Doing mothering from prison: using narrative to explore the experiences of participants in a mother-child support program

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Doing mothering from prison: Using narrative to explore the experiences of participants in a mother-child support program

by

Betty Chamness Trost

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Family and Consumer Sciences Education

Program of Study Committee:
Beverly Kruempel, Major Professor
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Sally K. Williams

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2006

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation of

Betty Chamness Trost

has met the dissertation requirements of Iowa State University

Signature was redacted for privacy.

Major Professor

Signature was redacted for privacy.

For the Major Program
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the women, children, and families affected by Storybook Project of Iowa.
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ABSTRACT

Qualitative research was conducted at a Midwestern state women’s prison to explore how six incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women created their mothering subjectivities prior to their imprisonment. It also investigated how their mothering subjectivities were affected by their experiences in the prison’s intervention programs specifically with the Storybook Project of Iowa: a mother-child support program that focused on literacy. This feminist narrative research explored how prison intervention programs, when coupled with the mother-child support project, transformed the women’s understandings of themselves and their mothering. This transformation was aided by the women’s self-reflective use of narrative through a series of three interviews. The study has implications for programming in women’s prisons, advocating the use of intervention programs along with mother-child support literacy programs. Through their experiences with these programs the incarcerated mothers rebuilt or nurtured relationships with their children, connected with family members caring for their children, improved their literacy skills and those of their children, reconsidered their mothering identity and improved their perception of self, and through interactions with the program’s volunteers acknowledged the community’s support of them and their children. In addition this study has implications for reducing recidivism of incarcerated mothers through the women’s improved relationships with their children and family members.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Background

Throughout this study of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated mothers, I have been interested in how women do mothering from inside the prison and how their experiences in prison and with a mother-child support program affected their mothering. I believe the most telling way to gather this information is through the women's stories - their narratives.

Storytelling and Narrative

Storytelling is an age-old form of passing down information about ourselves, our family, our culture, and our world. Often the words storytelling and narrative are used interchangeably. Rossiter (1999) clarified this, “Narrative in simplest terms has to do with stories,” and “Narrative is commonly used as another term for story” (p. 77). Human beings organize and make meaning of their experiences through narrative, through the stories they tell. Rossiter added,

Stories and storytelling are pervasive in human experience, communication, and symbolic activity. If we listen to ourselves in everyday communication – around the dinner table, from the pulpit, in the therapists office, in the classroom – we can hear ourselves in the act of storytelling. Although our everyday stories may be partial or fragmentary, the narrative structure of our meaning making is apparent. (p. 78)

M. Carolyn Clark (2001) said the narrative process is the “…storying of our experience” (p. 83) and she talked about narrative as telling stories about things that
happened to us or others, "real or imagined" (p. 87). She added, "The underlying purpose of narrative...is to enable us to make sense of our experience" (p. 87).

In "The Call of Stories" (1989), Robert Cole, in his venerable text on listening to stories as a psychiatrist working with children, clarified storytelling in this way:

We all had accumulated stories in our lives, that each of us had a history of such stories, that no one's stories are quite like anyone else's, and that we could, after a fashion, become our own appreciative and comprehending critics by learning to pull together the various incidents in our lives in such a way that they do, in fact, become an old-fashioned story. (p. 11)

I agree with Cole (1989) that we do "...become our own appreciative and comprehending critics" (p. 11) by telling our own stories. And I believe that telling their stories helps incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women come into a new form of being in how they reframe their past, their present, and their future (Cole, 1989; Lawless, 2001). Elaine Lawless advocated that this form of narrative has the potential to be healing. She argued:

The telling provides a kind of recollecting of the parts of her "self," a making sense of the past, restructuring of what seems to be disparate parts of their being into the construction that is now the "I" of her voiced narrative. Her voice, then, becomes the embodiment of her "self." I see this act of voicing the self as a healthy one for any one of us. For, otherwise, we must carry around in our mind, in our consciousness, in our flesh and our bones, those disembodied, separate encounters. The telling becomes the glue to holding
some of our memories together to create a newly constructed holistic self.

(2001, p. 6)

The use of storytelling is as old as human history, and new stories have yet to be told.

Women in Prison

Women who are mothering or have mothered from prison have stories to tell that are important for us to hear. They represent a vulnerable group of survivors. According to Harlow (1999), 57.2% of the women who are incarcerated in state prison systems reported that they experienced physical or sexual abuse prior to incarceration. In another study, 46% of incarcerated women were the only parent living with their children prior to arrest (Mumola, 2000). In 2000, 40% of all single mothers in the United States lived at or below poverty level (Caiazza). According to Mumola, prior to their arrests, mothers incarcerated in state prisons were more likely the primary caregivers for their children (64%) than were fathers. Women’s incarceration creates unique concerns about the welfare of their children since they typically have always been the primary caregivers. When men go to prison the children most often remain with their mothers; when women are imprisoned their children frequently have no parent to live with. While incarcerated, women try to maintain connections with their children. Mothers (78%) were more likely than fathers (62%) to report some kind of monthly contact with their children, with 60% of mothers reporting at least weekly contact, compared to 40% of fathers (Mumola).

Mothering from Prison

In Sandra Enos’ book “Mothering From The Inside: Parenting In a Women’s Prison,” she stated, “Motherhood is distinguished from other social commitments, not only by how much is committed but by what is committed to parenthood” (2001, p. 26). Motherhood
involves the ultimate responsibility for children. McMahon’s research (1995) focused on how becoming a mother is transforming for women and how motherhood is actively constructed by women. She suggested that this ultimate responsibility for children equals a mother’s moral worth. McMahon defined two distinct categories of motherhood: 1) the status of “being a mother,” and 2) taking on the responsibility and adequately performing the tasks involved related to “doing mothering” (1995).

Incarcerated women often hold the status of being a mother, but frequently struggle with doing mothering due to the barriers related to their incarceration (Enos, 2001; Bernstein, 2005). Those who care for their children while they are incarcerated are often other family members or foster families (Bernstein, 2005). “Doing mothering” while incarcerated is very difficult for mothers in prison (Enos, 2001). They suffer what Sykes (1958) called “the pains of imprisonment.” The “pains” that women experience involve family relations, specifically separation from children (Bernstein, 2005; Henriques, 1982; Kiser, 1991; Neto & Bainer, 1983; Stanton, 1980), the loss of the maternal role, and even the loss of legal parental rights to their children (Bernstein, 2005).

Incarceration not only has an immediate impact on the current relationships of women prisoners with their children but can also create problems for them upon release (Bernstein, 2005; Sobel, 1982). The level of contact maintained between imprisoned mothers and their children is important to the strength of the family upon the mother’s release (Beckerman, 1989; Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Girshick, 2003; Johnston, 1995; McCarthy, 1980; O’Brien, 2001; Sharp, 2003; Travis & Petersilia, 2001), but visiting their incarcerated mothers is difficult for children. In general, women’s prisons are located in rural areas, often 100 miles from the children’s homes, making it difficult for them to visit their mothers (Bernstein,
2005; Bloom & Steinhart, 1993). And, to make it more problematic, children’s caregivers are sometimes reluctant to allow visitation (Bernstein, 2005; Bloom & Steinhart, 1993).

There are programs in the United States to help incarcerated women stay connected to their children. Morash, Bynum, and Koons (1998) conducted a study that identified a number of programs to facilitate mother-child visitation. These accounted for about half of the parenting programs at institutions. Girl Scouts Behind Bars (Girl Scouts of America, 2003), Mothers and Their Children (MATCH) Program (Sharp, 2003), and Reading Family Ties (Girshick, 1999) are examples of these types of programs. Mother-child support programs work to increase the bond-building between mother and child. These bonds are important for the social and emotional health of both parties throughout the mother’s incarceration. The programs have the added benefit of easing some of the guilt the women feel (Cranford & Williams, 1998) at becoming separated from their children, thus increasing the interconnectedness of the mother-child relationship through the mother’s incarceration.

These programs also strengthen the larger family unit. In each of them, other family members or caregivers are involved to either bring the child to the prison to participate in the program with the incarcerated mother or to facilitate the program on the outside with the child. Either scenario builds and/or maintains relationships with outside family members that the inmate mothers can draw on when they are released to the community (O’Brien, 2001; Richie, 2001). Without programs like these, families would be less prepared to welcome the inmates back into the family and inmates would be less prepared to participate in family life (Travis & Petersilia, 2001). According to Girshick (2003):

These programs’ value lies in the sense the mother may feel about her worth as a parent. That she can mother and mother well, that she is vitally important
to her family, gives a sense of accomplishment and a sense of self that children need to feel from parents. Prison programs can help restore or even create a new sense of self. In this way, an inmate can leave stronger for her children and the well-being of her family. (p. 179)

There is a critical need for rehabilitation and reintegration support for prison inmates upon release from the penal system (O'Brien, 2001; Travis & Petersilia, 2001). Since 1973, the per capita rate of incarcerated women has increased more than five times, while the support for inmates released into communities has not kept pace (Ekstrand, Burton, & Erdman, 1999). This has caused high rates of recidivism in the prison system with inmates leaving fractured families and broken social networks behind, making successful reentry into the community and their families difficult.

Women who are incarcerated frequently have led lives of abuse, economic and educational deprivation, and unstable early and adult family relationships (Bernstein, 2005; O'Brien, 2001). Often they are born into, move into, or marry into cycles of abuse and powerlessness (Lawless, 2001). They are mothers at early ages with little family or economic support. Mother-child programs in prisons can make an impact on the lives of those involved, transforming them by building their self-esteem as individuals and mothers and providing some measure of guilt-relief. In prison, mother-child programs provide the women with an opportunity to reconnect with their children and families in a healthy way. If these programs involve books, they have the added benefit of boosting the literacy of all involved parties.

In a large Midwestern women's state prison, a mother-child support program known as the Storybook Project of Iowa has been in place since 1998 and involves volunteers recording inmate mothers' voices as they read children's books onto tapes. The volunteers
then mail the tapes and books to the children. This project allows mothers and their children to reconnect each month over books and tapes. For this study, I interviewed women who were currently involved in this project or had been involved prior to their release from the institution.

This research represents a unique study of a mother-child program that has not been explored in the literature on mothering and motherhood while incarcerated or after release. Of perhaps equal significance is the nature of the study, where women come into a new understanding of themselves and find a measure of healing through being asked to tell their stories (Lawless, 2001). The three aspects of this research are: 1) the women reading stories to their children through the Storybook Project, 2) the women telling their stories to me of mothering, motherhood, and the project, and 3) the stories I tell about them through the analysis of their narratives. In this dissertation I have used the feminist narrative approach and the research literature related to abused and incarcerated women and to mother-child support programs to anchor my analysis of these women’s stories. The final three chapters of this dissertation are organized as follow: in chapter four I will share the women’s perspectives of how they were mothered as children and how they mothered before they were incarcerated; in chapter five I will discuss how their incarceration affected their abilities to do mothering from inside, explore how their involvement in the prison intervention programs affected their mothering identities, and learn the affect of the Storybook Project of Iowa on their mothering; and in chapter six I will summarize this study in terms of the implications for the women’s healing through the use of narrative and will offer policy implications and recommendations.
Statement of the Problem

Although there are a number of mother-child support programs in place in women’s prisons (Morash, Bynum, & Koons, 1998), there is no reference in the literature to indicate that narrative research has been conducted on any of these programs. Certainly there has not been any research conducted on this specific program. There is a need to listen to these women’s stories of mothering, giving them an opportunity for reflection through the telling, and giving us an opportunity to listen while situated in the feminist narrative research literature with regard to inmate mothers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the narrative and inmate mother literature by analyzing incarcerated and formerly incarcerated mothers’ stories of mothering and motherhood while involved in a mother-child support program. In particular, this narrative analysis applied Pamphilon’s (1999) “Zoom Model” and coupled this with feminist narrative methodologies. Feminist narrative methodologies include three goals to inform the research: 1) individual lives are the primary source of data; and 2) “narrative research is concerned with deconstructing the ‘self’ as a humanist conception, allowing for nonunitary conceptions of the self” (p. 310); and 3) “using narratives of the ‘self’ as a location from which the researcher can generate social critique and advocacy” (Bloom in Merriam, 2003, p. 310). In sum, the aim of this study was to analyze incarcerated mothers’ narratives to learn how they understood mothering, how their understanding evolved through their prison experience with intervention programs and with the Storybook Project of Iowa and to provide the women with an opportunity for reflection through the telling of their stories.
Research Questions

1) Analyze incarcerated mothers’ narratives to learn how they understood mothering.

2) Explore how their understanding evolved through their prison experience with intervention programs and with the Storybook Project of Iowa.

3) Provide the women with an opportunity for reflection through the telling of their stories.

Definitions

Storytelling: Interchangeable with “narrative” (Rossiter, 1999).

Narrative: Telling stories about things that happened to us or to others (Clark, 2001).

“[H]ow we tell our stories rather than what is told. How we tell our stories, the narrative form, becomes a window to ways of knowing” (Munro as quoted in Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995, p. 115). Making meaning of our experiences through storytelling.

Being a mother: That of giving birth to children (McMahon, 1995).

Doing mothering: Taking on the responsibility and adequately performing the daily tasks related to nurturing and caring for children (McMahon, 1995).

Subjectivity: “The conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (Weedon as cited in Bloom, 1998, p. 4).

Nonunitary subjectivity: The feminist approach to subjectivity is that a woman’s self or life is multiple, flexible, evolving and active and “continually in the process of production within historical, social, and cultural boundaries” (Bloom, 1998, p. 4). The self is not a “fixed entity...but an unfolding story” (Rossiter, 1999, p. 62).
Storybook Project of Iowa: At the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women, the Storybook Project of Iowa has been in place since 1998 and involves inmate mothers recording their voices as they read children's books onto tapes each month. Volunteers operate the tape recorders and mail the tapes and books to the children. Since the project's inception on July 6, 1998 over 7,000 books and audio tapes have been sent to more than 600 children in the past seven years. Six hundred mothers have read. Twenty trained volunteers have given an average of more than 750 hours of time each year. This project is a not-for-profit organization with a 501(c)(3) tax status. It is funded by private foundations, individual donations, and local and state grants. It is governed by a Board of Directors made up of professionals with experience with incarcerated women, literacy, parenting education, and an individual who has been incarcerated and involved in the project. The project has several goals: 1) strengthening the mother/child relationships, 2) enhancing literacy through reading books aloud, 3) increasing the women's self esteem as individuals and mothers, 4) reducing recidivism through nurturing the family relationship, 5) assuring the women that they are important to the outside community.

Mother's Support Group: A program at the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women where mothers meet weekly with a volunteer to discuss their mothering concerns and issues and plan activities for Kid's Day.

Kid's Day: On the third Sunday afternoon each month the children and the mothers involved in Mother's Support Group visit in a classroom and in the gymnasium without the supervision of corrections officers or a family member.

Victim Impact Class: A class at the prison for inmates whose crimes have involved a victim. In this intense course the prison counseling staff encourages the women to take
responsibility for their actions through engaging in group counseling, reflection, and journal writing.

Significance of the Study

The Storybook Project of Iowa had been in place for almost eight years. Up to this time only anecdotal evidence of the impact of the program on the women had been collected. This research represented the first study conducted on this program and provided qualitative information of how women created their mothering subjectivities and how these were impacted by their experiences in the prison’s intervention programs and the Storybook Project of Iowa. This research explored how prison intervention programs, when coupled with a mother-child support project, had the power to transform women’s understandings of themselves and their mothering. The study has implications for women’s prison programming, advocating the use of intervention programs along with mother-child support literacy programs. When these programs were part of incarcerated mothers’ prison experience the women rebuilt or nurtured relationships with their children, connected with family members caring for their children with implications for reduced recidivism, improved their literacy skills and those of their children, increased their self-esteem, and through volunteer participation acknowledged the community’s support of them and their children.

Assumptions

When listening to and analyzing the women’s stories, I was not concerned with the ‘factual’ nature of their narratives. It did not matter where the truth was in these stories. Rather the point was how they chose their stories, how they organized them, and how they told them. As Elaine Lawless said, “The act of asking for their stories provides a way for them to ‘speak’ their way out of the deadlocked pattern in which they may find themselves”
(2001, p. 10). However, I recognized human nature for what it was in that people manipulate situations to suit themselves best. As I listened to their stories I always assumed that they told their stories with sincerity.

