THE IMPACT OF THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT ON MOTHERS

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In a period when greater numbers of women are being sent to prison nationally and many treatment and educational programs in prison are being eliminated, this "insider's" ethnographic study of mothers incarcerated at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York analyzes the problems and potentials of a model reform-oriented prison for women. Although the infantilizing, punitive character of the prison and its programs undermines the mothers' agency and reinforces punitive parenting models, many women take advantage of the educational, vocational, self-help, and parenting programs available to undertake significant change and self-development, and to improve their relationships with their children and their role in society.

> I was brought to Bedford Hills in a police caravan the same day I was sentenced to 75 years to life. As I stared out the car window at the hills and sky, I wondered whether I'd ever again see that landscape. Finally, when we reached the prison gates, a voice over the police intercom said, "Final destination, Bedford Hills. This is where you'll die." That's been the question for me and probably all the women here ever since: Will I live or die here? (journal entry)

On October 28, 1994, the *New York Times* reported that a benchmark in U.S. history had been reached. For the first time ever, more than one million people were incarcerated in state and federal prisons across the nation, with an estimated additional one-half million people in local and county jails (Holmes, 1994).

These statistics are the result of social and political policies advocated by most campaigning politicians and a broad segment of the public, encouraged

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by media coverage of crime and violence (Nossiter, 1994). Along with calls for longer sentences come demands for harsher prison conditions, an end to education and treatment programs, and severe questioning of the rehabilitative goal of incarceration. This punitive political climate, along with pressures created by overcrowding and budget cuts, threatens the very existence of treatment/reform-oriented prisons with a pendulum swing back to custodial/disciplinary model prisons. But few people are thinking about the social costs of the interactive effect of this rising incarceration rate and the punitive trend in correctional policy.

Whereas public images of crime and prison are overwhelmingly focused on men, the number of women in local, state, and federal prisons and jails has also risen dramatically, tripling over the last decade to a national total of 90,000 (Applebome, 1992). Another oversight in the coverage of crime is the reality that 70% to 80% of women in prison are mothers. At the time of their arrests, most were the primary providers of their children. Moreover, a study of women in prison in eight states found that an estimated 9% of the women gave birth while incarcerated (Applebome, 1992). In 1982, there were an estimated 21,000 children in the United States whose mothers were incarcerated. Today, that number has increased to approximately 137,000 (Applebome, 1992).

Children are the unseen victims of a mother's incarceration. As more and more children line up outside the prison gates to visit parents, few are asking what happens to these children during their parents' incarceration. Are we seeing the next generation of prisoners? The future of these children is at stake in what their mothers do while in prison.

The shift from rehabilitation- to custodial-oriented prisons will have a particularly pernicious impact on those women's prisons that have focused on programs and treatment designed to address the particular problems affecting women in prison including drugs, family violence, parenting, and economic and social marginalization (Rafter, 1990).

This article examines one of those prisons: Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, New York State's maximum-security prison for women. I have been incarcerated at Bedford since 1983, serving a sentence of 75 years to life. This article grows out of research I conducted for my master's thesis in psychology, completed during the 11th year of my incarceration.

I analyze this prison environment through a particular lens: the experience of mothers, particularly long-termer mothers. I look at aspects of this prison's culture and social roles, rules, programs, and ways that women survive in prison, particularly in terms of their mothering identities and their relationships with their children. As a mother serving a life sentence, the issues I examine are intellectual and intensively personal.[1]

Before their arrests, many women had already experienced enormous conflicts between their desire to be good mothers to their children and their drug-taking and high-risk activities. Some felt they were doing their best for their families, given their social and economic conditions, whereas others had given up on themselves and their children. Regardless of the quality of their prior relationships, imprisoned mothers' relationships with their children are central to their identities, their affectional lives, and the crisis of imprisonment (Baunach, 1985; Lundberg, Sheckley, & Voelkar, 1975). Moreover, mothers' relationships with their children can be a major motivating factor for personal change while in prison.

I contend that despite the severe limitations of parenting from a distance, mother-child relationships develop during the mothers' incarceration and the quality of that relationship will continue to affect the well-being of these children, most of whom are at risk because of the marginalized social and economic conditions of their lives and communities.[2] For a prison to address this need entails both practical issues of enabling consistent contact between mothers and their children and empowering women to understand the social and psychological issues that brought them to prison.

To build new relationships with their children, women must undertake a great deal of self-reflection and growth. How does the prison encourage or discourage those changes?

The closed, punitive prison environment re-creates many of the dysfunctional family and social dynamics women in prison experienced in the past and can undermine a woman's sense of autonomy and responsibility needed to succeed as an individual on the outside and as a mother to her children. Nonetheless, the rehabilitative orientation creates opportunities that women draw on in diverse ways. Mothers trying to build meaningful relationships with their children are often motivated to take advantage of those elements to better themselves and their children.

THE PRISON

Bedford Hills was one of the first women's reformatories, opened in 1901 as a result of the women's reformatory movement's call for alternatives to custodial prisons for some women. Although the reformatory movement ended by 1935, many of its positive and negative legacies continued (Freedman, 1981; Rafter, 1990).[3] More recently, during the 1970s, prisoner activism at Bedford and the general reform climate that followed the Attica rebellion brought significant changes including educational and vocational programs and an influx of civilian staff and volunteers, replacing the insulated subcul-

ture based on prison families with a more socially aware and goal-oriented environment (Fox, 1984).

