gap between incarcerated mothers and their children's caregivers is further compounded by the high illiteracy rate amongst female inmates, as well as institutional policies that limit prisoner's ability to make or receive direct phone calls (Beckerman 1994). So while incarcerated mothers want to retain their parental authority, issues of communication and collaboration between the mothers and their children's caregivers, illiteracy, and ignorance of the importance of involvement in permanency planning activities are often barriers to that authority (Beckerman 1994).

The topic of how incarcerated mothers cope with these barriers and learn to parent from within the prison setting was the focus of a study recently published by Celinska and Siegel (2010). Utilizing 74 semi-structured interviews with mothers, both before trial and during incarceration, they identified seven coping strategies that women employ when faced with a pending or actual separation from their children: being a good mother, mothering from prison, role redefinition, disassociation from prisoner identity, self-transformation, planning and preparation, and self-blame (Celinska and Siegel 2010).

The first of these coping strategies, being a good mother, utilizes the concept of motherhood as being a central identity. This is an emotion-focused strategy wherein a woman tries to demonstrate how fit of a mother she is by bringing attention to what she does for her children despite her pending or actual incarceration (e.g. disciplining and helping with homework) (Celinska and Siegel 2010). Coping with threats to their maternal identity by finding



ways to reinforce their maternal role while facing a pending or actual period of incarceration is very important since many mothers see their children as the light at the end of the dark tunnel that they have found themselves in (Celinska and Siegel 2010).

The second coping strategy, mothering from prison, centers on the notion of remaining active participants in their children's lives despite their physical separation. In a study conducted by Berry and Eigneberg it was noted, "mothering is not a static characteristic, but something that women create through action on a daily basis" (2002:116). That action can take place in the form of many different avenues in the prison setting. Writing letters with children old enough for written communication, offering verbal discipline and maternal advice during phone conversations and in person visits, and being actively involved with their children's surrogate caregivers are all examples of the various forms in which this coping strategy can take shape (Celinska and Siegel 2010).

The next coping strategy identified, role redefinition, examines the practice of incarcerated women redefining their children as friends or confidants. This is done in an effort to "neutralize the harms they have caused their children, while minimizing their own guilt and sense of failure" (Celinska and Siegel 2010:462). Disassociation from prisoner identity, on the other hand, allows an incarcerated mother to still view her children through a maternal lens. However, at the same time it allows her to distance herself from the image of a prisoner (e.g. by proclaiming that they don't belong in prison and they are different from other incarcerated women) (Celinska and Siegel 2010).

The interrelated strategies of self-transformation, planning and preparation focus on the transformation of an incarcerated woman's identity from a troubled woman to a good mother. These two coping mechanisms allow a woman to see where she went astray of the conventional

path and to consciously take active steps to improve her situation (Celinska and Siegel 2010). Similarly, planning and preparation allows an incarcerated woman to take the new skills that she developed through her self-transformation and apply those to her life by planning for a future for herself and her children. These two strategies consist of a reexamination of one's priorities and a refocusing on where one wants to be in life and how to get there, rather than on the difficult situation that they now find themselves in (Celinska and Siegel 2010).

The final coping strategy identified is one that, although originally classified as being maladaptive and harmful to an incarcerated woman's overall concept of self, has been found to play an important role in the process of self-transformation (Celinska and Siegel 2010). Present almost exclusively among incarcerated mothers within the prison setting, self-blame allows a woman the opportunity to take responsibility for the actions that led her to incarceration and opens the door for opportunities for self-transformation and a change in circumstances (Celinska and Siegel 2010). This strategy embodies the idea that you must understand where you came from before you can know where you're going. By taking responsibility for the actions that led them to incarceration and separation from their children, incarcerated mothers open the door to changing their own circumstances to improve the lives of those involved.

Celinska and Siegel's (2010) study was an important contribution to the fields of criminal justice and corrections given that the other existing literature at the time on imprisoned parents largely focused on the issues of maintaining parent-child contact during incarceration through participation in standard prison parenting programs. Emphasis placed on how that incarceration impacts a woman's maternal identity and sense of self, although not through participation in prison parenting programs or contact maintenance programs. Their focus on the coping strategies of women dealing with pending or actual separation from their children as a result of

incarceration provides a starting point to further examination of how incarcerated mothers reconcile their dual role as mother and prisoner.

Although an important contribution to the fields of criminal justice and corrections, Celinska and Siegel's (2010) study is not without limitations. While focusing on the coping strategies of incarcerated mothers, Celinska and Siegel (2010) successfully examined the mechanisms by which these women navigate being in the difficult position of being separated from their children. Like much research into the topic of incarcerated women, however, their research stops just short of exploring the gap between the development and utilization of these coping strategies and their resulting impact on maternal identity work.

The current study expands upon that of Celinska and Siegel's (2010) by exploring not only how incarcerated mothers cope with the separation from their children, but also how coping strategies developed through participation in contact maintenance programs impact the development of their own maternal identity within the prison setting. Although research has been done on coping strategies of mothers dealing with actual or pending separation from their children due to incarceration, such as the work of Celinska and Siegel (2010), as well as on contact maintenance programs overall, this study will be the first to examine how one's mothering identity is shaped by participation in such programs. A better understanding of how incarceration impacts an inmate's maternal identity and self-concept is needed if we are to appropriately plan and implement interventions within this rapidly growing section of the American prison population (Loper 2006).

## **Parenting Behind Bars: Contact Maintenance Programs and One's Identity as a Parent**

To alleviate some of the strains that result from the disruption of the family structure, prison programs and advocacy groups began to try to formulate programs that would work to better facilitate parent-child communication and interaction. Contact maintenance programs in particular have been growing in popularity with the increased number of incarcerated women within the American penal system (Burgess and Flynn 2013). The idea behind these programs is the encouragement of continued contact throughout the mother's incarceration through such things as frequent visitation, particularly for children too young to write or talk on the phone, telephone calls, and letters for children old enough to read and write. Not to be confused with parenting programs that promote child development education and parenting skills, these informal programs were developed by prison social workers, administrators, and other officials operating under the belief that continued contact between a mother and her child(ren) may lead to a reduction in the psychological and emotional trauma experienced by both parties as a result of their separation, thus improving the chances of a successful reunification upon release (Burgess and Flynn 2013).

These interactive contact maintenance programs encourage open lines of communication and physical contact between an incarcerated mother and her child through the development and maintenance of separate family visitation and play rooms specifically designed to mimic a daycare or school setting. Subsidies to defray the cost of transportation for children to visit their incarcerated parent are also offered in some programs to encourage the fostering of the parent-child relationship (Hoffman et al. 2010). Where physical proximity is an issue, some correctional facilities have integrated technological interface (e.g., videoconferencing, audio and/or video

recordings of a parent reading a book) to further bridge the gap between inmates and their children (Hoffman et al. 2010). Another benefit of contact maintenance programs is the fostering of a link between the incarcerated mother and the outside world, which can be a motivation for change and thus result in a reduced likelihood of recidivism. Additionally, such programs allow for better adjustment to maternal incarceration for the mother and her child, as well as the continued fostering of the mother-child bond (Burgess and Flynn 2013).