I came into this research with other assumptions. As a volunteer, through anecdotal evidence I had gathered informally over time, I believed that the Storybook Project of Iowa was having a positive impact on the women and their relationships with their children. I believed that providing the women with opportunities for sharing their narratives would allow them to critically reflect upon their mothering in the past and to guide their actions in the future.
CHAPTER 2-REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Storytelling and Narrative

There are three aspects of this research: 1) the women reading stories to their children through the Storybook Project, 2) the women telling their stories of mothering, motherhood and the project to me, and 3) my telling stories about them through the analysis of their narratives. The mothers involved in this study participated in the Storybook Project of Iowa by reading stories to their children to express their love while separated by prison walls. Recorded onto audio tapes and mailed to their children with the books, the mothers’ stories circumvented the prison’s razor wire and locked gates, the fee-based time-restricted phone calls, and the supervised visits in the visiting room. These stories were sent to their children and were listened to over and over in their bedrooms and bathrooms while they prepared for school or took their evening baths, and were heard in the cars of relatives or caregivers as they were driven on errands or out to the prison for visits. These stories were used as a foundation for follow-up telephone calls, book reports, school reading assignments and competitions, and as conversation starters during the monthly Kid’s Day activities.

The second aspect of this research was the women telling their stories: stories of how they were mothered, how they constructed motherhood and mothering, and how their mothering evolved while they were incarcerated and involved in the Storybook Project.

Storytelling is an old and treasured form of self-expression. In “Women Escaping Violence: Empowerment Through Narrative,” Elaine Lawless called it a “living, breathing, dynamic act” (2001, p. 15). She added, “Each told narrative is different from the other times it has been performed, and ... storyteller and audience work together to enact the telling of a
narrative that is vitally important to the community" (p. 15). Each time the story is told it evolves to suit the teller and the audience.

People organize and make meaning of their experiences through narrative, through the stories they tell. M. Carolyn Clark (2001) stated that the narrative process is the “storying of our experience” (p. 83), and wrote about narrative as telling stories about things that happened to us or others “real or imagined” (p. 87). She added, “The underlying purpose of narrative...is to enable us to make sense of our experience” (p. 87).

Elaine Lawless illustrated how popular the use of narrative for understanding has become by listing the following book titles:


It is clear from the titles of several of these books that feminists and women’s studies scholars have embraced the idea of narrative “to hear and honor the neglected, ignored, and dishonored stories of women” (Lawless, 2001, p. 16).

Lawless (2001) used narrative as she gathered the oral life histories of four women at a safe shelter. Aside from learning about lives of domestic violence, her research illustrated how the telling of women’s stories helped the narrators to develop their sense of self. She
argued, "we tell our stories to 'save our lives,' recognizing that telling our stories is a positive, therapeutic act that aids the storyteller in trying to make sense of a life that otherwise might appear too fragmented, purposeless, or chaotic" (p. 16). Through her research she clarified how the "very act of telling their stories, and our own, is the significance of the project" (Lawless, 2001, p. 8). She added, "It is what we can learn about the significance of speaking, through the act of telling our story, that becomes the significant moment, the now of the process" (p. 8).

I believe that telling their own stories helped incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women come into a new form of being in how they reframe their past, their present, and their future (Cole, 1989; Lawless, 2001). It provided them with opportunities to consider who they are in all their different "selves" and roles in all their subjectivities.

**Being a Mother and Doing Mothering**

In 1976 Adrienne Rich published "Of Woman Born." Twenty-five years later Andrea O’Reilly (2004), in her examination of how Rich’s work had informed and influenced the way feminist scholarship thought and talked about motherhood, described Rich’s book as "the first and arguably still the best feminist book on mothering and motherhood" (p. 1). According to O’Reilly and the authors in her edited text "From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich’s Of Woman Born," the book has had a far reaching impact on feminist thought on motherhood.

In her feminist text, Adrienne Rich (1976) distinguished between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: "the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that
potential - and all women - shall remain under male control” (p. 13). In discussing these two meanings O'Reilly added,

The term “motherhood” refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word “mothering” refers to women’s experiences of mothering that are female-defined and centered and potentially empowering to women. The reality of patriarchal motherhood thus must be distinguished from the possibility or potentiality of gynocentric or feminist mothering. In other words, while motherhood, as an institution, is a male-defined site of oppression, women’s own experiences of mothering can nonetheless be a source of power. (2004, p. 2)

Martha McMahon’s text “Engendering Motherhood: Identity and Self-Transformation in Women’s Lives” (1995), which was conceived from Rich’s writing, focused on how becoming a mother was transforming for women and how motherhood was actively constructed by women. Her research suggested that this ultimate responsibility for children equaled a mother’s moral worth. She argued that there are two distinct categories of motherhood: 1) the status of “being a mother,” and 2) taking on the responsibility and adequately performing the tasks involved related to “doing mothering” (1995). For this study, I will use these two categories: being a mother involves the act of reproduction, and doing mothering involves the daily tasks related to nurturing and caring for children (McMahon, 1995).

Sandra Enos (2001), stated that “motherhood is distinguished from other social commitments, not only by how much is committed but by what is committed,” (p. 26)
arguing that motherhood involved the ultimate responsibility for children. Rich (1976) and O’Reilly (2004) agreed with Enos’ statement, and Rich (1976) would have added that this ultimate responsibility has been placed on women by a patriarchal society intent on keeping women oppressed and isolated in the home where the “welfare of men and children was the true mission of women” (p. 49).

However, for Native American, African American, Hispanic, and Asian American women this middle class Northern European feminist theorizing about mothering and motherhood as a struggle for individual autonomy in the face of male domination does not hold true. Patricia Hill Collins stated, “For women of color, the subjective experience of mothering/motherhood is inextricably linked to the sociocultural concern of racial ethnic communities – one does not exist without the other” (1994, p. 47). To clarify this she quoted Asian American sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn as observing that for Native American, African American, Hispanic and Asian American women

...women’s reproductive labor of feeding, clothing, and psychologically supporting the male wage earner and nurturing and socializing the next generation – is seen as work on behalf of the family as a whole, rather than as work benefiting men in particular. (as cited in Collins, 1994, p. 47)

Collins added, “The locus of conflict lies outside [italics added] the household, as women and their families engage in collective effort to create and maintain family life in the face of forces that undermine family integrity” (1994, p. 47). This is compared with Rich (1976) and O’Reilly (2004) who saw the male-dominated society oppressing women and isolating them in their homes. The Northern European feminist approach to motherhood is
about society's domination of women, while for women of color it is about protecting, nurturing and sustaining family in the face of societal oppression.

To add another dimension to this, Adrienne Rich's writing (1976) defined mothering as a site of power for Black women. O'Reilly (2004) clarified two themes of African American mothering as separate from the Western patriarchal tradition: 1) mothers are valued by and central to the African American culture, and 2) mothers and mothering "are what make possible the physical and psychological well-being and empowerment of African American people and the larger African American culture" (p. 11). As Rich (1976) succinctly stated, the Black woman "has borne the weight of a people on her back" (p. 203). O'Reilly (2004) added,

The focus of black motherhood, in both practice and thought, is how to preserve, protect, and more generally empower black children so that they may resist racist practices that seek to harm them and grow into adulthood whole and complete. (p. 11)

Additionally, there are three traditions of mothering in African American culture that serve to empower Black mothers and make Black motherhood a site of power. They are "Other-Mothering/Community Mothering," "Motherhood as Social Activism," and "Nurturance as Resistance" (Collins, 1994; O'Reilly, 2004). Other-mothering is the situation where women mother children other than their own. Birth mothers are expected and encouraged to take care of their own children, but the culture realizes that this is not always possible or probable. Community mothers and mothering as social activism traditions are constructions where older women take care of the children in the community. In what has
become a situation of power, Black women feel accountable to all the community’s Black children (Collins, 1994).

The third type of mothering that serves to empower Black mothers and make Black motherhood a site of power is nurturing children as a method of resistance against oppression. As O’Reilly stated,

In a racist culture that deems black children inferior, unworthy, and unlovable, maternal love of black children is an act of resistance; in loving her children, the mother instills in them a loved sense of self and high self-esteem, enabling them to defy and subvert racist discourses that naturalize racial inferiority and commodify blacks as other and object. (2004, p. 12)

Patricia Hill Collins challenged me to remember that mothering is defined differently by different cultures and races (1994) and cautioned researchers like me with a Northern European theoretical construct of mothering to be open to and acknowledge other definitions as we conduct our studies.

Incarcerated women of any racial or ethnic background often hold the status of being a mother (McMahon, 1995), but frequently struggle with doing mothering due to the barriers related to their incarceration. Those who do their mothering for them while they are incarcerated are often other family members or foster families. I became aware of their struggle to do mothering several years ago while volunteering at the prison for a mother-child activity day. As the mothers were greeting their children, I overheard one mother ask “Is that a new coat? I haven’t seen it before.” To which the child replied “No, I had it last year.” The mother responded “Oh, I guess I don’t remember.” While this woman held the “mother status,” she was losing the struggle of “doing mothering” from prison. It is an understatement
to write that doing mothering while incarcerated is difficult for those women who hold the mother status.

Hayes (1996), echoing Collins (1994), O’Reilly (2004), and Rich (1976) argued that all mothers respond to various ideologies about child-raising and create their own mothering styles.

Mothers make selections among these sources and develop interpretations based on their social circumstances – including both their past and present social positions and their past and present cultural milieu…Individual mothers, therefore, actively engage in reshaping social ideology of appropriate child rearing. This process means that every mother’s understanding of mothering is in some sense unique. It also means that there are systematic group differences among mothers that are grounded in their different social positions and different cultural worlds. (p. 74)

Mothers who are incarcerated are reshaping the socially accepted ideology of mothering to suit their present social positions and culture. Their understanding of mothering is related to their understanding of the mothering role. Henriques, Hallaway, Urwin, Venn, and Walkerdine (1984) defined a role as “being originally a sociological concept, specified the content of actions or behaviors laid down by society” (p. 22). All individuals function within any number of roles simultaneously, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. Additionally, Banton (1965) defined a role as “a set of norms and expectations applied to the incumbent of a particular position” (p. 29).

For many women, mothering is a source of pleasure and identity formation. It is a “central component of identity, daily activities and life plans” (Ferraro & Moe, 2003, p. 13).
But in 2000, 40% of all single mothers lived at or below poverty level (Caiazza, 2000). As Ferraro and Moe (2003) argue, “the ability to mother one’s children according to social expectations and personal desires depends ultimately on one’s access to the resources of time, money, health, and social support” (p. 14). Mothers who are incarcerated face many challenges to shaping their understanding of mothering and functioning in this role from prison.

Research Related to Incarcerated and Battered Women

During the past 25 years, there have been a number of studies of mothering while women are incarcerated in prisons and jails. These include Baunach, 1985; Bloom, 1992; Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Enos, 2001; Glick & Neto, 1977; Henriques, 1982; Snell, 1994; Stanton, 1980; Watterson, 1996; and Zalba, 1964. These studies found that “mothering is a central concern of incarcerated women, and correctional facilities have failed to respond adequately to this concern” (Ferraro & Moe, 2003, p. 13). Several studies have documented that the incarcerated mothers’ main concern during time in prison is for their children’s well-being, as well as their own distress at separation (Boudin, 1998; Enos, 2001; Henriques, 1982; Watterson, 1996).

Recently a number of studies have been published that explore mothering from prison, issues related to transitioning from prison, and stories of battered women. In “Mothering From The Inside: Parenting In A Women’s Prison” (2001) Sandra Enos used the grounded theory approach to explore how women managed motherhood and mother identity while incarcerated in a northeastern correction facility. Following her one-time interviews with 25 women involved in the prison’s parenting program, she revealed how inmate mothers
find places for their children to live, manage relationships with caregivers, demonstrate their fitness as mothers, and negotiate rights to their children under challenging circumstances.

Enos identified seven findings from her research. First, a family’s obligation for the children of incarcerated mothers reflected its cultural and structural origins: African American and Hispanic families were more likely to extend help in times of crisis than families of White inmate mothers, generally because the White families’ resources had been depleted. Second, White women traced their paths to prison back to poor parenting; African American and Hispanic women did not. This had implications for the caretaking of the children while the White mother was incarcerated. Third, the quality of the inmate mother’s relationship to the caretakers directly affected their relationship to their children. If the caretakers were angry with the inmate mother, the children were less likely to receive telephone calls, letters, packages, or be driven for visits. Fourth, much of the work of mothering was left undone during incarceration. Fifth, to maintain their subjectivities as mothers, incarcerated women separated their past behaviors from the present and separated themselves from other inmates whom they perceived as “bad” mothers. Sixth, parental rights to their children provided an important identity for inmate mothers. Seventh, White families considered children to be caretaking burdens; African American and Hispanic families considered children to be resources for the family and community.

Kathleen Ferraro and Angela Moe (2003) also used the grounded theory approach to examine the relationships among mothering, crime, and incarceration through the narratives of 30 women incarcerated in a southwestern county jail. They discovered that the pressure of economic instability and domestic violence, when coupled with the responsibility of caring for children, led the women to choose economic crimes or drug dealing to support and house
their children. Other women, arrested for drug or alcohol related offenses, used drugs to self-medicate after the trauma of losing custody of their children. Minor probation violations related to balancing work, parenting, treatment and counseling appointments, car breakdowns, and housing were the reason for many of the women’s arrests. Finally, this research revealed that “for all women with children, mothering represented both the burdens of an unequal sexual division of labor and opportunities for resistance or marginalization and hopelessness” (p. 10).

In “Making It In The “Free World”: Women In Transition From Prison” (2001) Patricia O’Brien, using the grounded theory approach, interviewed eighteen women who were formerly incarcerated in eastern Kansas and the Kansas City area. She sought to gain insight into the factors that supported the reintegration of women into the free world. O’Brien identified three factors that contributed to the women’s success: 1) addressing the women’s concrete needs, 2) establishing healthy relationships, and 3) revitalizing the internal self. She used the women’s narratives to demonstrate the main points of her findings.

Susan Sharp and Roslyn Muraskin edited “The Incarcerated Woman: Rehabilitative Programming In Women’s Prisons” (2003). The chapter written by Susan Sharp, “Mothers in Prison: Issues in Parent-Child Contact,” examined the issues involving incarcerating mothers. They included: 1) children of incarcerated women of color being notably affected by current criminal justice practices, 2) the placement of children when mother goes to prison, including custody issues; 3) mother-child contact being maintained during incarceration; and 4) corrections policies related to pregnant inmates.

histories of four of the many battered women she interviewed at a safe shelter. Her emphasis in conducting this narrative research with a feminist approach was to illustrate how the telling of women's stories helps the narrator develop a sense of self. She added, "we tell our stories to 'save our lives,' recognizing that telling our stories is a positive, therapeutic act that aids the storyteller in trying to make sense of a life that otherwise might appear too fragmented, purposeless, or chaotic" (p. 16).

**Children of Incarcerated Women**

Recently, a number of books have been published providing a look into the lives of children of the incarcerated. Nell Bernstein wrote "All Alone In The World: Children Of The Incarcerated" (2005). A journalist, Bernstein provided an intimate and disturbing look into the lives of children of prisoners, weaving the experiences of four women and their children with statistics and interviews. She also published "Juvenile" (2004) with Joseph Rodriguez and "A Rage To Do Better: Listening To Young People From The Foster Care System" (2001). Other recently published books and research focusing on inmate's children include: "Children of Incarcerated Parents" (Reed, 1997); "Children of Incarcerated Parents" (Gabel & Johnston, 1995); "Incarcerated Parents and Their Children" (Mumola, 2000) "Weeping In The Playtime of Others: America's Incarcerated Children" (Heide & Wooden, 2000); and "When a Parent Goes To Jail: A Comprehensive Guide for Counseling Children of Incarcerated Parents" (Yaffe, Hoade, & Moody, 2000). While this research focused on inmate mothers, the books listed above provided a perspective of the literature related to their children's lives on the other side of the prison walls.
History of Incarcerating Women

Historically, women have been incarcerated in facilities that represent each era's current attitude toward females. These have ranged from all female housing where the women had separate bedrooms in the early 19th century (Harris, 1998), to some instances, after 1820, where males and females were locked together without access to any privacy for the intimate needs of women or ability to protect themselves from the unwanted sexual advances of the males (Harris, 1998). In the 1870s women were imprisoned in reformatories for unlimited sentences, to be released when they had been converted from a "poor unfortunate" or "fallen woman" to a female paragon of society (Harris, 1998).