But this prison, like most, has already felt the impact of increasing numbers of prisoners and cutbacks in programs. For example, new federal and state legislation eliminating college tuition grants for prisoners is forcing the shutdown of Bedford Hills's college program. The rehabilitative goal that defines the ethos and atmosphere of this prison is now in jeopardy.

Throughout my research, I was struck by the contradictory ways in which women talk about the role that prison plays in their lives and relationships with their children. On the one hand, they describe prison as oppressive, belittling, deprivational, and destructive of mother-child bonds. On the other hand, many women say that prison saved them, that their relationships with their children were jeopardized long before they came to prison, and that they have been able to understand themselves and improve their relationships with their children while in prison. It seems that both are true.

"PRISON SAVED ME"

> Where would I be if I hadn't been busted? Probably dead. Everyone I was with out there is either dead of AIDS or in prison.
>
> I was in a prison within myself. The drugs controlled my life. If I'd been thinking about my child, I wouldn't be here today. . . . I loved my child. I did. But that's not what controlled me.

Why do so many women say that prison saved them? Many women feel that they were "out of control," caught in a cycle of drugs and violence that they could not break on their own. Prison forces that break and provides a time out from such destructive behaviors and driven activity as well as a space away from the pressures and problems women faced outside: drugs, violence, finances, housing, and child care. It provides time to reevaluate. And, for many women, it is an opportunity to live drug free.

> I never thought so much about things, about myself, my children until I got here. Who has time to think out there? Or the will? But in here, all those things you took for granted out there, you see in a new light. . . . Then you realize that you weren't really so free out there. (journal entry; student's comments in a college class)

Although women express concern over the impact of their incarceration on their children, many admit that their children had lost them before they

ever came to prison. A mother who lives in the prison nursery with her baby commented,

> I have two other children, and I love them all. But this is the first time I've really spent quality time with my baby, even if it is in prison. Why? Because I'm drug free. As miserable as it is in here, the hassles with the other women and officers and all, I just focus all my attention on my baby. With my others, I was always on a mission to get drugs. I didn't give them all they needed. (journal entry)

The prison environment at Bedford Hills provides more than a period of "removal" from society. Its educational, vocational, treatment, and self-help programs provide opportunities for women to reinvent and redefine themselves. In school and work, women develop skills and achieve greater self-awareness. The various programs—Alcohol and Substance Abuse Treatment (ASAT), Choices and Changes, Family Violence Program, parenting classes and mothers groups, Ministerial Services, AIDS Counseling and Education (ACE), Alternatives to Violence, and others—provide not only support but also alternative cognitive frameworks that women use to understand themselves and their lives.

For example, in the Family Violence Program (which recently lost its director and another staff member because of budget cuts) women are encouraged to draw connections between their experience of childhood abuse and their destructive and self-destructive behaviors as adults. Choices and Changes, a program exercise, encourages women to look at their lives not solely as events that happened to them but as a series of choices determined by circumstances and relationships that they can analyze and change. ASAT (also recently cut) takes a more traditional 12-step approach to treating addiction.

As useful as treatment may be, many long-termers say that the most important program for them was college.

> Besides the Children's Center and Family Reunion, the most important influence was college. With college comes maturity. . . . College makes you look at everything from a different perspective, a more mature perspective. It makes you use your head. After you use your head for 4 years of college, you don't stop. If you take psychology courses, you find yourself analyzing yourself all the time.

In achieving milestones in school and vocational training, by working (sometimes for the first time in their lives) and participating in volunteer

organizations and work, women come to experience their own efficacy and self-worth.

The administration of Bedford Hills has encouraged women to establish self-development programs and organizations to meet the needs of the prison population. For instance, many Parenting Center services and programs, which enable mothers to sustain their relationships with their children, were developed and are facilitated by inmate staff. ACE, a peer counseling and education program, was organized by inmates responding to the AIDS crisis. The Family Violence Program grew out of public hearings at which women testified about their experiences of family violence to judges, legislators, and other public officials.

But even the positive aspects of prison are suffused with the losses inherent in imprisonment, particularly women's sense of loss and guilt about their children.

> I grew up in prison. Even though I was in my 20s, I still came in a lost child. Now I can play a role as a mother. Incarceration can work for you. Not like I did at first. Now I feel like I need to educate myself and read and reach for the best. . . . Because of my daughter, I can't ever really say that prison is a positive force in my life. If I didn't have her, prison would be that. But nothing is worth the pain of being inside. Everything else can be dealt with, but then you know your child has no parent and you hear her say, "I want you, Mommy. Come home now."

Each woman's conflicting feelings of gratefulness and anger at the prison affect how she resolves feelings of self-blame and self-pity and how she does her time in prison.

INFANTILIZATION AND DEPENDENCY

When women arrive at Bedford Hills as prisoners, most often they are brought in a bus or police car, chained to other women being transported from a city or county jail to begin their sentences. They are herded into a building, stripped, and showered under the watchful eye of an officer, who makes sure that shampoo with de-licing soap is used, personal belongings are inspected (most are taken away), and used and ill-fitting prison clothes are provided. The newly arrived women are fingerprinted and photographed, given ID numbers and cards, and told they must carry them at all times or they will be "given a ticket." Women prisoners are given a rulebook with dozens of rules, and they are informed that they will be given a ticket and punished if they

break these rules. In time, women learn that what is on paper is very different from what actually happens. They are taken everywhere in a group, walking two by two, like elementary school children, to their housing units, to meals, to the doctor, feeling foolish and uncomfortable.

"Walk to the end of the fence and wait there." "Do not move until you are told to." "On the chow!" "Four at a time on the mess hall line, ladies." "No leaning on the walls." "Twenty minutes to eat; on the go back line!"