One example of an existing contact maintenance program that has been increasingly popular is the Girl Scouts Beyond Bay (GSBB) program, “arguably one of the most publicized and well-known enhanced parent-child visitation programs” (Hoffman et al. 2010:400), for inmates meeting qualifying criteria (i.e. good behavior, completion of basic parenting classes, etc.) as yet another way for incarcerated parents and their children to maintain some semblance of a traditional parent-child relationship during the parent’s incarceration. Through GSBB, incarcerated mothers meet as a group on a regular basis to prepare themselves emotionally for upcoming visits with their daughters and plan activities that encourage the development of a healthy parent-child relationship. This program also offers support for the inmate’s daughters through regular meetings in the community where these young girls can interact with a peer group with similar familial circumstances (Hoffman et al. 2010; Block and Potthast 1998). This provides both the inmates and their daughters with an outlet for emotional support, as well as an environment that promotes bonding and the development of healthy relationships. This nurturing environment is essential for developing and sustaining not only the parent-child relationship (Hughes and Harrison-Thompson 2002; Houck and Loper 2002), but the incarcerated woman’s mothering identity as well.

Despite the many benefits of contact maintenance programs, few institutions offer these initiatives, especially when compared to those that offer educational parenting classes. According to one study, although a vast majority of institutions report having some version of a parenting program, “parenting classes that do not directly involve children were the most common parenting program offered in 51% of male facilities, 90% of female facilities, and 74% of co-gendered facilities” (Hoffman et al. 2010:403). In contrast, the 10% of male, 33% of female, and 15% of co-gendered facilities provided contact maintenance programs that directly involved the inmates and their children (Hoffman et al. 2010).

Although implemented in prisons across the country, there has been little research into the effectiveness of contact maintenance programs (Burgess and Flynn 2013). Further research is needed before one can adequately assert a causal relationship between contact maintenance programs and feelings of parental attachment or identity. This study addresses the research gap in this area by examining if and how participation in such programs influences an inmate’s mothering identity. Specifically, this qualitative study seeks to examine the following overarching research question: How does participation in contact maintenance programs impact an inmate’s mothering identity? Knowing if an influence occurs is essential to determining if such programs are fulfilling their stated goals of facilitating the mother-child relationship in an effort to strengthen familial ties and reduce recidivism.

## Chapter 3 - Theoretical Orientation

Symbolic interactionism, a term coined by Herbert Blumer based upon the work of George Hebert Mead, refers to “the peculiar and distinctive character of interaction as it takes place between human beings” (Blumer 1994:263). In other words, this theory seeks to examine the ways in which human beings create, interpret, and define the actions of themselves and others through the meanings that they attach to those actions. Much like the way that a smile has come to be known as a symbol for happiness, the various meanings that humans assign to the actions of themselves and others have become symbols for larger concepts. The idea is that it is not simply that these interactions take place, but rather the meanings that individuals attached to these interactions and the notion of self identity that impacts how we view the world around us.

According to the work of Mead, as humans we take account of the various actions and symbols that permeate our daily lives and then interpret the significance of those actions and symbols before we proceed (Blumer 1994). The decisions that we make are based upon what significance a given symbol holds for us as individuals. This process of interpreting the significance of actions and symbols is known as self-indication, or the “communication process in which the individual notes things, assesses them, gives them a meaning, and decides to act on the basis of the meaning” (Blumer 1994:265).

This process of self-indication is largely influenced by issues of intersectionality, which are the ways in which gender, race, class, and nation mutually construct one another (Hill Collins 1998). What this means is that, for example, one’s position as a nonwhite female from a background of poverty will influence one’s interpretation of the significance of a given action or symbol differently than one’s position as a white male from an upper class background. The life experiences of these two groups differ based on their divergent racial backgrounds, genders, and

social stations. Thus, the intersectionality of these qualities leads to variations in how individuals view the world around them.

These related concepts of symbolic interactionism and self-indication are important to understand when one is seeking to examine the role that contact maintenance programs play in the development of incarcerated women's perceived mothering identity. They form the basis of identity work, which rests on the notion that human beings develop their own sense of self in which varying identities can be present simultaneously (Turner 2012). For example, in the context of the penal system women may develop a sense of self in which the varying identities of woman, mother, and inmate may be invoked individually or simultaneously in a given situation. This study seeks to examine the role that contact maintenance programs play in the development of the second of these identities, that of the perceived mothering identity. Expanding on the work of Celinska and Siegel (2010), this study will explore whether contact maintenance programs are instrumental to the shaping of their perceived parental identity through the development of situated meanings and definitions. Situated or situational meanings refer to the way in which one develops their identity based upon the interactions between themselves and their environment (Pfuhl 1986). As a result, the prominent identity of an incarcerated woman is largely contextual in nature.

Erving Goffman (1959) touched on the idea of identities as being contextual, or inauthentic, in nature when he examined the concept of the front stage, or the behaviors that individuals display for an audience. In the context of the penal system, incarcerated women are the actors and correctional officers, the inmate's families, and their children are among the audience members. In the case of inauthentic identities, during the course of participation in contact maintenance programs inmates may perform for an audience, which would include



program administrators, other prison officials, and co-parents. Thus they may behave in the way that society says that a 'good' mother should (i.e. playing with their child, asking questions about their daily routine, planning for the future, etc.) while never fully embracing that identity as their own.

Alternatively, identities may also be authentic, or stable and transituational, meaning that they do not vary based upon the given situation (Erickson 1995). When examining authentic identities from the viewpoint of Goffman, these are identities that occur on the backstage. This means that they are more closely ingrained into one's perception of self rather than being simply a performance for an audience. It is on this stage that actors may embrace the various aspects of self that their audience may find unacceptable (Goffman 1959). For example, using the backstage concept an incarcerated woman is able to simultaneously embrace her roles as woman, mother, and prisoner.

There is also the notion of gender as a social construction (West and Zimmerman 1987). Rather than looking at society as being based upon familial organization by gender roles (Hill Collins 1998), West and Zimmerman (1987) saw gender as being created through human interaction. For a woman, "doing gender" in our society means that not only are they likely to work outside of the home, but they are also largely responsible for the vast majority of the household and child-care tasks as well (West and Zimmerman 1987). Today many women are single working parents, or at a minimum must work to help keep their family finically afloat. The women of today find themselves in a unique position. Not only are they responsible for the majority of the household and child-care tasks, but now many find themselves as working mothers as well (West and Zimmerman 1998; Wang and Bianchi 2008).

As a result of a social context of patriarchy (Chesney-Lind 1986), women have encountered a society in which a hierarchical organization of male dominance exists within the workplace (Acker 1990; Marcus-Mendoza 2004). This restricts the job opportunities that are both available to women and considered socially acceptable given the gendered division of labor that exists. “The ranking of women’s jobs is often justified on the basis of women’s identification with childbearing and domestic life” (Acker 1990). Women have traditionally been devalued within the workforce because they have been “assumed to be unable to conform to the demands of the abstract job” (Acker 1990:152), instead only being seen as capable of fulfilling nurturing roles (e.g. childcare worker, educator, nurse, etc.).