The criminal justice system is beginning to realize the unique needs of incarcerated mothers and the need to address the well-being of their children for the good of society. As Enos (2001) so clearly stated, "Many have said about the recent incarceration boom that we are not winning the war on drugs, but we are taking a lot of prisoners" (p. 3). While I was at the prison volunteering with the project, an inmate mother who was serving six months in the probation violators unit inadvertently and angrily added her affirmation of Enos' statement saying, "I want to tell the judge, I don't mind this [incarceration] for myself, but he is punishing my children. They don't deserve this" (Confidential, personal conversation, December 6, 2004).

Women in prison represent a vulnerable group of survivors. According to Harlow (1999) more than half of the women who are incarcerated in state prison systems reported that they experienced physical or sexual abuse prior to their incarceration (57.2%). Forty-six percent of incarcerated women were the only parent living with their children prior to arrest (Mumola, 2000).
Dressel, Porterfield, and Barnhill (1998) state that “prior to their incarceration, the bulk of imprisoned women (and often their families) struggled with very low income and with being undereducated, unskilled, and under or unemployed” (p. 92). Yet it is generally agreed that most mothers who are incarcerated were arrested because they committed non-violent property crimes and drug-related offenses (Ferraro & Moe, 2003; O’Brien, 2001; Smart, 1995) in a futile attempt to provide for their children. These crimes include prostitution, larceny, shoplifting, check or credit card fraud, forgery/counterfeiting, and drug possession (Bernstein, 2005; Bloom, Chesney-Lind & Owen, 1994; Chesney-Lind, 1997; and Waterson, 1996).

According to Mumola (2000), prior to their arrests, mothers incarcerated in state prisons were more likely the primary caregivers for their children (64%), than were fathers. Women’s incarceration creates unique concerns about the welfare of their children that are very different from the situations of the fathers, who are not generally the primary caregivers for their children prior to incarceration. During incarceration the mothers try to maintain connections with their children. Mothers (78%) were more likely than fathers (62%) to report some time of monthly contact with their children, with 60% of mothers reporting at least weekly contact compared to 40% of fathers (Mumola, 2000).

During this time in history when the U.S. is mired in a recession, mothers find it increasingly difficult to provide for their families. Poverty rates are rising (Proctor & Dalaker, 2002). Congress continues to reconsider the structure of key assistance programs that support low income families: Food Stamp Program, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, Child Care and Development Block Grants (Garasky, Greder & Brotherson, 2003).
Should these programs be cut, mothers will find it more difficult to gain economic self-sufficiency.

Between 1995 and 2004 the number of women in prison has grown nearly 53% as compared to male prisoners (32%; Harrison & Beck, 2005) and at least 70% of these women have minor children (Greenfield & Snell, 1999). Females were more likely to have a drug offense (31.5%) compared to males (20.7%) who were more likely to serve time for violent crimes (Harrison & Beck, 2005). One of the reasons for this rapid growth is the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). In this federal legislation women are expected to work toward attaining economic self-sufficiency. Bloom and Kilgore (2003) stated “this federal legislation ended poor families’ entitlement to welfare by establishing 5-year lifetime limits on benefits and requiring participation in state sanctioned activities leading to workforce participation regardless of childcare responsibilities” (p. 434). This reduction in entitlements with an emphasis on short term educational opportunities, coupled with little regard for their childcare responsibilities has driven low income women with children to locate legal or illegal sources of income.

Through this legislation, coupled with the policy shifts that have led to strict laws requiring women to be incarcerated with similar sentences as men, many children are being increasingly removed from their mothers’ care to the care of grandparents (53%), or other relatives (26%; Mumola, 2000). There are three reasons for the increased rates of incarceration: 1) the “war on drugs,” 2) the implementation of mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines, and 3) the “get tough on crime” attitude (Bernstein, 2005; O’Brien, 2001). These three factors have led to the imprisonment of many mothers for non-violent
property crimes and drug-related offenses. The war on crime is actually a war on women, the poor, and minorities (Donziger, 1996).

While in prison, all inmates suffer the "pains of imprisonment" (Sykes, 1958). Men suffer the pain of "loss of freedom, autonomy, personal security, heterosexual relationships, and the deprivation of goods and services that can be found in the larger society" (Enos, 2001, p. 12). Women experience "pains of imprisonment" that involve family relations: separation from children (Henriques, 1982; Kiser, 1991; Neto & Bainer, 1983; O'Brien, 2001; Stanton, 1980), the loss of the maternal role (O'Brien, 2001), and perhaps the loss of their legal parental rights to their children (Bernstein, 2005; O'Brien, 2001).

Existing Inmate Mother-Child Programs

Incarceration has an immediate impact on the current relationships of female prisoners who have been the primary caretakers of young children and generally creates problems for them upon release (O'Brien, 2001; Sobel, 1982). The level of contact maintained between imprisoned mothers and their children is foundational to the strength of the family upon the mother's release (O'Brien, 2001, Sharp, 2003), but children of incarcerated women often find it difficult to visit their mothers.

In their key study, Bloom and Steinhart (1993) noted a difference in the frequency of the prison visits between children who lived with their mothers prior to arrest and those who did not. Over half of the children (54%) who lived with their mothers prior to arrest visited them in prison, as compared to children who did not live with their mothers (28%). Bloom and Steinhart (1993) concluded that letters were the mothers' primary contact with their children. They also found that, in general, women's prisons are located in rural areas, often 100 miles from the children's homes, making it difficult for children to visit their mothers.
This study also noted that the children’s caregivers were sometimes reluctant to allow visitation.

As a volunteer and researcher often I have heard stories from the inmate mothers telling of their husbands’ or mothers’ refusal to bring their children to the prison for visitation. Reasons for this include anger at the woman’s behavior that resulted in her incarceration and a refusal to expose the children to the prison and visiting room environment. Further, in rare cases, some mothers I have worked with did not want their children to visit them because of their own debilitating guilt and shame. According to Cranford and Williams (1998), “women in prison suffer a great guilt over having left their children, and they spend countless hours dreaming about how to be the perfect mother” (p. 3). Bloom (1995) explained these feelings in this way: “The extent of powerlessness experienced by some mothers who are separated from their children is so severe that they sever their emotional ties to their children out of sheer preservation” (p. 25).

There are programs in the United States to help incarcerated women stay connected to their children. Morash, Bynum, and Koons (1998) conducted a recent study that found there are a number of programs to facilitate mother-child visitation. These accounted for about half of the parenting programs at institutions. The Storybook Project of Iowa is a program that facilitates mother-child connections through the women’s reading and mailing of children’s books and the newly recorded audiotapes. This mailing often becomes the subject of discussion during telephone calls, letters, and face-to-face visits between the mother and child. It has the added benefit of strengthening the reading skills of both the mother and child.
The Girl Scouts Beyond Bars program (Girl Scouts of America, 2003) is an example of a national program whose goal is “to reduce the chances that the daughters of incarcerated women will end up in similar situations” by rebuilding mother-daughter bonds and building self-worth in the women. Participating women and their children attend two Girl Scout meetings each month on the prison grounds. During these meetings the mothers and daughters work on projects and crafts. For the other two weeks each month the scout troop, including the inmates’ daughters, meets in the community.

The Mothers and Their Children (MATCH) program includes Children’s Centers where mothers and children work, learn, and play together developing a healthy bond. Support and referral services are provided to the mothers to help them with child custody issues. Parent education classes are also available through the support of a volunteer staff. Also provided are individual and family counseling services, conflict resolution classes, and transition and post release services (Sharp, 2003).

The Reading Family Ties program in Florida uses computers to maintain high-speed video conferencing contact between mothers and children (Bartlett, 2000). In North Carolina a prison offers occasional family retreats and home passes. With the support of a local church these retreats give priority to those women whose children are unable to visit regularly (Girshick, 1999). If the women involved in the mother-child support programs have been fortunate to have been involved in a prison intervention program such as a parenting course, residential treatment program, and/or Victim Impact course, then the mother-child support program has the added benefit of providing an opportunity for the women to apply the new skills they have learned and to act on the intense self-reflection and self-examination that is pivotal to these programs. In addition, these mother-child programs work to increase the
bond-building between mother and child. These bonds are important for the social and emotional health of both parties throughout the mother’s incarceration.

There is a critical need for rehabilitation and reintegration support for prison inmates upon release from the penal system (O’Brien, 2001; Travis & Petersilia, 2001). Since 1973, the per capita rate of incarceration of women has increased more than five times, while the support for inmates released into the communities has not kept pace (Ekstrand, Burton, & Erdman, 1999). This has caused high rates of recidivism into the prison system, with inmates leaving fractured families and broken social networks behind, making successful reentry into the community and into their families more difficult. Family support programs when coupled with prison intervention programs are effective in helping the inmate mothers maintain family connections. It is through these stable family relationships that the inmate mothers will acclimate back into their families and their communities (O’Brien, 2001; Travis & Petersilia, 2001).

**Literacy in Prisons**

Traditionally, mothers have assumed much of the responsibility for raising children and being involved in their education (Weiss et al., 2003). But when mothers are incarcerated, their children’s education may be damaged. In addition, children of low-income women are more likely to be at risk for literacy problems (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The academic, social, and economic costs of childhood literacy problems are substantial and include an increase in school drop out rates, juvenile delinquency, and welfare costs (Deering, McCartney, Weiss, Kreider, & Simpkins, 2004). With recent technological expectations there are additional expectations and costs related to a literate workforce.
The Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) is engaged in research and education as to how to educate economically disadvantaged children and to prepare them for educational success (2006). The federal No Child Left Behind legislation has focused the nation’s attention on the achievement gap of children and has directed us toward the realization that schools alone cannot meet the education needs of children. In an effort to meet these needs, the HFRP proposed a concept called “complementary learning” to describe the various types of nonschool supports and opportunities at the national, state, and local levels (2006). The project advocates that these links should all work toward consistent learning and developmental outcomes for children (2006). These links include: families, early childhood programs, schools (K-12), out-of-school time programs and activities, community institutions (health and social service agencies and businesses), and higher education (2006). Inmate mothers, in spite of being incarcerated, are part of the family link advocated by the HFRP. Even though they are physically separated from their children, they can have a positive affect on their children’s education and literacy.

In particular, early literacy can be improved through parental involvement. Greater parent involvement in children’s learning affects the child’s school performance including higher academic achievement (Lin, 2003; McNeal, 1999; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Trusty, 1998). Lin (2003) added that “simple interactions, such as reading to young children, may lead to greater reading knowledge and skills” (p. 1). The educational involvement of parents in their children’s lives is transmitted to children through three methods: instruction, modeling, and reinforcement (Dearing, McCartney, Weiss, Kreider, & Simpkins, 2004). Inmate mothers who are involved in mother-child support programs that support mother and child literacy demonstrate the importance of reading to their children through their own
involvement with books and support of the children's reading. In addition, these mothers reinforce the importance of school when they emphasize reading.

Summary

In this chapter I have reviewed the literature related to the application of narrative in feminist research. I have explored being a mother and doing mothering in terms of the feminist meanings of motherhood, of mothering from the inside of a prison, and mothering as a Native American, African American, Hispanic, and Asian American as it relates to the Northern European feminist approach to motherhood. I have reviewed a number of key studies related to incarcerated and battered women including recently published work by Enos (2001), Ferraro and Moe (2003), Lawless (2001), O'Brien (2001), Sharp (2003), and Sharp and Muraskin (2003). I have reviewed a recent book by Nell Bernstein (2005) on the lives of children of the incarcerated and provided a list of other recently published books in this genre. I also reviewed the history of incarcerating women, summarized recent statistical data of women in prison as this relates to the care of their children, and discussed the impact of federal legislation and cutbacks. I discussed existing inmate mother-child support programs in prisons across the nation. Finally, I explored the literature on the importance of the mother's support of her children's education through early literacy involvement.
CHAPTER 3- METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

I’ll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination. The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling; like that singular organic jewel of our seas, which grows brighter as one woman wears it and, worn by another, dulls and goes to dust. Facts are no more solid, coherent, round, and read than pearls are. But both are sensitive. (Le Guin, 1985, p. 311)

Introduction

In this chapter I will begin by clarifying the research setting and define “methodology and methods” as they relate to feminist research. In the methodology section I will discuss my theoretical approach to this study and how I analyzed the women’s stories. In the methods section I will describe the study, the participants, and the challenge to conducting research in a prison setting. I will discuss how my interpersonal skills, use of cross-checking to clarify their stories, and sensitivity to the inmate mothers’ racial and social location helped me hear their narratives. I will finish with a subsection on my position as a researcher when interviewing released prisoners in their homes.

Research Questions

1) Analyze incarcerated mothers’ narratives to learn how they understood mothering.

2) Explore how their understanding evolved through their prison experience with intervention programs and with the Storybook Project of Iowa.

3) Provide the women with an opportunity for reflection through the telling of their stories.
Assumptions

When listening to and analyzing the women’s stories, I was not concerned with the ‘factual’ nature of their narratives. It did not matter where the truth was in these stories. Rather the point was how they chose their stories, how they organized them, and how they told them. As Elaine Lawless said, “The act of asking for their stories provides a way for them to ‘speak’ their way out of the deadlocked pattern in which they may find themselves” (2001, p. 10). However, I recognized human nature for what it was in that people manipulate situations to suit themselves best. As I listened to their stories I always assumed that they told their stories with sincerity.

I came into this research with other assumptions. As a volunteer, through anecdotal evidence I had gathered informally over time, I believed that the Storybook Project of Iowa was having a positive impact on the women and their relationships with their children. I believed that providing the women with opportunities for sharing their narratives would allow them to critically reflect upon their mothering in the past and to guide their actions in the future.

The Research Setting

I conducted half of the interviews at a women’s correctional facility in a Midwestern state in the fall of 2005. As of May 8, 2006, this facility was built to hold 443 and housed 574 women. Thirty of these women were there as part of the Violator’s Unit, a program where women were incarcerated in a separate unit on the prison grounds for less than a year in an effort to “shock” them into a legal lifestyle. This is the only state correctional institution for women in the state. While this institution is located 30 miles from the urban center of the state and is more available to prisoner’s families than prisons in many other states (Bloom &
Steinhart, 1993), in good weather it is still a four-hour drive to the prison from the far corners of the state. As of May 8, 2006 the profile of the inmate population showed: median age 33, racial and ethnic population (individual count): Native Americans 17, Asian Americans 2, African Americans 131, Hispanic Americans 22, and Caucasians 397. No records were kept of the percentage of women with children under the age of 18. Women were incarcerated for an average sentence of 14 years with sentences including drugs, violence against people, violence against property, public order, and mandatory sentencing. The average educational grade level was 11.9 and the average reading level was ninth grade (Linda Haack, personal communication, May 8, 2006).

Beginning in 1998, each month volunteers of the Storybook Project of Iowa came into the prison to provide inmate mothers with the opportunity to read to their children on audio tapes. After the mothers read the book(s) to the children, they packaged them and the tapes, and the volunteers mailed them. The mothers signed up in advance and wrote a $2.00 prison check per package to cover the postage charge. The warden required the fee so that the women took responsibility for paying for the program. Incidentally, most of the women earn approximately $1.50/day at an assigned job at this prison.

During the past eight years, the program has replaced the original cardboard boxes of children’s books with a rolling wooden bookshelf. Additional books, tape recorders, new audio tapes and mailing supplies were stored in a locked closet in the classroom. Children from birth through 18 years were served by the project. In 2004-2005, twenty volunteers facilitated 266 reading events in which 62 mothers read aloud 802 books to their children.