Prisoners with a minimum sentence of 6 years or less are likely to be transferred to a medium-security prison once finished with "reception processing." For those who stay, life improves as they acquire personal belongings, a job or school assignment, food to cook, and more freedom of movement. But the basic reality of powerlessness and dependency does not change. Women are told when to get up, when to eat, where to go. They must ask for their cell room doors to be opened and shut by the correctional officer. They are limited to 15 phone numbers, which must be approved prior to calling family and friends. If a woman's child goes to the hospital or has to stay with a neighbor, it can take days to get to a prison counselor to make a call to find out whether everything is all right. A woman can be moved from one housing unit to another if she is known to have an intimate relationship with someone on her unit. Sexual relations between consenting adults are prohibited.

Adult roles and responsibilities are taken away. Teachers often cannot teach, nurses are not allowed to work as nurses, counselors cannot counsel, and computer programmers will surely be kept away from any computers. The message is clear: Inmates cannot be trusted with too much responsibility; inmates are here to be corrected, to learn to accept authority.

> T. had been a special education teacher for 10 years. She was given a job as a teacher's aide. One day, she raised to her supervisor that several of her students should be tested for learning disabilities. He told her it was not her place to make such judgments. "But I'm a special ed teacher; I know that we are not meeting these students' needs!" "Well, in here, you are my assistant and you will do what I tell you to or I will write you a ticket." (journal entry)

And, of course, mothers can no longer be responsible for the day-to-day decisions and needs of their children.

> After a while, you get used to things here, and if you know how to carry yourself, you can get along. I'm in school and I feel good about that. Then one day, I found out that my son had a fight in school and they were threatening to throw him out. I couldn't get through to him on the phone and I couldn't talk

> to his teacher. When I tried to get to my counselor to help me get a call through, my officer wouldn't make the call. I had a fit, crying and screaming. Later, I felt humiliated. Here I was, trying to be a mother to my child and I was reduced to acting like a child. (journal entry; conversation with a neighbor)

Numerous historians and researchers have critiqued the tradition and current practice of treating women prisoners as wayward children, as distinct from men prisoners who are at least accorded adult status (Burkhart, 1973; Carlen, 1985; Chesney-Lind & Rodriguez, 1983; Dobash, Dobash, & Gutteridge, 1986).

> A therapist in the Family Violence Program noted that prison life was like a second adolescence. So she tries to make use of it, working with her clients on the unresolved adolescent issues which inevitably surface in this context. But, I object, what does one do, as a long termer, who cannot get to "graduate" into adult independence for 20 or more years? (journal entry)

Women who are able to construct a meaningful daily life still fear that things beyond their control will disrupt their efforts. For instance, women with short time are subject to sudden transfer.

> S. was devastated when she found out she was HIV+. She was terrified of anyone finding out. Finally, after months of depression, she went to ACE and joined a support group. Her biggest nightmare was whether to tell her teenage children. Finally, she decided to talk with her family on their next visit. But before that day came, she was transferred upstate, despite frantic efforts to "get her pulled from the draft." (journal entry)

Bettelheim (1960), discussing the impact on personality of the extreme helplessness faced by concentration camp inmates, noted that

> to be filled with impotent rage is a situation frequent in childhood but disastrous for one's mature integration. Therefore, the prisoners' aggressions had to be dealt with somehow, and one of the safest ways was to turn it against the self. This increased masochistic, passive-dependent, and childlike attitudes which were "safe" because they kept the prisoner out of conflict with the SS. But as a psychological mechanism inside the prisoners, it coincided with SS efforts to produce childlike inadequacy and dependency. (p. 131)

Although I hesitate to compare the situation in the camps to that in this prison, similar social-psychological dynamics are at play. It is very common to see prisoners hugging staff persons and calling them "Mommy" or tugging

on others' sleeves and asking for candy. Many women attach themselves to an older "mother" who cooks for, coddles, and scolds them. On the living units, one hears women horseplaying, giggling, and playfully hitting and yelling at each other, like kids on a playground.

But these same "kids" are mothers with children of their own. One wonders how they can turn back into adults on the walk from their living units to the visiting room to see their children. Many cannot. Often, I see a woman in the Children's Center, stern and remote from her child. Here, in the one situation where it is absolutely appropriate for her to play—as a mother with her child—she is unable to do so. She has to *act* like an adult even though she does not feel like one. She fears that if she plays with her child, she will lose her adult facade and her immaturity will be exposed to her child and family. Insecure and ashamed, she turns to the authoritarian parental mode to compensate for her felt inadequacies.

Another manifestation of infantilization and internalized aggression discussed by Bettelheim (1960) is the atmosphere of petty fights among women and squabbles with officers that lead to frequent punishments. Women try to compensate for their feelings of impotence and emptiness by filling the air with the din of daily battle, all too reminiscent of the argumentative, conflict-driven families in which many of the women grew up.

The women's infantilization and anger reinforce the tendency for mothers inside to relate to their children as siblings rather than as parents to children (La Pont, Pickett, & Harris, 1985) and to identify with their children around issues of powerlessness and frustration in the face of authority.

> Two days after coming to Bedford, I got a ticket. I developed a pattern of getting tickets for arguing with COs [correctional officers]. My first lock was for fighting. . . . Then, later, with my son, the family was treating him like he was a problem, that there was something wrong with him and he was hyperactive and inattentive and bad. He was getting pretty wild and unruly. . . . I identified with him . . . in terms of my being in the system. In here I was labeled bad, but that wasn't me. I was punished for things I didn't do. It was like we were going through parallel experiences, him with the family and me in here, and I told him that.