This has limited the upward mobility of women and restricted power at the upper managerial level on both the national and world level to all male enclaves (Acker 1990), thus further subjugating women to be reliant on men for economic stability. According to Chesney-Lind, purported as being the mother of feminist criminology (Belknap 2004), it is this tradition of economic discrimination rather than liberation that can be best used to explain the manners and reasons by which female crime exists (1986). When women, particularly those with children, are placed into a position where they must become the primary breadwinners for their families, they are face with meager job opportunities offering too little pay to provide economic security. As a result, many women turn to the traditionally female crimes as petty theft or prostitution (Chesney-Lind 1986) in an effort to survive. This is especially true for those most oppressed within our society, young women from nonwhite backgrounds of poverty (Chesney-Lind 1986).

These women are seen as “fallen women, bad mothers, and unsuitable for society” (Marcus-Mendoza 2004:39). They have strayed from the bonds of patriarchy and forged new, nontraditional paths for financial security. Unlike their male counterparts, women who are

labeled as delinquent or criminal experience a greater sense of social disapproval from both fellow delinquents and non-delinquents alike (Chesney-Lind 1986). This further limits their ability to find suitable employment, adequately provide for their families, and be regarded as upstanding members of society.

Thus one's gender and social station within patriarchal society is influential on their ability to acquire and maintain suitable employment and provide for one's family. Due to the increasing expectations placed upon women to contribute not only in the home, but in the workplace as well (West and Zimmerman 1987), and the resulting masculine authority structure, women find themselves blocked from advancement by structural elements within society. Gender, however, "is not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doings of some sort" (West & Zimmerman 1987:129). We create gender within society through interactions (e.g. interacting with our mother as the parent responsible for child rearing, seeing our father as the primary breadwinner, and interacting with men in upper managerial roles), yet gender structures those very same interactions based on preconceived notions of what is masculine or feminine within our society (West & Zimmerman 1987). What this means is that the very interactions that shape our perceptions of gender are actually influenced by our preconceived notions of gender.

Using these concepts of identity, gender theory, and structural issues as a guide, my study will seek to examine contact maintenance programs in an effort to identify how such programs encourage or hinder a woman's progress toward developing her maternal identity. Is there a divide between a woman's identity as a prisoner and her identity as a mother? If so, does participation in such programs bridge that divide? How might that identity work be related to one's experiences in prison (i.e. improved behavior, participation in educational activities, etc.)?

## Chapter 4 - Methods

### Sample

The sample for this analysis consists of 34 women incarcerated at the Topeka Correctional Facility in Topeka, Kansas. This facility is the only female correctional facility in the state with a capacity to house over 764 minimum, medium and maximum-security inmates (Topeka Correctional Facility 2016). Each respondent identified as having at least one biological child under the age of 18 and were active in the Women's Activity Learning Center (WALC) program. WALC is a contact maintenance program began in 1987 and funded through ministry-based grants (Kansas East Conference of the United Methodist Church n.d.) that offers such programs as parenting retreats, courses on child development, and a birthday book program that allows incarcerated mothers to send their child a book, a tape of themselves reading the book, and a stuffed animal on his or her birthday. The majority of the sample was White (n = 28; 82%); the remaining participants self-identified as Black (n = 4; 12%) and Indigenous American (n = 2; .06%). Of these, 38% (n = 13) indicated that they were between 23 and 28 years of age. The remaining sample consisted of participants between the ages of 29-33 (n = 8; 26%), 34-39 (n = 9; 24%) and 40 and over (n = 4; 12%). The majority of participants self-identified as having 1-2 children (n = 20; 59%), while the remainder identified as having 3 or more children (n = 14; 41%). See Table 4.1 for more information on individual respondents.

**Table 4.1 Respondent Information**

#	Pseudonym	Demographics	Kids	Security Classification
1	Nicole	White, 33	2	Maximum
2	Sphinx	White, 27	2	Maximum
3	Angela	White, 24	2	Maximum
4	Katie	White, 28	4	Maximum
5	Makala	Black, 24	1	Maximum
6	Belle	White, 29	7	Minimum/Medium
7	May	Indigenous American, 43	3	Minimum/Medium
8	Joann	Indigenous American, 27	2	Minimum/Medium
9	Taitiana	White, 36	6	Minimum/Medium
10	Jasmine	White, 30	4	Minimum/Medium
11	Victoria	White, 26	3	Minimum/Medium
12	Susan	White, 39	3	Minimum/Medium
13	Markita	White, 30	2	Minimum/Medium
14	Knucklehead	Black, 40	5	Minimum/Medium
15	Lynn	White, 28	1	Minimum/Medium
16	Toni	White, 33	2	Minimum/Medium
17	Ayn Rand	White, 33	2	Minimum/Medium
18	Amanda	White, 33	3	Minimum/Medium
19	Ashley	Black, 24	1	Minimum/Medium
20	Michelle	White, 39	2	Minimum/Medium
21	Andy	White, 34	2	Minimum/Medium
22	Staci	White, 45	4	Minimum/Medium
23	Shawna Taylor	White, 31	2	Minimum/Medium
24	Sharon	White, 28	3	Minimum/Medium
25	Mac	White, 27	1	Minimum/Medium
26	Heather	White, 34	3	Minimum/Medium
27	Ashley	White, 53	2	Minimum/Medium
28	Barbie	White, 36	4	Minimum/Medium
29	Jo	White, 37	2	Minimum/Medium
30	Vanessa	White, 34	3	Minimum/Medium
31	Lynn	White, 28	1	Minimum/Medium
32	Leah	White, 23	1	Minimum/Medium
33	Ann Sharp	White, 38	1	Minimum/Medium
34	Donyell	Black, 28	1	Minimum/Medium

## **Data Collection**

This study utilized a qualitative approach with information being gathered through a series of audio-recorded, individual interviews conducted between March and October 2015, which lasted between 15 minutes and one hour in length with each inmate. Although I was involved with all aspects of the research design, another member of the research team conducted the interviews and I then performed a secondary data analysis of the in-depth interviews. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended survey questions in an effort to provide some structure to the interview process while still allowing the freedom to probe beyond the respondent's initial answers to the interview questions (Berg 2009). These questions were administered to primarily minimum and medium security inmates in an effort to gauge the respondent's perception of how participation in the various contact maintenance programs offered has affected an inmate's identity as a parent.

Although quantitative research is more often utilized and praised than qualitative work (Berg 2009), good qualitative research can produce a depth of detail and analysis that other research methods cannot match. Highly labor intensive and often generating much stress (Miles 1979), "good" qualitative research requires the researcher to look for differences that make a difference in social life (Stinchcombe 2005). An example of such differences would be one's membership in a stigmatized group, such as that of the incarcerated female population. Looking at the difficulties experienced in parenting by incarcerated mothers allowed me to examine the ways in which participation in prison based contact maintenance programs assists these women in negotiating conflicting identities within the institutional setting.