This project operated within a second floor classroom in the administration building on prison grounds. The large and airy room had high ceilings, white walls, and a wall of tall
windows covered by orange mini blinds that looked over the central “yard” of the prison. The yard was a large green space with shade and flowering trees, cut grass, and flower beds. A large air conditioner filled one window, and radiators lined the walls under the windows. Three overhead fans hung from the ceiling. Nevertheless, the room was hot in summer and cold in winter.

Instead of being set up as a classroom, four long and narrow tables lined the walls, with two chairs at each table facing the walls. Three of the tables held a small tape recorder, blank audio tapes, mailing supplies, and a box of tissues. The fourth table faced the door to the hall. At this table sat one or two older prison inmates who served as “clerks” for the program from “inside.” They maintained notebooks on who read, what they read, and to whom. They also kept financial records, weighed, and affixed postage to the packages. These women, who were incarcerated for life, were interested in providing programs that helped the younger women connect with their children. They held a proprietary interest in the program and perceived their role as facilitators. No corrections officers were present during the “reads.” Women signed up for time slots and either came at their appointed time or when they were “called” over the prison public address system.

For the reads the bookcase was rolled out of the storage closet and the women gathered around it, browsing and reading books, searching for ones that best suited their children’s ages and interests. The women took their turns sitting with a volunteer who ran the tape recorder and helped them feel comfortable. Mothers were encouraged to begin with a personal greeting on the tape, to read the entire book or the first chapter(s) of a chapter book, and to close with a message.
Since the project began on July 6, 1998, over 7,000 books and tapes have been sent to more than 600 children in the past seven years. Six hundred mothers have read. Twenty trained volunteers have given an average of more than 750 hours of time each year. The Storybook Project of Iowa, originally sponsored by Lutheran Services in Iowa is an independent not-for-profit organization with a 501(c)(3) status. It is funded by private foundations, individual donations, and local and state grants. It is governed by a Board of Directors made up of professionals with experience with incarcerated women, literacy, parenting education and an individual who has been incarcerated and involved in the project. Half of the women who shared narratives were participating in the project. The other three women I interviewed had been involved in this project while incarcerated at the prison, but at the time of the research they were living outside in their communities.

Research Methodology and Methods Defined

In the introduction to the book “Feminism and Methodology” (1987), Sandra Harding discussed the confusion about the terms methodology and methods as they relate to feminist research. She defined methodology as “a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed” (p. 3) and method as “a technique for (or way of proceeding in) gathering evidence” (p. 2). I will use these terms as defined for this dissertation.

Methodology

Feminist Research

When I began the process of organizing my thoughts to conduct this research and then to write this dissertation I realized that, unlike many of the researchers whose work I had read, I did not have the benefit of an academic foundation in social science or women’s studies. It seemed that most research projects similar to this study had been conducted by
professionals in those fields (Enos, 2001; Lawless, 2001; O’Brien, 2001; Sharp, 2003). I was a university family and consumer sciences (FCS) teacher-educator with rich life experiences working with and teaching marginalized women in Kenya for the U.S. Peace Corps; with teaching low income, high-risk women in the inner city of a large Midwestern city; and with frequent interactions with incarcerated women while volunteering at a state women’s prison. In spite of not having a strong background in social science or women’s studies, I did have the benefit of taking graduate courses in qualitative research from Leslie Rebecca Bloom and Deborah Kilgore.

According to the Body of Knowledge for Family and Consumer Sciences (2000) of the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (Baugher, Anderson, Green, Shane, Jolly, Miles, & Nickols) family and consumer sciences is an integrative profession engaging systems theory and lifespan development that is applied to individuals, families and communities to study and address basic human needs. With this professional background, it is reasonable that I am interested in exploring how their prison experiences and the project have impacted the women’s understanding of themselves as mothers.

When I first conceived of this research study, as a leader-volunteer in the Storybook Project, as an FCS teacher-educator and a parenting curriculum writer (Williams, Brun, Trost, Wasike, & Taylor, 1995) I believed that this research needed to be conducted to give the inmate mothers and formerly incarcerated women an opportunity to talk about how the Storybook Project helped them develop their reading skills and to learn how this project helped them maintain their roles as mothers with their children. I felt that giving the women an opportunity to talk about the project and how they parented would encourage them to reflect on their experiences, allowing for personal growth and development as women and as
mothers. From their unique positions they had information to share that would be of value to the project leaders and funding base, to the prison administration, and to the rapidly growing body of literature related to incarcerated women.

Initially, due in part to my somewhat unusual professional background, I was slow to realize that this study had tendencies toward feminist research. Leslie Rebecca Bloom and Deborah Kilgore were the initial catalysts for this (albeit gradual) transformation in my thinking. Recognizing how shallow my academic background was in this area and acknowledging how deep that pool of literature was, I was reluctant to start the swim. I did not think of this as a feminist issue, but as a data gathering project with opportunities to provide feedback to interested parties. But as I read Nell Bernstein (2005), Leslie Bloom (1998), Patricia Hill Collins (1994), Sandra Enos (2001), Sandra Harding (1987), Deborah Kilgore (1999), Patti Lather (1988, 1986), Elaine Lawless (2001), Mumbi Mwangi (2002), Patricia O’Brien (2001), Andrea O’Reilly (2004), Cristina Rathbone (2005), Adrienne Rich (1976), Pauline Rosenau (1992), and Anne Woollett and Ann Phoenix (1991) I found myself asking the question: What is feminist research?

To the question of “What is feminist research?” Patti Lather (1988) responded, “To do feminist research is to put the social construction of gender at the center of one’s inquiry” (p. 571). She added that feminist research is, “...to see gender as a basic organizing principle which profoundly shapes/mediates the concrete conditions of our lives” (p. 571). Finally, she stated, “Through the questions that feminism poses and the absences it locates, feminism argues the centrality of gender in the shaping of our consciousness, skills, and institutions as well as in the distribution of power and privilege” (p. 571). Certainly my research talking
with women about how they constructed their mothering while incarcerated put gender at the heart of my inquiry.

Feminist research involves ways of knowing that are “inherently culture-bound and perspectival” (Lather, 1988, p. 570; and Bloom, 1998; Collins, 1990; Harding, 1991; Munro, 1998; Smith, S.1987) and that “knowledge production and legitimation are historically situated and structurally located” (Lather, 1988, p. 570). In my study I explored how the women’s understanding of themselves as mothers was situated within their family, culture, society, and the culture of the prison system, and how the mother-child support project impacted this understanding.

Feminist research emphasizes women’s lived experiences and the significance of their daily lives (Bloom, 1998; Collins, 1990; Smith, S., 1987; Weiler, 1988). Women are not only the participants in the research, but are also the “co-creators of new knowledge” (Mwangi, 2002). The women in my research did create new knowledge for themselves as they explored through their stories how they had constructed (and reconstructed) their mothering while in prison and after release from prison.

Finally, feminist research is transformative in that it generates social critique and advocacy (Bloom, 1998; Lather, 1986, 1988). The process of being involved with it changes the participants, the researcher and, ultimately, promotes further action. It is emancipatory in that the action involves freeing women from the oppression of patriarchal social institutions and organizations. Lather (1986) called this “research as praxis” (p. 260) and defined it as a “…critical, praxis-oriented paradigm concerned both with producing emancipatory knowledge and with empowering the researched” (1986, p. 258). Lather (1986) urged, “What I suggest is that we consciously use our research to help participants understand and change
their situations” (p. 263). During my interviews with the three former inmates, I provided the women with opportunities for self-reflection and a deeper understanding of their subjectivities as mothers. Given that I wanted the women to share their stories of mothering, to have opportunities for self-reflection and growth, and to explore how they could take action against forces of oppression in their lives, this research was appropriately situated in the feminist approach.

Life History-Narrative

Life history and narrative approaches are important research areas in feminist literature. These approaches are valuable as a means for understanding the female condition and perspective (Bloom, 1998; Kilgore, 1999; Lawless, 2001; Mwangi, 2002; Surratt, 2005). There has been considerable interchanging of “life history” and “narrative” in the literature. Bill Ayers responded to Hatch and Wisniewski’s survey to initiate a nation-wide discussion about the two approaches: “Life history and narrative approaches are person centered, unapologetically subjective. Far from a weakness, the voice of the person, the subject’s own account represents a singular strength” (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995, p. 118). As Hatch and Wisniewski (1995) stated, “Life history and narrative offer exciting alternatives for connecting the lives and stories of individuals to the understanding of larger human and social phenomena” (p. 113). But there is little agreement among researchers at the distinctions between life history research and narrative research (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). Some researchers believe that life history is a type of narrative, while others see little difference between the two as each focuses on the life as it is lived (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). For this research I will use the term narrative as described by Munro to be “…how we tell our stories rather than what is told. How we tell our stories, the narrative form, becomes a
window to ways of knowing” (as quoted in Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995, p. 115). However, I also employed a thematic approach to analyze their narratives.

Human beings organize and make meaning of their experiences through narrative, through the stories they tell. M. Carolyn Clark (2001) stated that the narrative process is the “storying of our experience” (p. 83), and she wrote about narrative as telling stories about things that happened to us or others “real or imagined” (p. 87). She added, “The underlying purpose of narrative...is to enable us to make sense of our experience” (p. 87).

Deena Metzger in “Writing For Your Life: A Guide and Companion To The Inner Worlds” (1992) discussed how a “self” comes to be.

A self is made, not given. It is a creative and active process of attending a life that must be heard, shaped, seen, said aloud into the world, finally enacted and woven into the lives of others. Then a life attended is not an act of narcissism or disregard for others; on the contrary, it is searching through the treasures and debris of ordinary existence for the clear points of intensity that do not erode, do not separate us, that are most intensely our own, yet other people’s too. The best lives and stories are made up of minute particulars that somehow are also universal and of use to others as well as oneself. (p. 247)

In her work with battered women at a safe shelter, Elaine Lawless advocated that narrative was healing. She argued,

The telling provides a kind of recollecting of the parts of her “self,” a making sense of the past, restructuring of what seems to be disparate parts of their being into the construction that is now the “I” of her voiced narrative. Her voice, then, becomes the embodiment of her “self.” (2001, p. 6)
Lawless clarified how telling stories of life experiences combines and voices the separate parts of a woman’s self. M. Carolyn Clark (2001) discussed how humans use narrative to deal with tragic events in their lives. She cited Riessman (1993, p. 4) quoting Isak Dinesen as saying, “All sorrows can be borne if we can put them into a story” (2001, p. 87). As I listened to the stories of the women in my research I often thought of this quote. They had borne many tragedies in their relatively short lives, yet were able to speak of them as they constructed their stories to themselves and to me.

The use of narrative research provides an opportunity for “women’s self-definition, self-awareness and the ‘shared consciousness’ about their everyday experiences. This self-awareness encodes a political and ideological potential to impact and motivate women to want to change their negated social positions and societal attitudes” (Mwangi, 2002, p. 43).

Leslie Rebecca Bloom (1998) introduced her chapter on women’s autobiographical narrative with the quote “Truth is a matter of the imagination” (LeGuin, 1985, p. 311). I’ve chosen to introduce this chapter on methodology and methods the same way. Bloom, like Ferraro and Moe (2003); Deborah Kilgore (1999), and Elaine Lawless (2001), recognized that women’s stories are fluid and flexible and are a form of storytelling. Like all stories they change depending on the mood, location, and situation of the storyteller.

Teresa de Lauretis (1987) and Sidonie Smith (1987), however, are suspicious of women using narrative forms to tell their stories. Their concerns were related to women’s unconscious use of patriarchal storylines of being female to tell their stories. Dorothy E. Smith (1987) argued that women have had a restricted role in society. She wrote that men have occupied positions of power almost exclusively, which meant that “our [women’s] forms of thought put together a view of the world from a place women do not occupy” (p.
19). She added, "...the means women have had available to them to think, image, and make actionable their experience have been made for us and not by us" (p. 19).

I recognize the limitations in our culture where men have been the dominate class. Dorothy E. Smith (1987) reminded that "words, numbers, and images on paper, in computers, or on TV and movie screen" (p. 17) are the "primary medium of power" (p. 17) of this male-ruling society. Her thesis is that we have been unconsciously permeated with a male-created orientation and life agenda, and so use these in our daily lives as a template without conscious thought. But I believe that the women who shared their stories with me did so in an effort to make sense of how they constructed their mothering and how the project impacted them and their families. Whether their stories were unconsciously permeated with a male-created orientation and life agenda was interesting to explore within the research setting, but missed the point of their telling. This was to help them come to a new understanding of themselves in their mothering subjectivities.

Because the Storybook Project had received no research attention since its inception in 1998 and because the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women involved in the project had stories to tell about how it affected their mothering from prison, I chose to conduct qualitative research using feminist narrative inquiry to gain access to the rich data of their lives and their perceptions of mothering and motherhood from prison, and the impact of the project on them.

Subjectivity

Leslie Rebecca Bloom stated that one of the goals of narrative research with a feminist approach is to deconstruct the self, "allowing for nonunitary conceptions of the self" (in Merriam, 2002, p. 310). In postmodern feminist research the concept of a nonunified self
is critical. In the postmodern perspective “...individual constructions of ‘self’ or of ‘a life’ [are] seen as complex, situational, fragmented, nonunitary, nonlinear, noncoherent, and constantly in flux” (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995, p. 122). In feminist scholarship this self is known as subjectivity and the acknowledgement of women having multiple selves is known as non-unitary subjectivities (Bloom, 1998). The feminist approach to subjectivity is that a woman’s self is multiple, flexible, evolving and active and “continually in the process of production within historical, social, and cultural boundaries” (Bloom, 1998, p. 4).

This feminist approach is compared to the Western humanist tradition of the self where the self is perceived as a unified whole that is unchanging in spite of the normal assortment of challenges, victories, reflections and personal development that women experience over a lifetime. In this tradition the self was seen as born into a state of being and remained fixed throughout a life. Weedon (1987, p. 32; as cited in Bloom, 1998) described unitary subjectivity as that self where humans have “an essence at the heart of the individual which is unique, fixed and coherent and which makes her what she is” (p. 3; Rosenau, 1992). This approach, however, was generally attributed to the lives of males. Since women’s lives were not the subject of research studies at that time, the changing nature of a woman’s subjectivities was not topical to research. If they were, the studies were conducted by men for men. But when females began to conduct research with a feminist approach, this flexibility and flux of a person’s sense of herself was recognized and studied. Bloom (1998, p. 4) cites Weedon as explaining that “‘subjectivity’ is used to refer to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world.” This flexible and changing self that evolves with her environment
is seen as normal for women. This is countered by the traditional male perspective that nonunitary subjectivity is weak or indecisive (Bloom, 1998).

Marsha Rossiter (1999) added to this discussion but focused on narrative research when she stated, “Central to the narrative perspective is the idea that the self is not a fixed entity, an autonomous agent, moving through a developmental sequence, but rather, the self is an unfolding story” (p. 62). She added, “As we understand the world and our experiences narratively, so also do we understand and construct the self as narrative” (p. 62).

In this research the women’s stories provided windows into their multiple subjectivities as women, abused women, addicted women, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated mothers, inmates, wives, aunts, daughters, sisters and friends and described the “ongoing construction” of their lives (de Lauretis, 1987, p. 159 as cited in Bloom, 1998, p. 4).

**Revisiting the Past to Change the Future (Sartre’s Existentialist Philosophy)**

Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist (1960/1968), in his progressive-regressive method posited how one develops a sense of self through revisiting and reflecting key points or events in a life. He believed that human behavior is brought into being through a self-review of past, real, and present factors that affect the behavioral condition of individuals trying to come into being. He wrote, “A life develops in spirals; it passes again and again by the same points but at different levels of integration and complexity” (Sartre, 1960/1968, p. 106). The process of trying to bring a person into being was key to existentialism, to free people from the social conditions that oppressed and organized them, so that they would see themselves as responsible for their own nature and choices. Sartre wrote, “The most rudimentary behavior must be determined both in relation to the real and present factors
which condition it and in relation to a certain object, still to come, which it is trying to bring into being” (1960/1968, p. 91).