Such an awareness of going through parallel experiences can be useful in understanding and communicating with one's children. But if the mother feels undermined and infantilized, she is unlikely to be able to admit her own experiences. Rather than offering empathy and advice, she may strike out at her child, condemning the very behavior she cannot control in herself.

> I'm talking to a friend on the phone, but I can't hear because the woman on the other phone is screaming. She's yelling at her kid, who got suspended from school for fighting. "How many times have I warned you about losing your temper and getting in trouble in school?" But how can she lecture her kid about fighting when she herself just came out of lock for a fight? (journal entry)

A parent needs a sense of her own agency and efficacy to communicate to her children that they have alternatives to striking out in anger (Anthony, 1970; Benjamin, 1988). Children can pick up on and act out their mother's unexpressed feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

THE PRISON AS PUNITIVE PARENT

Many women whose lives were out of control feel relief from the restraints imposed by imprisonment. But although external controls may mask problems, they do not solve them. Some women become dependent on the controlled prison environment.

> I met B. during my early years at Bedford. A blond, upstate woman, she looked like she had just stepped off the farm. She pined for her daughter, whom she could not see often. She went to church and Bible study every day. She seemed such an innocent, I couldn't imagine how she had gotten caught up with drugs, and when she went home, I was sure I'd never see her again. Six months later, she was back, having gotten strung out again. Within weeks, she looked healthy again and was immersed in Bible study. Again she left and came back. She told me then that she felt defeated. "While I'm here, I don't even miss the drugs. I make all these promises to my daughter and I really *mean* them. But when I get out, I can't stop myself from using the drugs." (journal entry)

The prison—represented by officers, staff, and administration—acts as a "parent," imposing rules and sanctions, much like the model of a punitive parent who seeks to control the child through sanctions and punishments. This, ironically, can re-create some of the same problematic family and interpersonal dynamics many of the women experienced as children and adults, with the resultant negative self-representations and impulses. This is particularly significant given the large percentage of women in prison who report experiences of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse as children and/or adults (Grossman, 1985).

Men's prisons also operate on rules and sanctions. But the dynamic in women's prisons is often different because it is intertwined with infantilization and the emphasis on remolding attitudes and relationships (Humphrey, 1990). For instance, women describe instances when they have angered authorities and consequently been moved from choice living units or jobs but were told that these punitive actions were "for their own good."

The potency of such judgments accompanying punishment is greater because the same staff who impose punishment can also bestow rewards and security. The psychological pressure to seek approval—to be "good"—is enormous, and it is difficult for women to sort out whether they are acting out of their own sensibilities or for the sake of expediency.

Rafter (1990) argues that the early women's reformatories were effective in reshaping inmates' attitudes because they mixed punishment with kindness. This dynamic is present today as well. Just as a child gets caught between a parent's double message—grow up/don't leave me, love me/fear me—so too do women prisoners receive double messages: Take responsibility for yourself, but do not become too independent.

The child of punitive parents may feel rage at the capricious power of the adults yet also recognizes his or her dependency on them. Caught in that double bind, the child can either capitulate through dependent passivity or rebel reactively. Adolescent identity development can be forestalled when a youth feels pushed to either unquestioningly adopt the parents' values or reject them in total (Erikson, 1968). Prisoners who feel the imposition of prison authority get caught in a similar bind, becoming either submissive or reactively rebellious. Neither road enables women to become independent and self-motivated.

The control of drugs is one arena in which the limits of rule enforcement plays out. As one would expect, there are many rules and security measures to discourage drug use in prison. Although no one could honestly say that there are no drugs in prison, the majority of women in this prison use a lot less drugs than they did on the streets.

> When I was first put away, there were so many drugs in my system, I never thought about being a parent. I didn't take on those responsibilities of having those worries. . . . It took 3 years to be totally drug free and sit and know I was feeling again. My emotions were coming back. . . . It is scary to deal with the here and now or the before.

On the other hand, the control of drugs is used as a rationale for many repressive measures such as humiliating strip searches after visits, prison-wide lockdowns and searches, illogical limits on food and other items disallowed through the package room—all of which create resentment. In addition, there is little opportunity for women to talk honestly about their current drug problems and attitudes without feeling exposed.

> I remember an N.A. [Narcotics Anonymous] meeting where the guy said that we could talk freely because everything said would stay in the room, and I politely raised my hand and said, "That's a crock of shit." Just like that! And then everyone else, who'd been acting like it was okay, all started agreeing with me. I don't trust any of them.

Thus, even among women who stay drug free while in prison, many remain drug identified. Many women admit that they do not know whether they will stay away from drugs when they leave.

In a family, a parent may project her feelings of aggression onto a child, who then unconsciously acts out that role and is punished for it (Fraiberg, Adelson, & Shapiro, 1974). This defense manifests in the prison environment, where expectations of misbehavior may become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Humphrey, 1990). Many times, I have witnessed the impact of unspoken pressures put on women to maintain expected roles—to act the clown, the bully, the child—even when they try to change. However problematic such behaviors are, they serve a purpose in the overall scheme of things. Thus officers and peers will "push the buttons" of a woman who is known to be volatile to test and prod her into a confrontation. Such dynamics take place in any social situation, but they have more potency in the closed, coercive environment of prison, where they can dominate some women's patterns of relating (Goffman, 1961).