Prior to conducting interviews, the interviewer read the participants the informed consent document and they had the opportunity to ask questions regarding the research. An initialed copy

of the informed consent document, as well as the other study materials and field notes, are located in a secured filing cabinet located in a locked office on campus. Only members of the research team have access to the study materials. Participants had the opportunity to consent to both engaging in the interview process and having the interviews audio recorded. No participants refused to have their responses recorded. Due to policy restrictions at the Topeka Correctional Facility, monetary and/or physical incentives were not allowed for participants. Instead an information packet containing a list of community service programs for inmates post release,<sup>2</sup> with a heavy emphasis on parenting related programs, was offered. The university's IRB approved this study.

The audio recordings were then transferred to a password-protected computer after each series of interviews and the files were erased from the recorder immediately after transfer for security purposes. Once the interview process was completed, members of the research team then transcribed<sup>3</sup> all of the audio-recorded interviews verbatim. I then utilized ATLAS.ti (ATLAS.ti 2016) to assist with data management. I first engaged in an inductive analysis, which is the process by which a researcher immerses themselves within the data with no preconceived hypothesis about what themes may emerge (Berg 2009). I also utilized open coding, which allowed for the unrestricted coding of the data (Berg 2009). Through this method the raw interview data guided me in the direction of the themes that they held rather than setting out with specific themes in mind (Given 2008; Berg 2009). This is in contrast with deductive analysis, in

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<sup>2</sup> This list of programs and services will be a collaboration of the information offered to inmates nearing release by correctional staff, as well as a list of programs and services that I am personally aware of.

<sup>3</sup> Each transcription was proofread and double-checked against the audio recording for accuracy by both Dr. Melander and myself.

which researchers enter into the data analysis process with predetermined hypothesis in mind and the data serves as a means of proving that hypothesis (Berg 2009).

With the identification of these emergent themes, I then moved on to axial coding, which provided a more in-depth analysis than allowed by open coding (Berg 2009). During this process, I omitted the respondent's name and other identifying information to protect the identities of the informants, and instead referred to them by their self-selected pseudonyms in the manuscript. In addition, I engaged in collaborative data conferences with the research team. The emergent themes were discussed, and the codes were refined based on the resulting discussion.

### **Questions for Interviews**

In order to expand upon previous research conducted on coping strategies and mothering identity among women in the criminal justice system (Celinska and Siegel 2010), the purpose of the current study is to examine how participation in the WALC contact maintenance program impacts an incarcerated woman's identity as a mother. As such, we considered the following research questions: 1) Does a participant identify themselves as a mother first or a prisoner first, and why? 2) How has their view of themselves as mom been changed by prison? 3) How has their view of themselves as a mom been changed by participation in the WALC program? 4) If they were released at the time of their interview, would they be ready to parent their children? Why or why not? See Appendix A for the full interview guide.



## **Chapter 5 - Results**

Four main themes regarding the mothering identity of incarcerated women participating in the WALC contact maintenance program were identified: personal identity, the impact of incarceration, the impact of the WALC program, and readiness to parent. Each of these themes and their relevant sub-themes are discussed in detail below.

### **Personal Identity**

Entering into prison, what Goffman (1957) describes as a total institution that separates an individual from outside society, incarcerated mothers bring with them a unique sense of self and attachments to outside support systems (e.g. family, friends, children, etc.) that have allowed them to function in everyday society (Goffman 1957). When these women enter prison and those support systems are removed, tensions develop and a shift in their sense of self may occur (Goffman 1957). This absence of support systems and the resulting shift can lead to a change in an incarcerated mother's primary self-identification as either mother or prisoner.

When asked about their self-identity, most participants referenced their co-existing prisoner and mother statuses. As such, the participants often self-identified their primary status as that of a mother or a prisoner to varying degrees dependent upon their security classification within the prison, participation in the WALC program and overall experience within the Topeka Correctional Facility itself. While the majority of participants, particularly those classified as minimum or medium security, identified as mothers first (68%), others identified as prisoners first (26%). Alternatively, there was a smaller population of participants that had an inconsistent self-view (6%). This population self-identified as neither mother first nor prisoner first, or their identity or view of themselves varied depending on the context. This discussion of their views of themselves and their rationale for these distinctions are important aspects in identity work.

### *Mom first view*

Among participants who self-identified as a mother as their primary identity over that of a prisoner, a common theme was the idea of family as their focal point. The notion that everything they do is for their children resonated as a motivating factor behind everything from continuing education to good behavior while incarcerated. Susan, a 39-year-old mother of three, gave an example of how her children are her primary focus in her life:

I mean every morning that I wake up the first thing that I think of is there anything I need to do to help my kids. I'm always finding new ways to be involved in their lives. Um, I wake up and the first thing I do call and wake my son up make sure he is up for school, tell him good morning, have a good day. Um, I don't know, they're the very first thing I think about and the very last thing I think about before I got to sleep.

The women also often stated that although they are incarcerated, they are still mothers. "I was a mother before I came to prison," stated Katie, mother of four. This sentiment was widely echoed in various ways throughout the course of the interviews. For participants in this category, their identity as a mother is not something that could be broken by the confines of prison. According to Barbie, 36 year old mother of four, "I'm a mom, and just because I'm an inmate doesn't make me not a mom. ...being a mom, that's forever." Michelle, mother of two, further elaborated on the importance of nurturing one's identity as a mother within a prison setting when she stated, "If I consider myself a prisoner, I'll lose hope," showing the importance of identity work to female inmate's overall emotional well-being while incarcerated.

Although these women are confined behind bars, they have not allowed that to define who they are. Participants who identified as a mother first tended to see that title as more than just a label. It was a badge of honor to be worn with pride, no matter their current circumstances. These women were excited to have the opportunity to talk about their children and to emphasize

the important presence that they still have in their lives. The identity of prisoner was not something that took precedence for participants within this category. In fact, May (Indigenous American, mother of 3) went so far as to say that “being a prisoner is the last on my list of labels.”

### ***Prisoner first view***

The prisoner first view, or the “convict mom” view as Nicole, a mother of two, put it, does not negate the importance that the identity of mother plays in the lives of female inmates. Rather, it focuses on the importance of parental involvement in the shaping of one’s identity as a mother. When distance separates mother and child, the standard day-to-day interaction that is often taken for granted among those outside of prison ceases to exist. Instead, mothering is often reduced to infrequent visits and sporadic, time limited phone calls. That distance and lack of day-to-day involvement leads some participants to declare that ‘mother’ is simply a title for them now, not an identity or prominent feature of their personalities. Sphinx (27-year-old mother of two) shared, “...Sometimes you get a feeling of yeah I'm their mom but it's just a title now because I'm away from them. And, you know that's just- they call me mom, they know I'm mom but I don't get to be mom.” This physical separation and restricted contact often makes it difficult for incarcerated women to see themselves as mothers when their very definition of motherhood entails day-to-day involvement and interaction with their children.