Leslie Rebecca Bloom in “Under The Sign Of Hope: Feminist Methodology And Narrative Interpretation” (1998) used Sartre to explore the power of subjectivity in her analysis of three women’s life narratives. She wrote,

One of the purposes of examining subjectivity in women’s personal narratives is to redefine what it means for women to write, tell, discuss, and analyze their life experiences against the backdrop of the prevailing discourses that seek to silence them. (1998, p. 64)

The women I talked used their conversations with me to rethink and revisit life experiences related to how they were mothered, how this reflected upon how they mothered their own children, how imprisonment had affected their mothering and how they envisioned mothering differently when they were released; or with the released mothers, how they were mothering differently as a reflection of their time spent inside. The belief behind these conversations and Sartre’s philosophy is that people are capable of change and of taking control of their lives. He believed as I do that revisiting life experiences and telling stories was a way to bring about change in individuals. And in the case of incarcerated, low income, addicted women, this change was liberating. As Bloom stated, “Individuals have the capacity to overcome the limitations imposed upon them by social, economic, racial, and historical factors. For women, this means also overcoming limitations placed on them due to their socialization within the patriarchal gender system” (1998, p. 64).
Organizing the Stories Within the Methodology

Riessman stated that organizing the data “requires decisions about form, ordering, style of presentation and how fragments of lives that have been given in interviews will be housed” (1993, p. 13). As I listened to, transcribed, coded, recoded and re-recoded the women’s stories I thought deeply about how they related to feminist concerns, Sartre’s philosophy of existentialism, the literature related to abused women, to incarcerated women (and their children), and to prison education programs. I recognized that listening to their stories was like searching for buried treasure. I listened to them as they searched through “the treasures and debris of ordinary existence for the clear points of intensity” (Metzger, 1992, p. 247). I recognized that I had become a digger, just as Robert Coles (1989) stated, “we … had become diggers, trying hard to follow treasure maps in hopes of discovering gold” (p. 22). And I recognized that, “What you are hearing is to some considerable extent a function of you hearing” (Coles, 1989, p. 15) and accepted this as the caution it was meant to be.

Whenever it seemed necessary, I reflected upon and clarified my position as researcher. And finally, “Their story, yours, mine – it’s what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them” (Coles, 1989, p. 30).

Leslie Bloom defined narrative research with a feminist and postmodern approach as that which “focuses on the ‘self’ for data collection and data analysis” (in Merriam, 2003, p. 310). She identified three goals that give structure to narrative research: 1) individual lives are the primary source of data, 2) “narrative research is concerned with deconstructing the ‘self’ as a humanist conception, allowing for nonunitary conceptions of the self” (p. 310); and 3) “using narratives of the ‘self’ as a location from which the researcher can generate social critique and advocacy” (p. 310). This research used women’s narratives as the primary
source of data and through these narratives has generated social critique and advocacy in relationship to mothering from inside including a mother-child support program. Finally, in the telling of the stories the women explored their subjectivities, and in the analysis of the stories I explored the construction of their mothering selves.

To analyze the women’s stories, I used Pamphilon’s (1999) “Zoom Model.” In this model the metaphor of a photographic zoom lens is used to examine the women’s stories from different perspectives: from the “fine details of a leaf and out to the vastness of a forest” (p. 393). This model consists of the macro-zoom that focuses on the socio-historical dimensions exploring collective meanings as they relate to individual experience. These include the dominant discourses, their narrative form, and the cohort effect; i.e., federal legislation affecting welfare mothers. The meso-zoom “reveals the personal level of values, interpretations and positioning” (Pamphilon, 1999, p. 393). This includes the narrative process, narrative themes, and identification of key phrases. In terms of key phrases, I found that the incarcerated women often used the phrase “good communication with my children” when describing their mothering goals upon reuniting with their children. The micro-zoom focuses on the subtleties of the telling, examining emotions and voice. In my research this was examined by exploring the tone of voice, body language, facial expressions, and the length of the pauses in the narrative. The interactional-zoom recognizes life histories as a product of the relationship between the narrator and researcher. I explored this when necessary in the analysis. Pamphilon argued that “by zooming in on each of the multiple perspectives, differing, complementary, and even contradictory data emerges. Most important, this model allows the researcher to acknowledge and productively hold in tension both the individual and collective meanings within life histories” (1999, p. 393).
In analyzing the transcripts I noted the length and type of pauses in the stories that I
was told. Considering the topics of the stories, pausing in their narratives was natural. Three
of the six women I interviewed were raised in homes where the walls were saturated with the
stains and screams of abuse. This ratio was only slightly lower than the national percentage
(57.2) for incarcerated women (Harlow, 1999). Sherry, Angela, and Karla told stories of
physical and emotional pain, of sexual abuse, of screaming, and of drug and alcohol abuse.
As they told their stories they did pause frequently. Elaine Lawless talked of the pauses that
she heard in the life stories of the abused women at her safe shelter (2001). She argued that
these pauses were not cases for coding as Joan Radner and Susan Lanser discussed in
“Strategies of Coding in Women’s Cultures” (1993), but were rather, as Bernard-Donals
(1998, as cited in Lawless, 2001, p. 60-61) wrote, spaces for the “presence of an event to
bleed through the writing or method of the historian.” She discussed the idea that the
“unspeakable is, in fact, unspeakable” (p. 61) and that this allows us to “read the gaps” (p.
61) in women’s narratives where they were unable or unwilling to find words to tell the
story. In retelling the story, these women were reliving it. As Sherry said, “I already lived it. I
don’t want to keep re-feeling it, but its still there.” Her pauses indicated, naturally, a re-
feeling of the events.

To make sense of their pauses I developed a notation system. During transcription I
inserted two ellipses (a double set of three dots) to indicate a short pause in their narrative,
three to indicate a longer pause, and a group of four ellipses (twelve dots) when the pause
stretched. I retained the standard three dots to indicate I had removed material that was not as
important to the narrative and used a period at the end of this to indicate a sentence ending.
The narratives in this dissertation carry this notation system.
As I analyzed the women’s stories, I reminded myself of the nature of narrative analysis. First, their stories were the vehicles through which these women constructed themselves and their mothering (Bloom, 2002). Second, the “task of the narrative researcher is to make sense of the telling rather than the tale” (Bloom, 2002, p. 311). You will notice that these stories resist clear placement into categories and chapters and there are repetitions and overlaps in the chapters. Narratives are like this, as is life. Narrative analysis is not tidy but looks through the layers of the stories, using the narratives to illustrate the emerging themes.

Elaine Lawless had something to say about the difference between collecting empirical data as compared to the value of narrative in her research with abused women at a safe shelter. She described clearly the value of storytelling and use of narrative for information gathering (2001). She argued that it provided rich data as compared to the gathering of empirical data.

I am convinced, however, that “hearing” the stories in this book will take us further in our understanding of the effects of violence than more quantifiable approaches. Compare what you learn from the women’s stories as told in their own voices with what might be provided to us when women are asked to fill out a survey that asks the following questions:

1. Overall, how upset were you by this experience – extremely upset, somewhat upset, not very upset, not at all upset?
2. Looking back on it now, how much effect would you say this experience(s) has had on your life – a great effect, some effect, a little effect, or no effect? (p. 10)
I believe that hearing the stories of several women who were involved in the Storybook Project of Iowa and listening to how this affected their mothering while inside was more valuable than asking the women to complete a similar survey to that as described by Lawless.

I will close this Methodology section with a quote from Robert Cole. In this quote, Cole (1989) discussed his philosophy of asking his patients to tell their stories as part of therapy:

The people who come to see us bring us their stories. They hope they tell them well enough so that we understand the truth of their lives. They hope we know how to interpret their stories correctly. We have to remember that what we hear is their story. (p.7)

As I analyzed the women’s stories and developed this dissertation “story” I reminded myself that this was their story, not mine, though I was using their stories as a foundation to my premise regarding of the evolution of their mothering subjectivities in prison through their involvement in intervention programs and with the Storybook Project of Iowa.

**Method**

In the fall of 2005 I conducted three interviews with each of the three inmate mothers who were currently involved in the Storybook Project and with three women who had been incarcerated and participated in the project before being released into their communities. In addition, I continued my volunteer activities at the prison facilitating the project each month. Other volunteer activities related to the project that I have been involved with at the prison include: Prison Tour Night, Annual Spring Volunteer Appreciation Banquet and Art Sale, and the Summer Drama Production.
Research Participants

All names are pseudonyms. None of the women had been to prison prior to this current incarceration. None of the women had gone through the process of adopting a child as their own. One of them had lost a child to a birth defect.

Inside

Courtney: White woman; age 24; one child: son seven; living with his father; serving 50 years with an 85% sentence for second degree murder; tentative discharge date: 8/16/2042; dropped out of school in ninth grade; completed her GED and taking community college courses through distance education in prison; has participated in Storybook Project of Iowa for five years.

Teresa: White woman, age 27; two children: daughter nine, son seven; living with her sister; served 29 months mandatory for the sale of methamphetamine; discharge date: 9/19/2005 (after interviews); dropped out of school in sixth grade; one test short of earning GED in prison; participated in Storybook Project of Iowa for two-and-a-half years.

Angela: African American woman, age 29; five children: sons 12, 10, seven, four, three; the oldest living with her mother; the other four children living with her husband; married for the first time while in prison, September 13, 2005; serving a 20 year sentence for aggravated assault; tentative discharge date: 02/04/2012; prior to imprisonment was three credits short of having earned an associate of arts degree from a local community college; applying to take a business course while in prison; has participated in the Storybook Project of Iowa for 10 months.
Outside

Sally: White woman, age 45; four children: three daughters 18, 12, 10, one son 15; the oldest daughter attending community college in another town; the other children living with her and her husband; served a four-year sentence for child endangerment; discharge date: 01/26/04; education unknown-high school diploma assumed; participated in Storybook Project of Iowa for four-and-a-half years.

Karla: White woman, age 32; one child: one son seven; living with her ex-husband and his wife and children; served six months in the Violator’s Unit of the prison for drugs and stealing; discharge date: 12/2004; prior to imprisonment earned a medical technician degree from a local community college; participated in Storybook Project of Iowa for six months.

Sherry: White woman, age 37; six children: one son died at six months from birth defects related to Down’s Syndrome, two sons 18 and 13 living with their birth father’s parents; one daughter six and one son five living with her mother, one son five-months-old living with her and her husband; served three years of a four year mandatory on a 25 year sentence for methamphetamine sales; released one year early on appeal; discharge date: 10/2003; attended and failed 10th grade in three different schools, never completed 10th grade; prior to imprisonment earned a GED and beautician’s license; participated in Storybook Project of Iowa for two-and-a-half years.

Challenges to Conducting Research in a Prison

A challenge to conducting this research was gaining approval from three groups: my Ph.D. committee, the Iowa Department of Corrections, and Iowa State University’s Institutional Review Board. After gaining permission to conduct the research from my
committee, but prior to requesting approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at ISU to conduct research involving prison inmates, I was required to gain written permission from the Iowa Department of Corrections (DOC). This policy was in place to protect the incarcerated women and the prison system from unethical research.

I began the entire process by requesting a written approval from the DOC for this research. I felt that with this initial letter of approval in hand I would be better positioned to gain approval from my Ph.D. committee members. I requested this on December 3, 2003, and received the letter of permission from the DOC on May 19, 2004. (see Appendix A) Gaining permission required a dogged determination to conduct this research; I made repeated telephone calls and sent several letters to various members of the DOC and the prison staff.

My committee approved the research on January 11, 2005, but they strongly recommended that before I approach the IRB for its permission, I should acquire another letter of permission from the DOC that allowed me to conduct the research for a period of five years to ensure that my application to the IRB was more likely to be approved.

On January 20, 2005 I wrote the DOC seeking the revised letter of permission and provided them with a copy of the initial letter of permission. On May 18, 2005, I received their letter of permission with the five-year clause. (see Appendix B). Between January and May, 2005, I made a number of phone calls and sent letters to different individuals to track and facilitate this paperwork.

Armed with my Ph.D. committee’s approval of my research, their approval of my two interview guides (inmates and released) and of the informed consent document (see Appendixes C, D, E) and with the new letter from the DOC with the five-year research
clause, I approached the IRB for permission to conduct the research. But acquiring permission from the university's IRB was quite problematic when seeking to conduct research involving prison inmates. Federal research guidelines identified as Prisoners Involved in Research (45 CFR part 46, subpart C) consider inmate mothers to be a vulnerable population (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004).

The IRB and I had already discussed the possibility of conducting research involving prison inmates before this current research. My first interaction with them occurred during the 2003 fall semester when, for a course project, I had approached them to request permission to conduct similar research with incarcerated females at the same prison. The IRB refused to review the study on the grounds that they did not have the proper committee representation to meet the federal guidelines for this population (Ginny Austin, personal communication, October 7, 2003). These guidelines require that a "committee member be a prisoner, prisoner representative or prisoner advocate" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004).

When I made it clear to the IRB that, while I was not able to wait for approval for the research for the course project and was giving up that research, I was intending to conduct research involving prison inmates for my doctoral research. They realized that they would have to amend the committee representation for my research. Consequently, they asked me for names and the contact information for individuals who would fit the committee representation guidelines. I located a number of individuals in the area with appropriate experience and provided them to the IRB. Due to my insistence the IRB located an individual to serve on the committee (Ginny Austin, personal communication, April 5, 2004).
The application process for this type of qualitative research was fairly complicated as the IRB strives to protect the participants from any harm. The research must be:

...supported by the Department of Health and Human Services, and the IRB must notify the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and 1) provide the name and qualifications of the prisoner representative, 2) provide a reasonably detailed description of the research, 3) document the category of research (A, B, C, or D per 45 CFR 46.306), and 4) document the additional seven protections required per 45 CFR 46.305. Research involving prisoners may not proceed until OHRP has reviewed the IRB’s determination in accordance with 45 CFR 46, Subpart C, and concurs. (Ginny Austin, personal email, June 4, 2004)

While this quote would indicate that the university’s IRB must first approve the research then forward it to the OHRP for approval, according to Ginny Austin (personal conversation, June 4, 2004), the IRB has final approval of the research. This is to say that the approval of the IRB is sufficient to proceed with the research as ISU holds a Federalwide Assurance of Compliance number FWA00002678 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004) that certifies that ISU complies with OHRP guidelines.

On July 13, 2005 I submitted paperwork to the IRB seeking approval for the current research. This committee required a number of rewrites of the application itself, the interview guides (inmate and released) and of the informed consent document. On August 1, 2005, I received permission to begin this research (see Appendix F).

Obviously, conducting research with prison inmates represents a considerable commitment of time and energy to gain permissions through the Department of Corrections.
and the IRB. It is not for those who are easily distracted or vacillating as to the importance of their research questions, and it requires planning ahead to allow time to move through the bureaucracy before the research may begin.

When I reviewed this story after not seeing it since writing it for my research proposal in January 2005, it occurred to me that I told it as someone who through persistence “won a victory against a well-meaning but oppressive system,” taking all the ownership of “winning the battle.” I now realize that I told this story recreating a “master script” (de Lauretis, 1987) where I used a masculine model of power and influence for a happy ending. The general tone of my writing is very much first person “I,” with the following phrases also telling the story: “...first person at the university,” “…located people to serve on the committee,” “It was due to my insistence,” and “…didn’t give up.” And the ending followed classically the “master script” model of de Lauretis (1987) with a happy ending: “on August 1, 2005 I received permission to begin this research.”

The reality of this “master script” telling was that my subjectivity was much less unified than my telling of the story showed. I did feel a personal victory for being the first at this land-grant institution to gain permission to conduct research with prison inmates. But when I review the story I am uncomfortable with how many times I used the first person singular to tell it. It feels a lot like bragging to me and I was raised to believe that bragging is unattractive.

The truth was that I found this permission-gaining process to be grueling. It took eight months to put together the appropriate paperwork for the IRB. They even required that I attend a weekday workshop held in a nearby city intended for IRB committee members to learn more about the federal guidelines process. Everyone there represented a hospital or
clinic in charge of clinical research involving blood draws and tissue samples. Certainly, the workshop did not apply to my qualitative research.