Many have noted that prison, with its myriad and maddening rules, fosters a society of rule breakers and antiauthority norms and values (Sykes, 1958). Many women limit their risk taking, but they will take opportunities to "get over" in terms of thwarting the net of rules and prohibitions. Getting over and "getting back" are a way of life in prison, fueled by anger at daily frustrations and humiliations and reinforcing women's attitudes that "the world owes" them.

> I did some pretty risky and self-destructive things when I first was here. Eventually, I stopped the worst of it. Why? The real question is what made me start. It was my attitude that the world owes me. The rebel in me had to prove that even though it wasn't allowed, I could do it. But when I did, I felt like shit.

How does this affect mothers and their children? It is difficult to help one's child handle rules and limits when one is caught up in those same conflicts. Defensive about her own ambivalence toward authority, the mother often compensates by automatically supporting the sources of authority in the child's life or by merging with the child's anger and frustration.

But how can mothers in prison successfully keep their children "in line" any more than the prison can keep *them* in line? Bettelheim (1960) argues

that "inner controls are built up only on the basis of direct personal relations, not by obeying society's demands" (p. 96).

Children of prisoners have a multitude of questions and feelings about whether and why their mothers committed crimes, which affect their own relationship to authority. Yet many mothers feel unable to talk with their children about themselves, their crimes, and the complex circumstances surrounding them.

> I keep coming back to the same thing. The one thing that mothers inside can give their children—and the most important thing that their children need from them—is the truth of their own lives. Not just in black and white, but with all the grays. (journal entry; civilian teacher who runs groups in the Parenting Center)

Women in prison live with profound guilt (Baunach, 1985; Lundberg et al., 1975), both for their crimes and for abandoning their children. The dynamics of rules and sanctions, capitulation, or punishment intensifies resentment and resistance, making it more difficult to come to terms with their past, for themselves and for their children.

The writing of psychoanalytic theorist D. W. Winnicott (1965) explores how children work through the conflict between their aggressive feelings and behaviors and their love and need for their parents. He argues that children need to experience the power of their own reparative gestures to develop a true internalized sense of morality. In addition, women in prison need to take genuine reparative action through their own self-motivated work, rather than from coercion, to face the challenge of genuine remorse and change. This may be the only way to feel strong enough to open up the sources of guilt with one's children and to share the complicated and messy "truths of our lives."

SUPPRESSION OF EMOTIONS AND THE THERAPEUTIC MILIEU

> Some days I can *feel* the depression as a tangible presence in here—in the lethargy of women half my age, in the hours of TV watching, in the lines of women walking down every night to get their "mental meds." . . . There are days when I don't want to walk out of my cell, to be hit by it, fearful that it will take me under its sway. (journal entry)

A mother's grief over her children is intensified by all the other losses in prison. Complicated by guilt and repressed anger, grief congeals into depres-

sion. But depression can endanger the fragile ties with children. Clinging to the awful sense of having "blown it" can prevent women from finding ways to help their children under these conditions.

For many women, it is the call of their children in the here and now that challenges them to emerge out of the fog of depression to face the demands of living.

> I'll never forget one visit with my child when I was particularly glum and distracted. . . . My child mentioned someone she knew who was on a visit. I replied that I hadn't noticed her. She responded, "That's right, Mommy. You don't notice a lot of things. Sometimes you barely notice me." Honey, that was like electric shock therapy. I knew then I had to work my way out from under.

It is never easy or quick. For mothers to let go of their preprison mothering roles and build relationships with their children that meet the children's needs, they have to be open to emotional buffeting. This runs contrary to many women's ways of coping by controlling their emotions and just "handling it."

But just as the punitive parenting model is reproduced by the prison environment, so too are women's own defenses against their emotionality fortified by the prison's attempts to "keep a lid on" emotional volatility. The pressure to suspend any expression of emotions (Baunach, 1985) comes in part from the management needs of the prison, in part from the fact that there are few outlets, and in part from peer pressure.

> When I got sentenced, I completely lost it. I broke down. They sent me to the hospital and put me on thorazine. When I got to Bedford, they kept me on thorazine. I was like a zombie. They wanted to keep me on it, to keep me like that. I told them I wanted to get off of it, that it was destroying me, and they threatened to write me a charge sheet if I stopped taking my medication. So I stopped on my own.
>
> When my father died, everyone came around to express their condolences. I was still in shock. When I really started feeling it, a week or so later, people acted surprised to see me looking pained and asked, "What's wrong?" In here, everything is a momentary event, and then you're supposed to snap out of it and get back into the groove.

The culture of a therapeutic community that pervades this prison plays a contradictory role in terms of women's psychological and emotional needs. A prisoner needs certificates of completion from appropriate treatment programs to gain release when she goes to the Parole Board. Program participation is also taken into account in granting privileges, such as living on the

honor floor or in the special honor cottage. Thus treatment does not merely coexist with the coercive aspects of prison; it is part of it. This situation calls into question the agency of the women to derive the benefits of therapy.

> B. was counting her certificates in preparation for going to the Parole Board. "I've got a certificate from ASAT, Reality House, Money Addiction, and Incarcerated Mothers group. By the time I go to the board, I'll have finished Down on Violence. Do you think that's enough?" (journal entry)

One might assume that the prevalence of treatment modalities provides emotional outlets. But some of the programs contribute to the suppressed emotional environment by offering prepackaged answers and quick fixes that can close down intellectual and emotional exploration. Their aim is to bring behavior under control; their message: When in conflict, step back and disengage. Interpersonal involvement and intimacy are suspect. One learns to function within a group without getting "caught in the mix." In my experience, this approach is deleterious to the real nurturing and connectedness needed for autonomy.