### ***Inconsistent view***

Falling in-between the mother first and prisoner first views were several participants who had an inconsistent or uncertain view of their current identity. Rather than self-identifying as either a mother first or a prisoner first, their identities fluctuated between the two depending on

the context of a given situation. Which identity they embodied was often a direct reflection of the environment and situation in which they found themselves. Michelle, a white 39 year-old, stated,

Um, I do not think of myself as a prisoner um, and I think... and I don't know that I think of my myself as a mother first either. I think that I'm still struggling with my individuality and until I figure that out, I don't think I can successfully think of myself as a mother but my case is a little different um, and I have an appeal that is pending on my case and they expect to win it, and I expect to be going home a lot sooner than I was expecting to and I think that if I allow myself to consider myself as a prisoner I would lose some of that hope that I have and I wouldn't be as successful as I have been.

Although Michelle's struggle to find her identity led her to reject the primary label of 'mother,' her hope for the future also would not allow her to accept the primary label of 'prisoner.' The role that incarceration plays in this feeling of uncertainty in regard to identity was highlighted by Makala, mother of one, "...Right now I think of myself as an inmate first just because I'm here...This is everything in my world. Um, I'm gearing more towards being a mom first, but I think that will come when I get out of here." Identifying prison as the world in which she lives currently, Makala (Black; 24 years old) felt that it was difficult to identify as a mother given her current situation. She believed that might change once she's released, however. That anticipation of a future release date is what encourages women at all security levels to participate in WALC when and where possible.

### **Impact of Incarceration**

The impact of incarceration on one's identity and sense of self was a salient theme throughout the interviews. Although there was much discussion on the topic of the positive impact of parenting within a prison setting, and more specifically within the WALC program itself, the barriers to parenting within prison were also a topic often discussed at great length.

The participants in the sample praised the WALC program for its ability to facilitate their involvement in their children's lives, but they also highlighted the struggles of being an incarcerated mother and the unique challenges associated with parenting behind prison walls.

### ***The positive side to parenting in prison***

Although none of the participants reported their situation as being ideal, many of them did see the positive side to parenting in prison. Andy (White, mother of two) credited prison with changing her life, whereas Ashley, mother of one, was more specific about her belief that the WALC program saved her life by giving her something to look forward to: time with her son.

I feel like if I was in another prison, this would not be happening at all. I wouldn't, I would literally just see him when ... at...wit everyone around em. And it just, that would be it. And he wouldn't feel comfortable cause he feel comfortable when he come back here. He just let loose, like this is a big play place and not prison.

A theme that resonated throughout the course of the interviews was the idea that both prison and the WALC program changed and shaped these women's lives in some fashion, largely by means of providing a child-friendly atmosphere and opportunities for bonding and helping them to better appreciate their loved ones on the outside.

Beyond just creating a deeper appreciation for their loved ones, some participants identified prison, and WALC in particular, as a catalyst to helping them grow as people. In turn, several participants stated that prison had either made them a better mom in general, or made them a mom by way of their actions for the first time in their lives. When asked how being incarcerated has impacted her self-identity as a mother, Toni, 33 year-old mother of two, said, "...Through being locked up and through doing the parenting classes and the WALC program and becoming the mother that I needed to be...." As such, participation in WALC and the associated programs helped Toni develop her identity as a mother. Sharon, mother of three,

echoed Toni's sentiments by saying, "I'm here to be a better person." Meanwhile, Markita (mother of two) stated that her goal was to be a better mother. The goals of both of these women are met through participation in the WALC program as they learn not only parenting skills, but pro-social skills that will help them succeed in society after their release such as how to interact with those in positions of authority and anger management. Through a development of their confidence and a belief in their ability to parent through participation in programs such as the parenting retreats offered through WALC, participants indicated that prison helped them develop a strong desire to be and do better for not just themselves, but for their children as well.

### ***Barriers to parenting in prison***

As anticipated, parenting from the confines of a prison does not come without barriers. Not only does being incarcerated limit one's ability to be an active parent, as described by most of the participants, but the interviews also revealed that it makes it harder for these women to identify as mothers due to that inability to participate in the day-to-day activities of their child(ren)'s lives. Lynn, 28 year old mother of one, makes this point by stating, "I talk to [her daughter], but I'm not very, I don't have a hands on relationship with her, my life doesn't ... I talk to her and I know how her day is going, but my world doesn't revolve around that right now." Although participation in the WALC program allows her to communicate with her daughter and to continue to nurture some form of a maternal relationship, her absence from the mundane, day-to-day activities prohibits her from feeling as though her daughter holds the same place in her life that she would if Lynn were not in prison.

Another theme that resonated throughout the interviews when participants were asked how prison had changed their view of themselves as a mother was the idea that prison had made them harder on themselves and led them to question if they even deserved to be seen as a mother

given their prior actions that led them to be incarcerated. For example, Markita (White; 30 years old) discussed how her criminal lifestyle contributed to her loss of self-identity as a mother and said: "...It's hard to talk about being a mom because part of me don't think that I deserve to be that because of what I've done to my kids." This demonstrates that it is not only the physical separation that dampens the maternal identity of an incarcerated woman, but the emotional struggle that goes along with that separation as well.

Another barrier to parenting in prison is the management of a co-parenting relationship with the child(ren)'s caregiver and the loss of authority and control that accompanies an incarcerated mother's absence. "I worry about everything on the outside that is completely out of my control, and I overwhelm myself with it," said Katie, mother of four, in reference to how her view of herself as a mother has changed because of her incarceration. No longer having the ability to be primary decision maker for their child(ren) can sometimes lead to conflict between an incarcerated mother and her child(ren)'s caregiver. The ability of participants and their child(ren)'s caregiver to communicate and be on the same page regarding the rules and disciplinary measures utilized served as a barrier to parenting for several of the participants interviewed.

### **Impact of WALC**

One consistent theme across participants at all security levels was the praise awarded to the WALC program. Like most states, Kansas has only one female correctional facility. Also like most facilities, the Topeka Correctional Facility (TCF) operates on a very limited state budget with funding for any additional materials or programs outside of what is absolutely necessary for the routine functioning of the facility to come from outside sources. In the case of the WALC program at TCF, the vast majority of the funding for this program comes from the United

Methodist Women (UMW) (Kansas East Conference of the United Methodist Church n.d; United Methodist Women 2012)

In 1987, a UMW volunteer became aware of the unique challenges affecting incarcerated women, particularly incarcerated mothers, after attending a UMW based program featuring incarcerated mothers from Kansas Correctional Institution at Lansing (United Methodist Women 2012). Through meetings with correctional staff at the facility, UMW volunteers learned of the need for a Parenting Center to address the issue of visitation between incarcerated mothers and their minor children (United Methodist Women 2012). Prior to the establishment of such program, however, the female inmates were moved from Lansing to the Kansas Correctional Vocational Training Center in Topeka. This facility, which would later become known as TCF, was the birthplace of the Women’s Activities Learning Center program.