To cope with the anxiety I felt in this process, I began to knit again. I am an accomplished knitter: I have knit sweaters, mittens and socks, but had given it up for graduate work. But this time I felt compelled to hear the soft click of the needle tips and to see the finished garment emerge. So many days of my life, so many dreams and hopes for my Ph.D. research seemed to be held in the hands of the DOC and IRB. I felt powerless as I awaited emails and letters that I hoped would grant permission and the end of the delays but instead asked for more information. I felt angry at the loss of days passing while I awaited a faceless and nameless committee’s approval. I grumbled that the committee didn’t seem to know anything about this type of research. I wondered if I would ever be permitted to start. I needed the satisfaction of working off tension through a challenging and creative endeavor that produced something beautiful. So I knitted and felted ballet-type slippers using bright wool colors and gem-colored mohair as soft and weightless as cobwebs. Between May 2005 and August 2005 I made eight pairs of colorful and warm slippers for family and friends.

What is odd about this entire scenario is that I could hardly be a more unlikely candidate to push for a change to the IRB’s operating system. I am a peaceful woman. I dislike arguments and fights. I am not inclined to change a system, but to work within it. But this research was important to me. It was important to tell the stories of the women involved in the Storybook Project and it was equally important that they had an opportunity for reflection in the process (Lawless, 2001). This was a time in my life where I used my personal power to “take one’s place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one’s part matter” (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 18) I felt it was important to break my gentle
silence and become empowered to right a wrong that had political implications (Lawless, 2001). And … I realize that still I tell the story using a “master script” model where I win the battle to tell the stories of oppressed women -- but I’ve become more reflective in the process.

When I received permission to conduct the research from the IRB on August 1, 2005, I began the process of identifying and inviting six women to participate in this narrative research: three incarcerated mothers currently involved in the project and three formerly incarcerated mothers who had extensive experience with the project and were released into the community. Joyce Binder, the former prison ministries coordinator at Lutheran Services in Iowa and with the project, was an invaluable resource for this process. Through over 20 years experience of working at the prison she had come to know the inmate mothers involved in the project at a level gained through confidences and experience.

Binder selected incarcerated women from the list the prison maintained of individuals involved in the project. Although over 600 mothers had read to their children throughout the life of the project, only approximately 20 met the research criteria. The final three women were chosen because of their participation in the Storybook Project of Iowa for a long period of time and their ability to be reflective and articulate. They were chosen to reflect the ethnicity, number of children, educational background, and marital and socio-economic status of those who participate in the project.

A similar process was used to locate three women who had been released into the community and were extensively involved with the project during their incarceration. That list began with nine women and was reduced to four based on the research criteria and Joyce Binder’s ability to locate the women. These women would be able to speak from the
perspective of time and distance about the project and their mothering while incarcerated, sharing the valuable perspective of hindsight.

Initially all the women were contacted by Joyce Binder, either in a face-to-face meeting if they were incarcerated or by telephone, to seek their interest in participating in the study. The three inside women all agreed and stayed with the study for the duration. An initial group of four ‘outside’ women was identified. However, when I tried to contact one woman by telephone to set up the first interview, she was difficult to reach. Either she could not talk at the time and would call me back, or I had to leave a message. When I finally reached her, she expressed a change of heart in participating in the interviews even though she initially had agreed to talk with me. But she had talked with her husband about this study and she explained, “[He] did not want me to revisit my time at the prison, [he] wants me to move on and leave it behind” (confidential conversation, August 31, 2005). Another woman who did participate cancelled and rescheduled interviews eight times during the period of the study. While this was frustrating, I did not find her behavior surprising. I had learned to expect the unexpected during my work with high risk, low income mothers in the Parent Growth Program. Further discussion of my experiences there is located later in this chapter.

Once the women on the inside had agreed to talk with me, I telephoned the warden’s administrative assistant who scheduled the same classroom the Storybook Project of Iowa used for the interviews. At the same time, we scheduled the initial meeting dates and times for the three women. They were advised of my visits in advance through the prison’s paper-based communication network. I was not permitted to contact them directly. In the case of the women on the outside, I telephoned them to set up an initial meeting date, time and place.
This research involved three interviews with each of the women where they shared their experiences with the project and reflected upon how their mothering was constructed and how their incarceration impacted their mothering. Before the first interview began, I explained the informed consent document and informed each of them that our conversations were completely confidential and that I had no connection with or influence on the parole board, treatment staff, child welfare, or other authorities; nor was I a mandatory reporter of child abuse who would have to file a report if I was told of any abuse occurring. And I answered any questions. All six women signed consent forms. For the outside women, I mailed copies of their signed consent document along with the copy of their initial interview transcript. In the case of the incarcerated women, they, as well as the warden’s office retained a copy of the consent document for their files.

The interviews were conducted either in the prison classroom used by the Storybook Project of Iowa or, with the women who lived outside, in a coffee shop or their home. With the women on the outside, I asked them to choose the location for the meetings stating that I wanted them to be comfortable with where we met. They preferred to meet in their homes. The interviews lasted for approximately one hour to an hour-and-a-half and were audio taped. Immediately after each interview I transcribed the tapes and sent or delivered copies to the participants. Before talking with me again, each woman received a copy of “her words” to review. The transcripts varied between 24 and 42 pages in length. Some women read “their books” and others acknowledged that their reading skills were not up to that task. All the women used the conversations as a basis for self reflection. All the names used in this research were changed; I chose the pseudonyms for the women and their children.
The interview guidelines (see Appendixes C & D) included broadly phrased questions and prompts to encourage conversation. These questions were derived from a reading of the literature and my experiences with the women as a volunteer. The initial interview guidelines included questions that were closed-ended and demographic. These included participant’s name, date and place of birth, ethnicity, family organization, marital status, names and ages of children, and where they live(d).

The other questions were open-ended. For example: “Why did you want to be part of Storybook?” “Tell me about how you feel when you read with Storybook.” “What reactions do you get from your children/family to the books and tapes?” “What are things that mothers do for/with their children?” “How did you learn to mother your children?” “What are parenting approaches that have worked well for you?” “What are parenting approaches that have created difficulties?” “How do/did you mother your children from here [inside]?” “What are/were some of the challenges to doing mothering that you’ve experienced here [inside]?” “How does/did Storybook affect your mothering from prison?” “How do/did you feel about yourself when you do/did Storybook?” “There are always volunteers helping with Storybook. Tell me about your experiences with them.” “What will you/did you take away from being at the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women (ICIW)? How has that impacted who you are and how you mother?”

As I began the interviews I learned that the women were excited to be part of the research and wanted to tell their stories. And, in an affirmation of the project, they were excited to tell their stories to someone who represented the project. They had positive experiences with the program and several of them knew me through it. They wanted to talk about the impact of the project on themselves and on their children.
Riessman (1987) warned of the tension that may be added to interviews if the participants are approached with a "scientific" interviewing practice using distance and objectivity (p. 372) and to try to merge this with the empathy and subjectivity characteristic of feminist methodology. I learned this firsthand during my initial interviews. When I asked the demographic questions first, the women responded as if I had a clipboard in my hand and was filling out a government survey about their household. The excitement and anticipation of sharing their experiences (with an interested and new visitor) would fizzle away.

I learned to begin the interview (after gaining a signature on the informed consent document and beginning the audio-tape with their name, date and location) with a smiling request: Tell me a story about Storybook. Their faces would become animated, they would either settle back or sit forward, and they would talk quickly with the words tumbling over each other. It was important to them that they told how this program affected their children. This was what they had prepared for after initially agreeing to be part of the research.

I realized as I became more experienced with the interview questions and these mothers that I could gain the demographic information during the interviews by just listening to their stories. If this did not come through clearly, I asked clarifying questions.

It was early in the second round of interviews that I noticed a pattern. Uniformly, they began to wonder aloud why I was asking questions about how they learned to be a mother, how they mothered before they came to prison, and what was it like to be a mother from inside. These questions were more emotionally wrenching than they had anticipated, bringing tears and powerful emotions. To them, these subjects didn’t relate to the project. I was asking probing questions and was crossing a line. But with my (naturally) calm and soothing voice (so my students at the University tell me) I would respond that I was asking these questions
to understand their world. My research was not only about the joys of Storybook but also about how it affected their mothering from prison. All these questions were important to help me understand. With this explanation, all of the women were more than willing (and patient) to open a window to their world. As Teresa said,

If you’ve never lived a life like some of us have lived it would be hard to understand. It would. And alls you can do is listen to people’s stories and try to put them all together and try to get your own perception of why and how.

I chose this interview strategy for two reasons. First, it provided the incarcerated women with an in-depth opportunity to share their experiences and to discuss how they were mothered, what worked well for them as mothers on the outside, how their mothering was impacted by being on the inside, and how they hoped to mother when they returned to living with their children. It provided the “outside” women with a similar opportunity, but was oriented to the past tense and with the benefit of hindsight. Second, this research was structured such that the women were able to revisit their responses and stories in the later interviews. This interview structure allowed them the opportunity to rethink, review, and revisit.

I audio-taped the interviews and took notes as needed. Immediately following the interviews I transcribed them verbatim and coded the stories into categories such as: abused as a child, first think what it means to be a mother, activities in prison to ease loss of mothering role, being a ‘good’ mom, describe self as a mother now, didn’t work well as a mother, dreams for the future, and drug and alcohol begin date. These categories were helpful in the early interviews and when conducting further interviews with other participants to identify trends in the data. After all the interviews were completed I had identified forty-
seven codes. I read the transcripts again and recoded as seemed important, then "cut and pasted" the coded stories into separate computer documents according to the new coding categories. These general categories included: how I was mothered, what I did as a mother, who I am as a mother, Storybook Project. These categories were reviewed for organization and structure in terms of the women's stories and the research goals and the stories were sorted yet again to reflect the current organizational structure.

*You Know What I'm Sayin'?*

I listened carefully as these women told their stories. I analyzed the transcripts throughout the interview process. I took notes as needed. Through my prior experiences teaching and conducting home visits with a similar group of women, volunteering with the project and interacting with the women, being situated in the inmate mother literature and with an interest in conducting interviews as conversations, I thought I had a better than an average chance of being able to "hear" what they were saying. However, due to my lack of "shared cultural norms" (Michaels, 1985, p. 51) with the women, I know that I did not always "hear" correctly (Riessman, 1987, p. 172).

Marshall and Rossman (1999) stated that interpersonal skills are of paramount importance with an emphasis on being an "active, patient, and thoughtful listener and having an empathetic understanding of and a profound respect for the perspectives of others" (p. 85). My experience with the project was an important factor to building our ability to relate to each other (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Sandra Enos (2001), in her study to learn how inmate mothers constructed and managed motherhood while incarcerated, used a process she termed "checking stories through comparisons" (p. 155). I found this approach to be particularly helpful in my
research. Sherry was my “outside” interpreter. She was one of the last women I interviewed and was interested in helping me understand what I was hearing. She had spent three years inside this prison and had a number of friends who had been incarcerated there. I talked with her when I had a theory or needed clarification on something that I kept hearing from other women. Without breaking confidence, I asked her to interpret inmate mothers’ stories for me.

Listen to the story she told to answer the question I had about why the inmate mothers said they were good mothers just because they still had custody of their children:

My sister, she’s a meth addict, and she never got arrested. She never lost one of her daughters; first husband took her first two and she gave her last daughter to my mom when she was 3 years old, but she kept one daughter. And that whole time, the younger daughter’s 12 now, and this whole time she’s never lost her. And she never went to prison, but she’s been in a number of meth labs. I could tell you about—She’s shot meth. She’s done all kinds of things. She’s had so many different guys in and out of her life. Her and her daughter have lived in so many different places and every time she moves, her daughter loses everything. All her toys have to start over. And she’s so tired of it. But my sister, I think, feels that she has been more successful at being a parent than I was because she didn’t lose any. She didn’t lose her. And she didn’t go to prison. When in all reality it is … [B: A different grading sheet?]

And that’s the grading sheet that says I don’t go to prison and DHS don’t take my kids away and I’m doing OK… [B: OK. … … That was revealing.

Thanks.] You’re welcome. [B: I’m trying to get this figured out.] Probably takes a lifetime! [laughing]
When interviewing prison inmates and former inmates the issue of race and social location becomes sensitive. Since this research was conducted in a Midwestern penitentiary, White women outnumbered Black and Hispanic women in the Storybook Project. In an effort to echo the statistics of the races of the women involved in the project one Black woman was included in the interviews. While she was chosen because she was Black, the other sampling qualifications were also used: number of children, educational background, and marital and socio-economic status. The five other women in the sample were White and chosen for the same reasons.

In her narrative analysis of two contrasting interviews, one with an Anglo and one with a Puerto Rican woman, Riessman stated that the lack of “shared cultural norms” is particularly important as it “reproduce[s] within the scientific enterprise class and cultural divisions between women that feminists have tried so hard to diminish” (Riessman, 1987, p. 173). As O’Brien (2001) stated in a discussion of her research involving formerly incarcerated women as they transitioned from prison, “fostering a collaborative stand acknowledges the inherently interactive quality of interviewing, and incorporates the empowerment of women as an implicit research principle” (p. 154).

Enos (2001) addressed the issue of “How could I come to ‘know’ what inmate mothers were really saying in our interviews” (p. 153). She cited DeVault (1995) as she reminded me to be sensitive to the issue of race as it is used in dialogue:

[D]o I know enough to...understand and interpret? How did my knowledge – and perhaps, more importantly, my ignorance – shape our interaction and then my reading of the interview data produced in our encounter? (1995, p. 626)
Angela, who was the lone Black woman in the sample, would often punctuate her stories with the expression, “You know what I’m sayin?” and I would respond slowly, “Yeah, but keep telling me.” Angela was the only African-American woman whom I interviewed and from time to time I did not understand some of her phrases and expressions. When this happened I was careful to ask her questions for clarification. For instance, several times in her stories she used the phrase “worrying about the streets.” When transcribing and analyzing these early stories I wondered if this was an expression that she used to describe engaging in prostitution to pay for her alcohol addiction. So I asked her what she meant. She was patient with me when she described “worrying about the streets” as “partying.”

In fact, I think that asking her for clarification was a way that I gained trust with her and with each of the women. It was to say that I was listening hard enough and was honest enough with them to clear up racial, social, and language confusions as they surfaced. I think they came to see themselves as the experts teaching me about something they knew and I was interested in learning. Since I was a university teacher and a Junior League looking lady, I think they enjoyed giving me an education of their own. This being said, in no way do I mean to imply that their responses were less than the truth as they knew it. I always assumed that they told their stories to me with sincerity. Girshick (2003) spoke to this, “What I have heard from countless women inmates is a craving for self-respect, for self-worth. They respond to people and programs that help them feel like worthwhile human beings” (p. 174).

My experience with this type of population of women began in 1990, when for four years as a family and consumer sciences teacher employed by the Des Moines Public Schools, I taught family living and parenting skills to high risk, low income mothers in the Parent Growth Program. The program was part of the school district’s Adult and Continuing
Education program. Mothers were referred to the intense program by judges with the goal they would learn life and parenting skills and by applying this knowledge at home would avoid termination of their parental rights. The mothers in the program were from families where domestic violence and addiction were the norm and were rooted in generations-old behaviors and addictions. My position included teaching classes, conducting weekly home visits and submitting written reports to judges and social workers. When the mothers in the Parent Growth Program did not come to class and I could not locate them, I would contact their social workers and often find out that they had been to court and sent to county jail or the state prison.

In this teaching position, I observed the limitations that many children face in their own homes. I would see it in my classroom, in the faces of their children in our day care center, and in their homes each week. After three years, I began to realize that I was experiencing a deep weariness in my soul. I had a knot in my stomach before each day of work that never really went away. I had horrible, terrible nightmares. I was consuming quantities of antacids, beginning early in the morning. I felt completely and absolutely inadequate and frustrated as a teacher in the program. I knew enough about the women’s lives to know that all my efforts were not likely to change their lives or their children’s lives. These families likely would always have a very tenuous hold on any type of stable lifestyle and I wanted more for the children. They faced multiple limitations in their own homes where they should have been sheltered from the stresses of the outside world and nurtured to face the experiences and challenges of that same world. Tears for these children came frequently for me. Anger at their mothers and fathers was always close by. My feelings mirrored Elaine Lawless’ when she shared her experiences with working at a battered
women's shelter (2001), "My tears are for their broken homes and their broken faces [women's], for the hideous and frightening lives of their children, for their nightmares, and for me, because my tears are no help to them at all" (p. xx).