There are separate programs for separate problems: substance abuse, money addiction, physical and sexual abuse, violent crime, even Emotions Anonymous. Women go from one to the other. But such an approach reduces a person to the sum of her separate problems. Many longtime drug abusers have been through numerous drug programs over the years. They have gotten the lingo down and can go through each meeting "on automatic pilot." Others talk openly and fervently about themselves in their groups. Yet they shed those understandings as soon as they leave the meetings, reverting back to old habits and behaviors back on their living units.

The imprint of the therapeutic community and 12-step models, with its emphasis on behavioral-oriented change and formulated explanations and catchwords (e.g., codependency, self-esteem), extends beyond the programs to the general prison culture.

> Even my mother's group often ends with the A.A. [Alcoholics Anonymous] Serenity Prayer. The other day, one of the outside facilitators asked if anyone knew the Serenity Prayer well enough to lead us in it. A woman who lives with her baby in the nursery laughed and said, "Know it? We recite it so often in this place that I'm sure when my baby starts to talk, his first words will be the Serenity Prayer!" (journal entry)

On the other hand, some women say that they have been helped by the substance abuse programs by learning ways to control their behavior and

break through self-destructive cycles. Women who want to understand themselves and work through issues often find help in one or another of the programs. Different women find satisfaction from different sources. There is some diversity of approaches in addition to the 12-step approach including family-oriented therapy, groups for survivors of physical and sexual abuse, educational and support groups, and individual counseling. Some of the programs recognize explicitly that the source of problems does not lie solely in the individual but also in society. And almost all the women can name at least one therapist, officer, or staff person who has made a positive difference in their lives.

> There is so much emphasis on self and women get so self-involved in here, I think it's important to have groups. The group serves as a mirror for a woman, to be able to see what she's been carrying around inside her without being aware of it. Women can challenge each other in ways they can accept. One time, a woman kept talking about her anger at her mother for not protecting her as a child. Finally, other women said to her, "But isn't that the same thing you did with your child? Even though you hate her, you did the same thing." You could see the light bulb go on. She needed the group to hold up that mirror to become aware of herself. (civilian teacher/group leader with Parenting Center)

THE MOTHERING SUBCULTURE

Prisoners contribute to the norms and culture of prison life not only by reacting to the system but by bringing to it their own values and identities (Carlen, 1985). It is important to examine this aspect to understand how individuals survive and grow within a closed and coercive prison environment (Cohen & Taylor, 1972).

A significant dimension of prison culture grows out of women's identities as mothers. The mothering role provides women with a positive identity, a source of meaning, and a sense of community. The mothering culture encourages women to focus their energy on improving connections with their children and provides a means to share experiences, information, and legal expertise.

The mothering culture at Bedford Hills draws on the extensive resources and activities of the Parenting Center and other programs in this prison (daily visiting, a Children's Center playroom for mothers and children, monthly bus transportation, weekend programs and weeklong summer programs for children to spend intimate quality time with their mothers, civilian advocates,

peer counselors, groups and classes, and the Family Reunion Program's trailer visits) that enable many mothers to see their children regularly and comfortably; to communicate with caregivers and others such as teachers, therapists, and social workers; and to improve their relationships with their children. There is also a nursery unit, which enables selected women who give birth while incarcerated to keep their babies for the first year.

Not every mother has regular contact with her children. Some children are too far away, sometimes in other countries. Some mothers are not allowed contact with their children by courts or the caregivers, whereas others decide that it is better for their children not to visit or know that their mothers are in prison. Some have lost custody and parental rights. Despite the loss of contact, many remain invested in their children and their mothering identity and participate in the mothering subculture.

Women share photographs, letters, and stories that help them sustain a sense of connection when they are not able to see their children for long periods of time. Nursery mothers bring their babies to church. Friends get to know each other's children, much like women do on the outside. They talk over new developments, celebrate birthdays together on visits in the Children's Center, and give advice and comfort during crises.

> My connection to my son has been key to my survival; the sense of myself as a mother was key to my sanity. My relationship has been a major focus since I got here. I wanted to have a relationship to the Children's Center because of him, and I joined the Foster Care Committee. I took courses about children, like child psychology. The Children's Center, becoming close to other mothers—it is like a subculture in here that I became part of. When my son moved farther away, part of how I got through that was talking to friends who were going through similar problems.

On the other hand, the premium put on the "good mother myth" promotes a culture of denial in which women are loath to voice their feelings of guilt and failure as mothers and their fears about the future. Women spin out glowing stories of the things they did with their children before they were in prison, glossing over problems such as their drug addiction.

One pernicious way that the culture of denial is fostered is through the stigmatization of women with child-related crimes. Railing against them can be a means for a mother to ward off her own guilt and shame and deny her own aggression toward her children. In this polarized view of reality, some mothers are good and some bad, and "never the twain shall meet."

Whereas all fingers point accusingly at women convicted of crimes against their children, there is no stigma against drug selling. "I never sold to kids."

"I didn't force anyone to use drugs. If it wasn't me, they'd buy it from someone else." And yet, few mothers are not worried about their children using or selling drugs or dying in the drug wars raging in the streets.

The myth of the perfect mother discourages honest reevaluation of attitudes about punitive parenting, the drug culture, and what constitutes abuse and neglect.