Serving as a way to nurture a deep and lasting relationship between incarcerated women and their children, participants credited WALC with bringing a ray of hope to what was often described as a dark spot in their lives. WALC allows participants to keep connections with their children, identify as a mother and enjoy a home like visiting environment with their children.

### ***Keeping connections***

A primary function of WALC appeared to be the development of connections between mother and child(ren), as well as the ability to help mothers to be active participants in the lives of their child(ren). When asked how WALC had impacted her relationship with her children, Sphinx, mother of two, stated, “... The things that I can do through WALC helps me to feel like I am still able to parent them.” Another respondent, Ayn Rand (White, mother of two), shared that the WALC program helped her son to be more focused on her during visits, which allowed for more interaction and bonding. That personal connection and interaction were more difficult to



achieve prior to her participation in the WALC program when their visits were taking place in the main visiting area with other inmates and their families.

Similar to the discussion above on the positive aspects of parenting in prison, the WALC program was mentioned as being chiefly responsible for providing participants with the opportunity to grow as a mom. From the birthday book program to the retreats, WALC allows these women to be active participants in their child(ren)'s lives to the extent that is possible within prison. According to Toni (33 years old), "It's given me the opportunity to be a mother with my children. I felt like before, with my son, I never had that opportunity. I now I have the opportunity to be the mother that I can be in here through WALC." When asked how the WALC program provided her the opportunity to grow as a mom, Andy, mother of two, said,

The programs, and being able to come back here and, you know? Have the retreats and, uh, the Skype calls or the phone calls or, just gives you more of an opportunity to be with your kid, you know? It's like, I have a lot of respect for this program because, because they want you to stay in your children's lives. They, they, I mean, when I got told I could Skype with my kid I mean, I'm like, "Are you serious? You're gonna do that for me? You're gonna, you're gonna, you're gonna help me be a part of my kid's life? That's freaking amazing! You know, I screwed up! This is my fault, but you're gonna help me?" and I really appreciate that.

An emphasis was placed on the opportunities provided by WALC to engage with her children, and that ability to have a second chance at being the mother that she wanted to be. Without those opportunities the path to her growth as a mother would be far more difficult with limited visitation and contact.

### ***Identification as a mother***

According to participants, the WALC program goes a step beyond helping them to develop and foster connections and an ability to be an active parent. The program also helps

women to identify as a mother, as told by Sphinx (White; 27 years old). “Um, WALC helps you to be Mom. It helps you to be able to participate; it helps you to be able to have that connectedness that you can lose when you're here.” This development and self-awareness comes through a multipronged approach: support, education and interaction. Although the support of program leaders and interaction between participants and their children was discussed frequently, a lesser but equally important role is played by the ability to equip participants with the skills needed to parent through the various programs that are offered. Examples of such tools include courses on child development, appropriate disciplinary measures for children and anger management. The importance of these opportunities was not lost on Ashley (White; 53 years old) and Sharon (White; 28 years old), both of whom stated that the WALC program gave them the resources that they needed to be better mothers, both inside prison walls and after their release.

### ***Home like environment***

Rather than the bleak setting that one imagines when asked to think of a prison visiting room, participants in the interviews instead described the WALC visiting area as comfortable and homelike. Belle (29 years old; mother of seven), a mother with a young son for whom she was utilizing the WALC program’s unique encouragement of pumping breastmilk through participation in the mother-infant bonding program, shared how the WALC visiting area has become a safe zone where families are free to interact and bond in a manner that isn’t possible in the cramped and noisy main visiting area,

Um, the prisoner thing is, is really pushed to the backburner because when our husbands and our family members come and our children come, we're not treated like, um, inmates. We're treated like mothers and grandmothers. Um, our children are all over us. Um, it's not like- I just came, like I said I just came from [another prison] and there I was a prisoner. I was a prisoner, and I was a number. Um, if we got out of line, if we held hands too long, if we did anything, our visit was terminated. Um, we sat in um rows, the tables

were like this but they were all lined up. Their mates sat on one side and the family sat on the other side... you got to give a quick hug at the beginning and a quick hug at the end. Here, we, we sit next to each other, you know? We can hold hands. Um, I hold my son the whole time and handle him. It's just, um, it really is a home like environment.

She continued,

I'm in a room with my husband and my son and I'm just spending time with them today. And it's not that I'm, I'm a prisoner, and that's because this is- if it was that I'm sitting out there with all the um other women and doing, you know prison visit then maybe it would be worse but it's different because I get this one on one time with my family and it doesn't seem like it's prison.

### **Parenting Readiness**

A question that provoked a strong and emotional response from many participants was that of their readiness to parent if they were released from prison today. Although many participants indicated that they were confident in their readiness to parent, others remained uncertain about their ability at this point in time. There were also a small number of participants in the sample who indicated that they would not be in a position to parent their children upon release until they had the opportunity to work on establishing stability and their self-growth first.

#### ***Ready to parent***

When asked if they would be ready to parent their children if they were released from prison today, the majority of participants within my sample indicated that yes, they would be ready. Participants May and Jasmine (White, mother of four) gave a very quick, definitive and enthusiastic yes when asked if they were ready to parent post release, whereas Lynn, mother of one, and Heather, mother of three, were more reserved and stated that they'd be ready to parent, but with the help of their parents. Heather (White; 34 years old) explained,

With my mom's help, with her assistance, I would be. Um, would I be able to just walk out of here and take them on full time without help? Probably not. Um, just because I can't, I can't get overwhelmed, and if I do, I think I'll be back here. you know? Um, I would and I wouldn't want to do that to them either, you know, uproot them and then just say "alright mom's out, let's go." It would have to be a transition.

Although the degree to which each participant identified as being ready to parent alone varied, a common thread was the excitement that they shared surrounding the possibility of being released from prison and becoming active participants in their children's day-to-day lives.

### ***Not ready to parent***

Although many participants in our study indicated that they would be ready to parent if they were released today, others did not believe that they would be in a position to parent their children full-time, either alone or with familial assistance. These women emphasized a need to focus on themselves first, as shared by Victoria (26 years old; mother of three). "...When I first get out I'm going to need to get on my feet and, you know, get myself stable enough to be able to adjust to that." Angela (24 year old mother of two) echoed Victoria's feelings of needing stability prior to parenting, "I would need stability first. I would need structure in my life to be gained before I could take that on." Both Angela and Victoria saw stability, in the sense of gainful employment and safe housing, as a means of proving themselves capable of parenting their children.

Whereas Victoria, mother of three, and Angela, mother of two, highlighted a need for creating stability and structure before taking on the role of full-time mom, Andy (34 years old) stated a need to reintegrate back into her son's life slowly as she learned to navigate both the activities of day-to-day life, as well as her son's special needs.