Because of my prior experiences with the Parent Growth Program, I had a sense of the home lives the women in the study had come from and I knew what their children "looked like." In fact, it was because of these early experiences with women and children in the Parent Growth Program that I co-founded the Storybook Project in 1998. At a visceral level I knew what imprisonment meant to these women and their children.

In qualitative research, closeness to the study site improves the researcher's understanding. Since the Storybook Project of Iowa's inception in 1998, I have been a long-time volunteer and an advisory board member or on the Board of Directors. To this research I brought a deep commitment to the work of the project and to the women at the prison. I believe that because the women and I had a common experience with the project, they reflected upon and shared their stories with more honest and sincerity than they might have with a "neutral" researcher. The passion and experience I brought to the project was an asset that allowed me to "hear" their stories more clearly and analyze them in more depth than a researcher with little background in this area.

**Interviews in Their Homes**

Feminist researchers and many other postmodern or humanistic researchers have rejected the notion of value-free research (Bochner, 1994; Bochner & Ellis, 1996; DeVault, 1990; Ellingson, 1998; Ellis, 1997; Fine, 1988; Mies, 1983; Reinharz, 1992). As researchers we come into the situation with our own histories, experiences, emotional responses and training. I brought to this research my own position as a teacher and a first time researcher.
For this research, in addition to interviewing three women incarcerated in a state women’s facility, I was invited into the homes of three women to talk with them about their experiences with mothering in prison and the Storybook Project. These women had been released from prison for about two years. By agreeing to participate in the research, I was asking them to revisit the memories of their mothering from inside. I’m sure they felt anxiety to meet with me. I know I was anxious to talk with them.

For our first conversation and my first interview for this study, Sally asked me to visit her in her home. She lived in a small town about an hour’s drive from my home. She scheduled this visit for 2:00pm on Monday, August 22, 2005 to give herself sufficient time to get home from her job in a nearby school. The timing meant that I had all morning to be anxious about this first visit. I worried that I would be late and compensated by building in more time for the drive. I worried that the cassette recorder would not capture her words and visualized where to place it in the interview situation. I worried that the recorder’s batteries or tape would fail and brought more of each along in my tote bag. I worried about what to wear and decided that a summer top and crop pants with sandals would be best.

Subliminally, I was returning to the home visits I conducted for the Parent Growth Program. In reality this was the first day of a new semester of classes at the university for me and I had a lot to accomplish, but revisiting those memories caused me to pause often in my work that morning. I did not return to happy memories.

Those home visits fifteen years ago were vitally important to the women’s education and to mine. I learned about their lives through seeing them in their homes and interacting with their children and relatives and friends. I worked with them one-on-one on their family living and parenting skills, and this was rewarding for both of us. But I became “way too
familiar” with shiny bronze cockroaches scampering in baby cribs, baby bottles on the dirty
shag carpets with nipples encrusted with sour milk, the smell of garbage in the kitchen,
boyfriends hanging out, my fear of catching head lice from the filthy carpets, and the tension
headache I often had after these visits. This was coupled with the good feeling of doing grass
roots family education (remember my Peace Corps experience in Africa) and the intense
frustration that I knew little and helped these families less.

With this toxic brew of memories boiling in my body I drove through the late
Midwestern summer heat and humidity to Sally’s home for our first visit. I get migraines
when under extreme stress so I was prepared with a bottle of water and my prescription
medicine for the drive home. I found her home easily and I was on time. To my enormous
relief I was greeted with a warm hug, words of welcome and a “do you recognize me now?”
and the offer to sit in an overstuffed chair in the living room. My initial free-floating
anxieties vanished. No garbage, no cockroaches, no angry boyfriends. Just a clean, fresh
smelling and tidy older home that seemed to hold just the two of us. We discussed the
informed consent document and added our signatures. I promised to mail a copy with her
transcript. With the tape recorder running I began our conversation and the recorder captured
her words.

My experience conducting home visits with drug affected, abusing, and abused
women in the Parent Growth Program did impact this and subsequent interviews, both inside
their homes and inside the prison. I struggled with my memories and the physical feelings
they brought back. I struggled with my position. I knew how to be a teacher conducting a
home visit, but now I was a researcher gathering narratives on mothering. Sometimes I
struggled with that line: teacher/researcher. But I was always cognizant of that; so much so
that I gave myself headaches over the push-pulls that I felt. Conducting the interviews was not easy to do. I rarely settled into them comfortably. But I did enjoy hearing the stories about their mothering and was thrilled when they told me they felt a measure of healing through the telling.

Ellingson's research (1998) discussed her position as a bone-cancer survivor in relationship with oncology patients with regard to using reflexivity in field work while conducting a narrative study. She knew what these patients were going through not just on a cognitive level, but at a body-knowledge level. Her body reacted to these patients and their treatment. I too felt this with my own experiences as I interviewed the women, especially in their homes. I was mindful (and cautious) of their home life, the conditions of their apartment buildings, their neighborhoods, and their histories. I was a first-time researcher and felt it every time. Every time I visited Karla in the kitchen of her apartment, I was nervous to be with her. In my personal journal I wrote:

Every time I leave her I am convinced that I am in the presence of someone who is NOT healthy. Sometimes I wonder if I'm safe there. I sit close to the door, just in case I need to leave quickly. I keep the conversation directed to Storybook, while listening to her rant and rave about her mom and her other issues that are seemingly unrelated to my research. But I do this to build a trusting relationship with her, so that she will talk with me about Storybook and [her son] Sam.

In addition to my personal journal, I kept copious field notes and a methodological log. This provided further data for this research and added to the audit trail. These field notes consisted of post-interview reflections, a record of all anecdotes and off-the-record
information, "interpretive hunches" (O’Brien, 2001, p. 151), and a chronological listing of research events. I maintained a personal journal to document my "experiences, ideas, fears, mistakes, confusions, breakthroughs, and problems" (Spradley, 1980, p. 71). The methodological log contained reflections on my reading of the literature as it related to my research.

**Conclusion**

The use of storytelling as narrative reveals a ‘truth’ about how the women view themselves and their worlds. As Elaine Lawless stated, "How they ‘see’ themselves on that given day clearly directs their narrative. As far as we are concerned, there is no other truth than that one" (2001, p. 6). She goes on to add, “Each told narrative is different from the other times it has been performed, and...the storyteller and audience work together to enact the telling of a narrative that is vitally important to the community” (p.6). She encouraged readers to see that these narratives were the current “truth” as the women saw themselves. She said, “telling their stories, framing their lives for me and my tape recorder, may actually help them frame or reframe how they approach tomorrow” (p. 6). She also believed that the act of asking for their stories empowers the women, perhaps for the first time. And for the women, the telling of their stories or, as Lawless called it, “the act of telling our story” (p. 8) is the significant now of the process.

As a researcher it was my role to co-author their stories by retelling them through my analytic descriptions (Mishler, 1995, p. 117). As Mishler (1995) stated, “We, too, are storytellers and through our concepts and methods – our research strategies, data samples, transcription procedures – we construct the story and its meaning” (p. 117-118). Cole (1989)
added to the tension by stating "Remember, what you are hearing is to some considerable extent a function of you, hearing" (p. 15).

It was through this experience that I hope the women I interviewed found understanding for who they are, what they have done, and what they may yet do (Bloom, 1998) as mothers and as women.
CHAPTER 4 – HOW I WAS MOTHERED AND HOW I MOTHERED

Introduction

This chapter begins with Teresa’s voice and image. She was a slight, dark haired, 27-year-old mother of two elementary-age children. She was animated with bright eyes, but had the hair, skin, and teeth of a meth addict. When I asked her how she learned to be a mother, she responded this way: she listened to the question, tipped her head, laughed apologetically at having to clear up something that was obvious to her, then said that learning to be a mother is

... like shaving your legs ... it’s like, I just watched my mom shave her legs

... [she] never said, “This is how you do it.” I just watched [her] and when I started to shave – that’s how I did it.

In this chapter, just as generations of women have learned to shave their legs through observation, trial, and error, I will argue that women have learned to mother through observation, trial, and error from how they were mothered. In other words, what was done to you as a child is what you do as a mother to your children. All the intervention programs in the world will not erase the imprint that early experiences make on a woman’s psyche of what it means to be a mother. In the Midwestern prison I visited, there were a number of programs available to incarcerated mothers. The residential drug treatment program helped them remember how they were mothered and how they mothered before their incarceration, forcing them to reconsider how they want to mother from inside and how they want to mother when they return to the outside world. This program also helped them come to an awareness of the victims they “took” in their addictions and brought them face-to-face with their addictive behaviors. Parenting classes helped the mothers gain techniques and tools for
the daily care and guidance of their children. The Storybook Project of Iowa is an intervention that provides incarcerated women with an opportunity to connect with their children through books and tapes. It allows them to practice some of the techniques they learned through the intervention programs, such as positive communication skills, reading to their children, and it provides them with conversational topics for letters, visits, and phone calls. But the programs cannot erase the early imprint of how they were mothered. Only the women, through extensive self-examination and reflection, can manipulate and manage this mindset.

The women in this study dared to think about how they were mothered and how they mothered their own children. They told stories that helped me (and them) understand their early developing and complex subjectivities as a mother and as a girl-woman. Through their stories they “re-membered” (Haaken, 1998 as cited in Lawless, 2001, p. 155) how they came to “be.” When the women dared to look back and tell their stories this became a process of “transformative re-membering” (Lawless, 2001, p. 156). Through the process of telling their stories they came to be newly reflective people and mothers.

**Being a Mother and Doing Mothering**

How does one define motherhood? Who is a mother? What do mothers do? How does one learn to be a mother? How is a woman’s mothering subjectivity formed?

Motherhood has been defined, described, and categorized in a number of ways. The Northern European feminist approach to motherhood defined it as the ultimate responsibility for children (O’Reilly, 2004; Rich, 1976). Martha McMahon (1995) argued that becoming a mother was transforming for women and that motherhood was actively constructed by women. She suggested that this ultimate responsibility for children equaled a mother’s moral
worth. She argued that there are two distinct categories of motherhood: 1) the status of "being a mother," and 2) taking on the responsibility and adequately performing the tasks involved related to "doing mothering" (1995). In addition, in "Mothering From The Inside: Parenting In a Women's Prison" (2001), Sandra Enos stated that "motherhood is distinguished from other social commitments, not only by how much is committed but by what is committed" (p. 26). She added,

Doing motherhood is a complex matter, in that it is both constructed and influenced by large structural factors. How one does motherhood and mothering depends very much upon the resources, social position, cultural factors, and other factors that one brings to the role and task. (p. 151)

I asked the inmate mothers and the former inmate mothers these questions: What is a mother? What do mothers do? How did you learn to be a mother? I did so because I believe a discourse on how one learned to be a mother logically starts with how one was mothered. It is through this early experience that females learn the characteristics of this role.

Learning To Be A Mother

Abused as a Child

Sherry was a 37-year-old White woman. She had given birth to six children but one son died when he was six-months-old from birth defects related to Down Syndrome. Four of her surviving children lived with other family members. One son age 18 and another age 13 lived with their paternal grandparents. A six-year-old daughter and her five-year-old brother lived with their maternal grandmother. Of the six children Sherry had borne, only her five-month-old son lived with her and her husband. The other children visited her every other weekend in a contentious visitation agreement with the grandparents. She had served three
years of a four-year mandatory on a 25-year sentence for methamphetamine sales and was released early on appeal. Sherry was discharged October, 2003. She attended and failed 10th grade in three different schools, never completing 10th grade. Prior to her imprisonment she gained a GED (without studying for it) and a beautician's license. She participated in Storybook Project of Iowa for two-and-one-half-years.

Sherry’s childhood was full of sexual, physical, emotional, and drug abuse. She told of walking in the door hoping to smell the sweet fragrance of marijuana plants drying in the oven. She knew if her father was high on pot, she would be safe for the evening. “It was the good part of home. ‘Cause when dad was getting stoned, then things were a little more mellow. When he was drinking we tried to hide… … .” Elaine Lawless (2001) heard many stories of women who told of similar experiences of abuse. These women spoke of walking on eggshells hoping to avoid doing or saying something that would trigger the anger of their father, husband, or uncle. In Sherry’s young life, the smell of pot represented safety and peace from her father’s abuse.

Sherry told the following story of her father’s abuse where her mother, grandparents, the social worker, her teachers, and the police were unable to protect her. She described the abuse beginning at the age of eight, her empowerment at 14 when she put her father in prison, her mother’s inability to stay away from her father, and the final episode where her younger sister called the cops one night and had him arrested.

Dad stuck a pot pipe in my face when I was eight. He said, “This will make you feel better.” So by the time I was 14, then I put him in prison, that’s what I did to feel better, all the time, was to get stoned. I was raised in a drug home. I was extremely abused. When my [younger] sister and I were 13 and
14 we put our father in prison. My mom did nothing about anything. And she left him like seven times and went back to him every time so she knew these things were happening and ... ... she didn’t do anything.

[B: And would you have liked to have been taken?]

Oh yeah. We went to DHS [Department of Human Services] quite a few times. Quite a few times, right before my dad went to prison we had went to DHS and we’d – that lady was frantically trying to help us figure out a way to get out of there. We couldn’t prove where the abuse came from. We couldn’t prove anything that was happening. So we-they couldn’t do nothing.

[When she was 13-14] we just got old enough, and we had worked with-- my sister and I-- had went to DHS and tried to get them to help and they couldn’t really do much ‘cause they couldn’t catch him in the act of anything. Tried turning him in for the drugs and he never had enough on him to really amount to anything. So – and we just called the cops one night and...

... He liked to sit us around the table and ask us questions and then take turns beating one of us while the other ones watched and stuff. It would go on till like 6 in the morning. And ... ... ... [looking into the distance] he took my mom off in another room to hit her, for some reason or another, I don’t know why ‘cause he never did that, but my [younger] sister got on the phone. And called my grandma and they come and got us. And the only way for us to stay away from him, at that time, us kids to stay away from him, was to put him in prison, because my mom would always go back to him. ‘Cause we’d left him
like seven times, but she went back every time. So we knew that we had to press charges on him.

Consider the irony of Sherry's story. She said, "Dad stuck a pot pipe in my face when I was eight. He said, "This will make you feel better." At the same time in her life he was sexually abusing her. Her description "sticking a pot pipe" in her face bears striking similarity to the image of the rapes she endured from him. His abuse of her was quite thorough. Not only was he abusing her little-girl body by forcing one of his body parts into one of hers, but, in her words, he forced an addictive substance into her mouth to drug her into compliance. So while the smell of pot assured her that she was safe from her father's abuse, it also drugged her so that she could endure his abuses more comfortably. It is no surprise that later her own drug of choice was marijuana.

Yet when she was 14, Sherry noted, that "we knew...the only way for us to stay away from him...was to put him in prison...we knew that we had to press charges on him." For abused women, the age of 14 seems to be the age of empowerment where they run away from home or get married to another abusive man (Lawless, 2001). Perhaps it is because at this age the mind reaches a level of development where it is capable of understanding cause and effect. The human developmental theorist Jean Piaget hypothesized that at about the ages of 11 through 15 adolescents are no longer limited by what they directly see or hear, nor are they restricted to the problem at hand (Thomas, 2000). In Piaget's "Formal Operations Period" children "can now imagine the conditions of a problem – past, present, or future – and develop hypotheses about what might logically occur under different combinations of factors" (Thomas, 2000, p. 266). At 14, Sherry, her sister, and the other girls in the literature
who tried to run away or stop abuse, had grown up enough to envision a future that was free of abuse. She decided that the way to stay away from him was to put him in prison.