> There is a story on the news about a woman arrested for child neglect after her toddler was found locked in her car in the parking lot of the office building where she worked. The women watching start to yell, "How could she do that?" "She needs to get locked up!" "She's lying about not having a babysitter; she was probably on crack!" (journal entry)

They have no sympathy for this single working mother. The idea that she could have been a good mother who made a bad choice under desperate conditions is too ambiguous to satisfy their absolutist standards. Their assumption that she is just another crack mother may provide some clues to their fury and judgments, for many of the women coming into the prison system during recent years were themselves "cracked out." Some feel that the most responsible thing they did was to leave their children in the care of grandmothers and other family members, who often continue to raise their children while they are in prison. But they also express fury at the caregivers for usurping their parental authority. Judgmentalness can take the place of the more difficult process of sorting through their conflicting feelings.

> The women are watching a program about an abusive mother. They are outraged and roundly condemn her as the lowest of the low. But these same women often talk about beating their children to "knock some sense into them." The next day, there is a news story about young teenage boys arrested for an attack on a younger child. The women are horrified. "Their mothers should have beat their asses." "They need to be locked up. They commit adult crimes; they should do the time." (journal entry)

Sometimes, I play devil's advocate. "But if you were beat and still ended up here, why do you think that's what these kids need?" I am always struck by the ironic parallels between the judicial system's and the mothers' faith in punitive justice: control through punishment. To be a responsible parent is to beat some sense into your child.

> Let me say this. We don't come to jail for taking care of our children. But that's how people talk. I guess it's to save face, to justify ourselves. . . . It's expected behavior in here to worry about our kids. How easy it is to say, "I miss my children." But what are they really thinking about? . . . I see all these women talking about how much they miss their kids, and then they leave and come right back. So how much do they really miss their children?

The answer to that question—"what are they really thinking about?"—is a complicated one. Most do love their children and yearn for the satisfactions they derive from their children. Split between guilt and denial, they may retreat into fantasized images of the past and future. But many brave their questions and conflicts to become better mothers.

TAKING CONTROL

For women to break the cycle of dependency, depression, and acting out, they need to find sources of hope and self-esteem through their relationships with their children and/or their work and achievements inside. In my experience, a woman's ability to take back some control over her life involves a combination of factors: support from family and friends, positive experiences and relationships in her daily life, peer influence, inner resiliency, and (strangely enough) time. As women get older, as they watch their children mature, they tire of an adolescent lifestyle and find a niche—be it their jobs, school, or programs—that provides them with a more mature identity and sense of purpose.

Prison does not save anyone; a woman must save herself. Although prison is hardly a preferable environment in which to do so, the people, vocational and educational opportunities, meaningful work, and counseling available at Bedford can empower and encourage her in that long, hard struggle.

To change, a woman must face her problems and what was wrong in her life. But she needs a sense of potentiality and to experience her strengths or else she can get stuck at the point of being a "victim." It is important to balance therapeutic programs with meaningful work and education.

To give up drugs and street life leaves a tremendous hole in many women's lives. People need something of value to take its place. Perhaps more than anywhere else, in college women reconceptualize themselves as educated professionals who can teach, counsel, work with computers, and so on.

> This time when I left prison, it was different [from leaving previous incarcerations]. It's rough, worse than ever, out here. But I'm not just an ex-con, ex-addict, ex-hustler. I'm not just an ex. I'm a college graduate. I can talk their talk and walk their walk. When I went for job interviews, I didn't have to hide where I'd been. I used it to my advantage, arguing that I was more useful

because I knew both sides of the life. (journal entry; conversation with a former prisoner)

Women find a sense of normality and positive self-definition working in the print shop, in the beauty parlor, and in building maintenance. They realize unknown potential working with the self-help programs, such as the Parenting Center and Pre-release Center.

> ACE gave me the chance to give back some of what I had taken from society. As a member of ACE, educating and supporting the women in this community, I felt I was doing something useful, something meaningful, solving problems instead of being the problem. In ACE, I was able to retrieve some of what I had lost when I entered prison: my humanity. (ACE member talking to a reporter)

Women remark that by helping others with problems similar to their own, they are better able to take responsibility for the toll of their past mistakes.

> When I get out, I want to work with and care for people with AIDS. I like the feeling of helping people. That's something I learned in here, working with the women in the hospital. I'm in for selling drugs. I wasn't any kind of big dealer. But still, when I see women in here with HIV, I thing about what I was doing back then and how it may have contributed to the epidemic. So now I want to do work that fights that epidemic. (journal entry; conversation with woman about to go to Parole Board)

For women in prison, freedom is a state of mind: the choice to nurture one's own integrity and connectedness. Women learn that to be their own person is not the same as "not giving a damn" or acting as if there were no consequences for one's actions. Their lives teach them that such reactive rebellion is as confining as passive submission.

To play a positive role in enabling her child to become an autonomous individual, a mother needs to realize her own agency and individuality.

> I'm watching my son start to hang out with the rough crowd, and I'm really worried. He says he's not taking drugs, but I wonder how long that can last if everyone around him is. Plus, they're all making and having babies, and I don't want that for him. I worry about peer pressure. So I try to talk to him about ways that I've felt pressure in here to do things because it's cool or expected behavior. I used to be down with it all. But then I decided I wanted to take my life back. Sometimes, it can get lonely. I tell him about that too. It's better to be the odd man out than to give up your life to the crowd. (journal entry; conversation)

Insofar as women integrate this lesson, they provide a powerful example for their children. Searles (1979) notes that "the crucial role in identity formation is the child's identifying with the parent's courage to be an individual" (p. 49). The courage of mothers in prison to live as free and committed people is a gift that they share with their children.

CONCLUSION

Bedford Hills Correctional Facility represents a very developed expression of a treatment model women's prison that incorporates many of the programs argued for by the "parity movement" (Rafter, 1990) to address the underlying issues and problems that most women in prison face. Analyzing it reveals some of the inherent contradictions between the goals of punishment and control and the goals of rehabilitation and sustaining family ties.