Being here is, it's really, it's easy. I mean, they force you to be responsible or you can not be responsible and set in seg. ...But, um, being out there, I'm gonna have to work a full-time job. ... And I'm gonna have to be able to get up in the morning and get him ready for work, or get him ready for school, me ready for work, make him breakfast, you know? Um, I want him to be in sports. I want him to utilize and, you know, take advantage of the things that children have so I'm gonna have to be able to get him to and from, you know? He's got his, his psychiatrist and his psychologist and his medications and counselors and this special school and... Plus he's got anger issues. I'm gonna have to take other parenting classes when I get out just to be able to deal with him when he freaks out, you know? I don't know how to do the special holds. I don't know to put him in timeout and not let him out, or when he runs out I don't know what to do to put him back in, you know? Um, no. I would not be ready. Would not be ready. I'm gonna have to reintegrate into, back into my son's life.

There was also a strong theme of self-improvement and a need to prove themselves within society by means of positive social participation, as emphasized by Michelle (White; 39 years old). "I've never been alone. I went from being a high school student to being a married wife to being a mother, you know? I never stood on my own two feet and I need to be able to prove to myself that I can do that. Um, and that I can create a stable environment for myself and my children." This desire to prove herself capable of being a successful member of society without relying on the help of others led Michelle to indicate that she would not be ready to parent immediately upon release.

### ***Uncertainty about readiness to parent***

Somewhere between some respondents indicating that they were ready to parent full-time and the realization of others that they weren't ready to parent, another group of participants indicated some uncertainty surrounding their readiness. These women experienced some contradictory readiness due to feelings of guilt about their past and their detachment from their

children prior to their incarceration. Ayn Rand, mother of two. “I was never really a mom until I came here, and now I have that sense of, I don’t know. Don’t get me wrong, I loved my children before, but I didn’t even love myself. So it was kinda hard to accept the fact that I was a mom,” she stated. This difficulty in the ability to see ones self in the role of mother was echoed by Michelle (39 years old). “I have a very hard time. I have a very hard time accepting, I guess, that I am still a mother because of where I am.” The separation caused by incarceration has led to this group of women distancing with the maternal side of themselves to some degree, as well as the development of uncertainty within themselves about their ability to be an active mother and positive role model in their children’s lives.

Other women discussed how they hadn’t had the chance to really be a mom yet, either due to prior bad decisions or the age of their children at incarceration. One respondent, Nicole (White; 33 years old), stressed that her incarceration had alienated her from the role of mother in her children’s lives in a sense because her own mother was now the primary custodian and decision maker for her children. This role reversal from mother and primary decision maker to someone with little say in their children’s day-to-day lives led some participants to experience co-parenting conflict and a sense of having no authority over their children. Nicole, mother of two, provided the following example,

You can tell at the visit this weekend she’s like Allison don’t need a dog. You don’t tell me what my kid needs. Uh, ya know? Like before, and it was whatever... if my, my mom didn’t want em to have it, they didn’t have it cause that’s who provided for my kids. Ya know?

Ayn Rand (33 years old) reiterated Nicole’s feelings of a lack of parental decision making. “I kinda, I don’t really feel that I have a lot of authority and control over my children’s lives. I kinda think, I really don’t, honestly.” When someone other than a child’s mother is the

primary caregiver a feeling of alienation and a loss of authority and control can develop when a mother is not able or allowed to make the day-to-day decisions for her child(ren). This sense of alienation and detachment can cause both mother and child(ren) to have attachment issues as a result.

Another source of uncertainty in regard to their readiness to parent post release appeared to be attachment issues stemming from their separation from their children. Shawna Taylor, 31-year-old mother of two, mentioned feeling unattached and as though she was not a part of her children's lives.

Up until recently, I still find myself as an inmate. Um, I knew I was a mom, but it felt like I wasn't because I was so diss.. I was so... unattached from them that I didn't feel like I was even a part of their lives. I mean this is when we were talking on the phone and stuff but I just didn't, I didn't feel a connection anymore.

Although the women in this category wanted to parent their children, their detachment from them made them uneasy. That uneasiness led to questions surrounding their readiness and if they would be making the right decision by taking the role of full-time caregiver away from their children's current caregivers. Putting their own desires aside, these participants wanted what was best for their children. As Luke (2002) said, "mothers do not stop being mothers because they have been convicted of acts that society finds abhorrent" (236). WALC helps participants to begin sorting out their self-identity as a mother, and in turn allows them to work through their feelings as they attempt to make decisions that are in their child(ren)'s best interest.

## Chapter 6 - Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the connection between participation in the WALC contact maintenance program at the Topeka Correctional Facility and its resulting impact on identity work. With societal expectations dictating that a women's role is to be the primary caretaker of her children (Snyder and Carlo 2001) and the increasing female prison population (Waren 2009; Vainik 2008; Phillips 2012), there is a gap in the research when it comes to the examination of how contact maintenance programs operate to facilitate and maintain an incarcerated mother's role as an active parent in the day-to-day life of her child(ren). There is also a gap in the research in regard to the role that such programs play in the development and sustainment of an incarcerated woman's identity as a mother (Hoffman et al. 2010).

Expanding on Celinska and Siegel's (2010) study that emphasized the role that incarceration plays on a woman's maternal identity and sense of self, this study examined not only the ways in which incarcerated mothers cope with separation from their children, but also how participation in a contact maintenance program impacts the development and sustainment of their identity as a mother within the prison setting. This study also explored the concepts of authentic or inauthentic identities. The motivation behind the display of an authentic identity, one that is stable and does not vary based on current environment (Goffman 1959), and an inauthentic identity, or one that is contextual in nature (Goffman 1959), is not always clear. It is possible that women who identify primarily as mothers either maintain the stable, authentic identity that they held prior to their incarceration or that they have grown during their incarceration, allowing the woman the opportunity to adjust her self-identification. In contrast, it is possible that those who identified as mothers first are expressing an inauthentic identity when participating in programs like WALC in order to garner benefits such as increased phone privileges and private visitation.



Future research should further explore the motivations behind participating in WALC to provide additional context to these expressed identities. Research on this topic is important if the development and implementation of such programs at other facilities across the nation is to be possible. Without such programs, incarcerated mothers will continue to be restricted to minimal contact with their children, often via short telephone calls or visits in cramped, loud visiting areas. Such limited contact is not conducive to the development and sustainment of the maternal bonds and identities that are vital to the emotional health and wellbeing of both incarcerated mothers and their children.

Through the use of Herbert Blumer's and George Hebert Mead's work on symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1994), this study examined the ways in which women within the confines of the Topeka Correctional Facility created, interpreted and defined their identity as a mother through their participation in the WALC program. Four themes emerged: personal identity, the impact of incarceration on parenting, the impact of the WALC program and readiness to parent. The degree to which participants identified as either a mother or an inmate as their primary identity varied in part on their security classification within the prison. Participants classified as either minimum or medium security tended to identify as a mother first, whereas those classified as maximum security tended to identify as a prisoner first.

Although parenting from behind bars was not seen as ideal by any of the participants, a theme that resonated throughout the interviews was the idea that coming to prison changed their life and gave participants an opportunity to be a better mother. Expanding on Celinska and Siegel's (2010) finding that incarcerated women may use the concept of motherhood as a central identity as a coping strategy to mitigate the physical separation from their children, this study found that participation in the WALC program helped participants to demonstrate their fitness as

a mother as a mother through interaction with their children. This increased interaction during their period of separation led participants to appreciate their loved ones more fully, which in turn served as a catalyst to their growth as people. By developing their confidence as mothers and facilitating and maintaining their role as an active participant in their child(ren)'s lives, participants indicated that they had a newfound desire to be and do better not just for themselves, but for their children as well. This finding supports that of Celinska and Siegel (2010), who found that incarcerated women employ the use of self-transformation, planning and preparation as coping mechanisms in an effort to grow as people and refocus on their priorities once they are released.

Despite that desire, parenting in prison is not without barriers as being incarcerated limits one's ability to be an active participant in the day-to-day operations of their child(ren)'s lives (Reed and Reed 1997). With physical proximity between a woman is housed and where her child is living and co-parenting tensions with their child's caregiver often limiting visitations (Reed and Reed 1997), being unable to attend school functions, help with homework or tuck their children into bed at night led participant's to report being harder on their selves when it came to examining past behaviors or preparing for the future. Some participants reported questioning their role as a mother as a result of this separation and the resulting strain in their social and emotional connections with their children.

The third theme that resonated throughout the course of the interviews was that of the impact of the WALC program. Through the ability to be more active participants in their children's lives by means of phone calls, the birthday book program and retreats, participants credited WALC with helping them to identify and grow as mothers. Supporting the findings of Loper (2006), this study demonstrates the ways in which involvement in such programs helps

incarcerated women sustain and nurture their relationship with their children despite physical separation and limited contact. The findings also support the findings of Celinska and Siegel (2010) by reinforcing the idea that programs that assist incarcerated women to invest in their image as mothers through education, encouragement and engagement allow women to better cope with theirs to their maternal identity while incarcerated.

The home like environment of these programs provides a comfortable place for families to interact without the noisy chaos of the general visiting area. Mothers and their child(ren) are able to focus on each other and experience the communication and interaction that is critical to the facilitation and development of not only their overall bond, but an incarcerated woman's identity as a mother as well. Further, a link is created between the incarcerated mother and the outside world, which can serve as a source of motivation for personal growth and change (Hoffman et al. 2010).

The final theme that presented itself throughout the study is that of readiness to parent. As Luke (2002) found, mothers do not stop being mothers simply because they are incarcerated. Their maternal identity and sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of their children remains despite their physical separation. While that maternal identity led the majority of participants to indicate that they would be ready to parent their child(ren) alone or with the help of their parent(s) if they were released from prison at the time of their interview, others did not believe that they would be in a position to engage in a parenting role. As Loper (2006) and Luke (2002) found, incarcerated women are more likely to have been arrested for low-level drug offenses than violent offenses. This history of prior addiction and subsequent attachment issues stemming from the separation from their children were cited as primary concerns surrounding their ability to parent for many participants. Several participants also cited a desire to create a stable home

life, as well as a need to prove themselves to society and their families, as reasons for their uncertainty.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Some limitations of the study should be noted. Due to the limited capacity of the program, only 34 interviews with limited racial and ethnic diversity were conducted. This small sample size makes it difficult to generalize findings across all racial and ethnic groups, as well as to inmates not participating in the WALC program. Further difficulty would be found in trying to generalize the findings of this study to other institutions. Additional research among inmates not participating in the WALC program, at other institutions and across a more diverse array of inmates would be needed to address the issue of generalizability.

Despite these limitations, this study fills a gap in the research on identity work within a prison setting. Prior identity work studies have largely focus on male offenders, and none have examined the role that participation in contact maintenance programs play in the development of one's identity as a parent. Additionally, this study provides insight into the success of the WALC contact maintenance program at the Topeka Correctional Facility and highlights the importance of such programs among incarcerated mothers.

### **Conclusion and Policy Implications**

Through investing in their self-image as a mother, incarcerated women begin to learn to cope with threats to their maternal identity during their incarceration (Celinska and Siegel 2010). Contact maintenance programs such as the Women's Activities Learning Center allow incarcerated women to sustain their identity as a mother despite their physical separation from their children (Loper 2006). This study examined the efficacy of participation in such programs and the development and sustainment of one's identity as a mother. A positive connection

between participation in contact maintenance programs and a pro-social mothering identity indicated the importance of establishing funds for existing and future contact maintenance programs, as well as promoting increased implementation and accessibility to such programs in women's prisons across the country. With a reported 108,866 women in prison as of 2012 (Carson and Golinelli 2013) there is a growing concern on the impact of incarceration and the resulting period of separation on both mother and child. Research such as this is important because the development and sustainment of a healthy mothering identity while incarcerated not only impacts the mother but the children as well. The fostering of meaningful connections between mother and child prior to release has the potential for future research into the connection between the development and sustainment of these connections and an incarcerated mother's subsequent potential for recidivism post release.

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## Appendix A - Interview Guide

### ➤ WALC Program Coordinators:

- Could you tell me about the WALC (Women's and Activities Learning Center) program?
  - Prompt: How are these programs funded?
  - Prompt: Are there subprograms within the WALC program? If so, what do they consist of?
- Who can participate in the WALC program?
- What are the procedures for enrollment?
  - What are the rules for continued participation in the WALC program?
- What motivated you to develop programs for incarcerated mothers and their children (Hoffman, Byrd, and Kightlinger 2010)?
- What do you see as the main benefit of contact maintenance programs in general?
  - What makes the WALC program unique from other prison based contact maintenance programs?
- Are there any assessment tools or reports that are used to evaluate the WALC program?
- Could you tell me about the changes that you see among the women who participate in the WALC program?
- What role does the WALC play in the development and sustainment of a woman's mothering identity, which refers to the ways in which she views herself as a mother and interacts with her children, among participants?

- Are there any challenges that you have encountered in the implementation of the WALC program? If so, what are they?

➤ **Inmates**

- **Introduction Questions**

- Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
- Can you tell me about your children?
  - Prompt: How many biological children do you have?
    - What are their ages and genders?
    - Do you have any non-biological children (i.e. step-children, adopted, etc.)? If so, what are their ages and genders?
- How often in the last month have you seen your children?
- How often in the last month have you received other forms of communication from your children?
  - Prompt: What were those other forms of communication?

- **Main Questions**

- How do you view your relationship with your children (i.e. positive or negative)?
  - Prompt: Do you feel like you have a good relationship with your child(ren)? Do you feel close to your child(ren)?
- I'd like to talk to you about you view yourself. Do you think of yourself as a mother or a prisoner first?
  - Why?

- How has your participation in in the WALC program impacted this view?

- **Ending Question**

- What are some things that are not currently being offered that might be beneficial in improving your relationship with your child(ren)?
- If you were able to leave TCF tomorrow, would you be ready to parent your child(ren)?
- If you were conducting this interview, what questions would you ask to understand issues about incarceration and mothering?