Infantilization and the push toward conformity undermine women's efforts to take responsibility as adults, mothers, and citizens. The deprivational and controlling character of prison gives rise to reactive, self-serving modes of adapting and reinforces punitive parenting models. The prison reproduces some of the same destructive relational dynamics that the mothers experienced within their own families. Treatment modalities, although diverse, operate within and draw authority from the coercive prison order. Such an approach to treatment can reduce the prisoner to a deviant child or passive victim rather than empowering her to take responsibility for herself and her family.

The repressive atmosphere in prison and the impact of multiple losses reinforce women's tendency to deny their emotions. Women turn their grief and anger against themselves, sinking into depression or getting swept up into petty fights and trouble. It is far easier to seek relief in quick fixes through medication or prepackaged therapeutic answers than it is to undertake the difficult process of coming to terms with themselves and their children.

Despite these problems, many women, particularly long-termers, struggle to actualize themselves. They build positive relationships with their peers, staff, and volunteers that help broaden their worlds. They educate themselves and reflect on their past and present. They undertake meaningful work and rebuild relationships with their children and other family and friends outside the prison.

In prison, where external authority has such power over one's life and group cohesion can take precedence over one's own integrity or connection to others, it takes courage to define one's own course and nurture one's own individuality. A mother's relationship with her child often inspires such an

effort. By doing so, the mother offers the child an example with which he or she can identify.

Women's ability to accomplish this rests, in large part, on the programs, resources, and people in this prison because of its explicit commitment to rehabilitation. Women are also encouraged in their efforts by the values expressed by staff and many inmates that prioritizes striving for growth.

The current punitive trend in corrections would eliminate any pretense of rehabilitation and focus on isolating "criminals" from society and punishing them for longer periods. This move toward retribution is in part based on an illusion: that when one locks up perpetrators, they no longer affect what happens "in society." But women in prison are not isolated individuals. They continue to relate to and affect their families, communities, and society. A whole new generation will be affected by current policy and will more likely be swept up into the cycle of powerlessness, marginalization, and anger that gives rise to drugs and violence and retribution. The interests of society are better served by women using their time in prison to better themselves and to help others.

Just as women in prison need to accept emotional and intellectual complexity to wrestle with difficult and painful issues, so too must policymakers and the public forsake the primitive satisfactions of vengeful "us against them" simplicity to face the complexities of prisons and prisoners.

Although I recognize the limits of rehabilitation-oriented prisons, they can be of benefit to prisoners. And yet, when I see the qualitative impact of education, training, therapy, and meaningful work, I wonder how many of these women's lives could have been turned around if they had had access to such resources before coming to prison. Our intellectual openness to complexity needs to include a willingness to question the efficacy of prison and punishment as the only solution to crime.

NOTES

1. In my research conducted in 1991 and 1992, I used ethnographic methods of participant observation, journal keeping, and semistructured interviews to explore the experience of long-termer mothers at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility (Clark, 1993). My work focused on the interior life of the mothers and their relationships with their children and families before and during incarceration. For purposes of my research, I considered a long-termer anyone with a sentence of 8½ to 25 years or more. Under New York State sentencing laws, one has to serve the full minimum sentence before being considered for parole and can be held up to one's maximum sentence. Of the eight mothers I interviewed in depth (from 6 to 12 hours over three to six sessions), seven had sentences of 15 years to life or more and one was serving 10 to 20 years. All had been in prison at least 7 years at the time of our interviews. Although the group

was diverse racially and in terms of age, these women were not a representative sample of the population. They were "survivors" who had sustained relationships with their children and achieved educational and other accomplishments during their incarcerations. I included myself as a subject, drawing on personal writing and letters. I also spoke with several staff members. Since completing my thesis, I have interviewed several more mothers, including two who have no contact with their children and three more recent arrivals, and I have continued to keep an observational notebook. Unattributed quotes in this article come from my interviews, whereas those attributed to "journal entry" represent more informal conversations and observations. I thank Hans Toch (1971), whose article, "The Convict as Researcher," first challenged me to recognize the potential power of my "insider's view" as a prisoner-researcher.

2. Although my research only tangentially touches on the experiences of the children of incarcerated mothers, I have been struck, over the years, by the spontaneous yet determined efforts by children to connect with, be nurtured by, and know their mothers despite separation and other problems. Ellen Barry, who has worked with incarcerated mothers and their children in California, remarks that children sometimes go to great lengths in attempting to deal with the complexities of being parented from prison. These children want to remain connected because although their mothers are in prison, they are still their parents (Muse, 1994). For a review of the literature on the impact of parental incarceration on children, see Johnston (1992). This article does not explore the role of the caregivers who play a crucial role in the children's and mothers' lives and in shaping the mother-child relationships. Understanding of incarcerated mother-child relationships is not complete without addressing their experience and perspectives.

3. See Freedman (1981) and Rafter (1990) for extensive histories of women's prisons. Whereas Freedman's view of the early women's reformatory movement emphasizes its progressive and feminist aspects, Rafter argues that reformatory policies and legacy were a double-edged sword in terms of infantilization and differential treatment of women prisoners, the social control functions of reformatories, and the harsher regimes faced by most Black and foreign-born women in custodial prisons. This historical debate reflects similar debates over the contradictory functions of prison in terms of punishment and rehabilitation (Carlen, 1985; Dobash et al., 1986; Foucault, 1979; Sullivan, 1990).

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