When Sherry told this story I was angry for her. I heard her anger at her mother and agreed with it. How could her mother let this happen? Why were Sherry and her sister unprotected? Why would her mother have taken her children back into that environment time after time? Then, like a thunderbolt on a clear spring day, I realized that Sherry was the child of the abused women Elaine Lawless interviewed at the safe shelter (2001). She was the child that Lawless cried for, “My tears are for their broken homes and their broken faces [women’s] for the hideous and frightening lives of their children, for their nightmares…” (p. xx). Sherry was the unseen little girl in the Lawless research, crying in the kitchen while her mother sat on the front steps, her face bruised, her hair ripped from her scalp, trying to collect herself enough to come back inside to fix dinner for her abuser (Lawless, 2001) and her children. Sherry was that small girl. But now she was an adult woman with children of her own, and she still did not understand her mother’s abuse. And she was still angry.

Sherry described her mother as knowing of the abuse but “did nothing” to stop it, of her leaving her [Sherry’s] father “like seven times,” but going back to him every time. This story is consistent with the abused women literature (Lawless, 2001). These women are so abused that they are paralyzed to protect themselves and their children from the hands of their abusers. And when they do manage to find the courage and strength to leave, they return home time after time, hoping that this time will be different, this time he won’t rage over an incidental act, this time he won’t break their ribs, pull out their hair, or rape them in front of the children. Sherry’s mother simply was acting out of her own abuse. However horrible her
offense in not protecting Sherry or her sister, she was unable to protect herself as well. Sherry did not understand this.

Where were Sherry's grandparents, her social workers, her teachers, or the police during the six years of her abuse? Why were her grandparents unable to take the female children to live with them? Was it because they were reluctant to transfer the abuse to their own home, knowing the vicious nature of the children's father? Why were the social workers unable to "prove where the abuse came from"? Were the bruises and breaks, vaginal tears, and drugs in the children's bloodstreams insufficient evidence of abuse? Why was their entire case dependent upon the amount of drugs the police had to find on their father? How was it that the two girls and their mother were abused time and time again for six years and were unable to get any help from their family or community?

From my experience with the abused women and with social workers I encountered while teaching in the Parent Growth Program, I suggest that the answer to the questions about the culpability of her social workers, teachers, and the police resides in another of Sherry's stories where she told of her father moving them from place to place. They were moved when anyone began to realize what was going on in the home, to hide the drug abuse and the other forms of abuse. She was moved so frequently that she attended 10th grade three times, failing it each time. Keeping a family on the move in rental farm homes is an effective method to keep abusive activities out of sight of the authorities. And the silence of the abused is guaranteed by keeping them away from anyone who they could develop a relationship with or could confide in.

The question remains, where were her grandparents in this story? Sherry's narrative did not provide any insight, only that her sister was able to call her grandmother and "they
come and got us.” Was it, as I suggested above, that the grandparents were afraid of him (and his friends)? Additionally, Sherry’s story was not clear as to whether these grandparents were the parents of her father or if these were her mother’s parents. This information would have provided a little more background from which to explain their behavior. Were these grandparents also involved in abusive behaviors? While we may want to turn away from the idea of the older generation having started the abuse-cycle, this would have been a reasonable explanation. The literature is full of stories of the cyclical nature of abuse in families (Lawless, 2001).

In her story, Sherry digressed from her narrative to tell us more details of the night when they called the police. In this story she painted a horrific picture of the abuse her father inflicted upon his family and of the thoroughness with which he demonstrated his power over them. She described how he liked to create an environment where they were required to sit in a small space and focus their attention on him (“sit us around a table”). He liked to ask questions that presumably had no right answers (“he liked to ask questions”). And he liked to do it all night so that they were racked with exhaustion and perhaps drugged. Certainly we can assume that he was high or drunk (another addiction according to Sherry). He would take turns asking questions and when their answers failed to match his expectations he beat them (“and stuff”) in front of each other. By beating them in front of each other he could be sure that they all knew their turn would come and they had a good idea of what to expect, and he could be assured that there was a common feeling of shame that bound the family to silence.

Most poignant to her story was the way Sherry recounted how her father took her mom off to another room to beat and likely rape her. This story clarified in detail the manipulation her father employed to enforce his power over them. While Sherry had told her
story frequently in the past, it was obvious that this memory still brought back pain. She did not want to “keep re-feeling” it, but it was still there, etched upon her adolescent girl soul. In her story, twenty-four years later, I had to “read the gaps” for the memories that were still too painful to share.

Another tragic and heroic aspect of this story is that these two girls were looking for an opportunity to get their father arrested, but this meant that they had to suffer the abuse until just the right situation occurred. This is another recurring theme in the literature on abused women (Lawless, 2001). Often abused women must exhibit unbelievable patience, courage, and heroism to achieve freedom. Sherry told this story as a pivotal event in her adolescence. She had grown from being an abused eight-year-old girl and was undoubtedly a 14-year-old “woman” physically and mentally. She told this story as the heroine, the victor. She and her slightly younger sister got their father arrested, in spite of her mother’s abuse-driven paralysis and inability to protect them. Sherry believed that mothers should protect their children from abuse. If they failed in this role, the children had to take matters into their own hands.

I believe, however, that Sherry’s mother did protect her daughters in that final abusive night. I think that she allowed herself to be led into the bedroom to accept the beating (and rape) by her husband to give the girls the opportunity they needed to call the police. And I think that Sherry knew this because of the long pause in her narrative. She knew that the event of her mother being taken into the bedroom for the beating was unusual. She acknowledged this in her telling of this story when she paused, looked into the distance, and speculated on this. Sherry was so angry with her mother for her lack of support and protection that she could not forgive her. However I believe that she did finally forgive her;
whether she would acknowledge it or not; she realized that her mother protected her in that final abusive night.

Asking the women to create and organize their stories provided them with an opportunity to reflect upon their personal histories or “herstories” (Lawless, 2001, p. 16). The term herstory as compared to history reflects the rejection of the use of the male-dominated master-narrative (Lawless, 2001, p.16). In a master-narrative, patriarchal themes are reflected in the organizational structure of women’s stories (Heilbrun, 1988). An example of this includes romance novel endings of “happily ever after.” DuPlessis called this, “The invention of strategies that sever the narrative from formerly conventional structures of fiction and consciousness about women” (1985, p. x) and named it “writing beyond the ending” (1985, p. x). Lawless cited Marsha Houston and Cheris Kramarae as researchers who recognized the importance of telling her story her way:

Breaking out of silence means more than being empowered to speak or to write, it also means controlling the form as well as the content of one’s own communication, the power to develop and to share one’s own unique voice.

(as cited in Lawless, 2001, p. 13)

In Sherry’s story she told of sending her dad to prison as a master-narrative (Heilbrun, 1988). Telling her story in this way gave her power over her father – her abuser. She needed to be perceived as a strong girl-woman. Perhaps of more importance, she needed to see herself this way. In the telling of the story her identity as a strong young woman-mother fighting against abuse and the inaction of her ineffective and weak mother became more pronounced.
Angela was an African American woman, age 29. She had given birth to five sons outside of marriage. At the time of our conversations her children were 12, 10, seven, four, and three. The oldest lived with her mother; his father was in prison. The other children lived with their father/her new husband. She was married for the first time while in prison, September 13, 2005. Angela was serving a 20-year sentence for aggravated assault with a tentative discharge date of February 4, 2012, but she anticipated being paroled in July 2006. Prior to her imprisonment she was three credits away from earning an associate of arts degree from a local community college, had worked for the school district as an teaching associate, and while in prison applied to take a business course offered through the adult education program. She had participated in the Storybook Project of Iowa for 10 months.

When Angela told of how she was mothered, her pauses were even more intense than Sherry’s. Often she cried during these conversations. These were difficult memories for her to revisit; she was obviously re-feeling them all over again. When I asked her to describe how she was mothered she said,

I’ll just say she was a yeller. She [her mother], yeah she just, she just

... ... I don’t know, she just didn’t ... ... I don’t know, I think she was just like overwhelmed, and just ... ...I can’t even explain it. ... ... ...she didn’t have the time. You know what I mean?

[B: I’m tryin’]

She didn’t, she just didn’t have the time to sit down and ... ... ... work with us when we needed it. I couldn’t just go to her and ask her to help me, with my homework. I can’t ever remember the time.

[B: How did she interact with you?]
She really didn’t. I mean there was times when we had our family nights, you know, when we’d sit down and watch TV and things like that. But just actually interacting with me as one-on-one? No, she didn’t do that. She didn’t do that.

Angela did not tell stories of being “other mothered” or “community mothered” (Collins, 1994, O’Reilly, 2004). Contrary to Collins’ (1994) and O’Reilly’s (2004) theoretical constructs where the children of Black mothers who could not or did not mother well were cared for by others in the community, Angela did not have another mother-person in her life to support her. While Patricia Hill Collins (1994) described this position as one of power for Black women, it was not so for Angela. When other women took accountability for other’s children as a matter of social activism and family survival against oppression, Angela was alone with an abusive mother. This set the pattern for her mothering as well.

Karla was a White woman age 32. She had given birth to one son. At the time of our conversations he was seven-years-old and lived with his father/her ex-husband, his wife and children. She had served six months in the Violator’s Unit of the prison for drugs and stealing. Of the six women I talked with, her sentence was the shortest and consequently, her participation in the Storybook Project was six months long. She was discharged December 2004. Prior to imprisonment she earned a medical technician degree from a local community college and had worked in a nursing home.

In Karla’s early home life, her mother was an alcoholic with a unstable and selfish presence (typical to addicts). Her parents divorced when she was five-years-old. After her mother moved out, Karla, her father, and brother moved in with her paternal grandmother. Her grandmother was a grade school teacher who raised eight children (seven girls, one boy)
with an alcoholic husband. Karla described her grandmother, who became her surrogate mother, as “hard-headed and hilarious.” Her father was “just kind of unloving” to them as children but later demonstrated warmth to his grandchildren. So Karla was raised with an alcoholic mother and grandfather, a firm grandmother, and an undemonstrative but stable father.

Karla shared stories of her mother’s instability and selfishness. She remembered her mother’s instability: “I just remember feeling – how come she never does what she says she’d going to do? How come when she says she’s gonna be here, she’s not coming?” To illustrate her mother’s selfishness, Karla told a heart-wrenching story of how her mother “sold” her and her brother to her father when she was in kindergarten.

You know my mom walked out of my life when I was five years old. I cannot imagine doing that to Sam. She just went out. She had a boyfriend there and she told my dad that she’s taking me and my brother. ... ... ... He said, “You can take the car, you can take the house, but you’re not taking those kids.” So she said, “Well, I want a thousand dollars for both of them, thousand dollars apiece.” So he went and got a thousand dollars for me and thousand dollars for my brother and gave it to her. And she just walked out.

Karla could not imagine selling her son to anyone and, to make matters worse, doing it in front of the child. In contrast, she also remembered her father’s stability. He was willing to give all he possessed to his ex-wife, but he was keeping Karla and her brother. If money was the way to keep the children, then he was going to pay it. Karla learned early that mothers were selfish and unstable and fathers were distant but constant.
Early Lives of Calm and Security

In contrast to the abuse and abnormality of the childhoods of Sherry, Karla, and Angela, Courtney, Sally, and Teresa had early lives of relative calm and security. Courtney was a White woman age 24 who at 16 had given birth to a son. At the time of our conversations he was eight-years-old and lived with her mother. Courtney had been incarcerated at 18 and was serving 50 years with an 85% sentence for second degree murder. Her tentative discharge date was August 16, 2042. She dropped out of school in ninth grade when she got pregnant with her son, although the school district had a policy of encouraging the attendance of pregnant students. She worked in a convenience store while pregnant but stayed home while her son was an infant, providing in-home day care to neighbor’s children. While in prison, Courtney completed her GED and took community college courses through the state’s fiber optic distance education network. She also mentored new prisoners in her unit and had participated in Storybook Project of Iowa for four years.

When I asked Courtney about how she was mothered, she reflected upon her home life before she was imprisoned.

I’ve always lived with my mom. I’d never have left home. So I lived with my mom. Well, we lived in a house with my dad and they’ve been separated, but they wanted to live together, until all of their kids had graduated school. Which we didn’t. But as soon as I turned 16 they ... sold their house and my mom moved into an apartment and I went with her. And by then, me and [father of her son] had been dating and he had moved in with me anyways. Wanted to be together all the time.
In Courtney’s story, while her mother and father were separated, they still lived together until she was 16-years-old. I wondered at this, why 16? And I wondered why they allowed Allen to move in with them, just because they had been dating and she was pregnant. Simply wanting “to be together all the time” would not be a valid justification for this arrangement in many families. None of the four daughters, of which Courtney was the youngest, graduated high school, in spite of her parents’ hopes. In our conversations she mentioned that if her parents had been more firm with them, they probably would have gone to school. Since her older sister had a congenital heart condition, the girls knew that feigning a headache allowed them a free ticket home for the day. Perhaps her parent’s motivation was to be loved by their children. Perhaps by being laissez-faire parents, not requiring school attendance and allowing Courtney’s boyfriend to live with them, they thought to reduce the tension in the family and keep everyone happy. Certainly they were passive parents. If this was their rationale for parenting, Courtney had mirrored this with her current mothering style with Nathan.

Sally was a 45-year-old White woman. She was married, had given birth to four children. She had three daughters: 18, 12, 10, and one son 15. The oldest daughter attended community college in another town. The other children lived with her and her husband. She had served a four-year sentence for child endangerment and was discharged on January 26, 2004. I assumed that she had a high school diploma but never asked her about it specifically. Prior to her arrest she provided in-home day care for the children in her small farming community. She participated in Storybook Project of Iowa for four-and-one-half-years.

When I posed the question to Sally, of how she learned to mother, she was stumped and searched for answers as to how to explain how she learned mothering.
I don't know, maybe from my mom. ... ... ... But I guess when I was little. I did baby sit too, when I was little, I think I was like 10 when I started, you know, watching kids. I kind of ... ... I had to watch them at my mom and dad's house. They wouldn't let me go to their house until I was a certain age.

... ... ... Like my oldest sister, had never baby sat. She didn't like kids or anything. Her and [her husband] got married and they had [a child] and it was like, they weren't going to be able to do this! ... ... Because she'd never been

... ... ... I don't know if it was from watching Mom or if I just tried it on my own, like I said, you know. Because when I did do the babysittin' I would to.

... ... ... Mom would usually ... ... They would eat with us if they were at the house. You know 'till I got older ... ... then I'd change diapers. I had to do it. It wasn't Mom's ... ... you know. ... ... [laughing] Because I was probably 10.

I don't know, my Mom might have showed me. I really don't remember. Or maybe I was at their house at one time,' cause my cousin used to live down this house here. They live out by [town] now. But um, I watched her kids quite a bit. But I, if she was there, I might be in there when she was bathing 'em, just kind of watching her.

While Sally's response was full of stops and starts, this was her speech pattern, not because she was emotional. But in spite of her method of telling, Sally's story was full of family activities and relationships. She was raised in the role of mothering, daughtering, and neighboring such that when pressed, she could not imagine not knowing what she knew.

Sally followed this pattern into her own adulthood in her mothering role.
Teresa was a 27-year-old White woman. She had given birth to two children. She had a daughter, nine-years-old, and a son, seven-years-old, and she had never been married. After her incarceration both children originally lived with their birth father, but since he was involved in drugs they now lived with her sister. Teresa had served 29 months mandatory for the sale of methamphetamine. She had a discharge date of September 19, 2005. She dropped out of school in sixth grade and was one test short of earning her GED while in prison. She had participated in Storybook Project of Iowa for two and one-half-years. She was released from the prison two weeks after my final conversation with her. Teresa told of her childhood with supportive parents who were strong role models.

I just learned from my mom, cookin’ our meals, just things like that. A lot of things I just did and I just did and I just knew how to do from her, I guess. My grandma, she passed away when I was real young. I was like seven or so. But ... ... I still have memories of her and she was a very good role model. I mean, I do, I have a very caring family.

Yet, in spite of her assertion that she had a strong role model in her grandmother and a very caring family, they were not strong enough to help her stay in school beyond sixth grade or to avoid the friends who introduced her to drugs. As she said, “I started drugs at a very young age. [I] started out just smoking pot [before 12] and then that led to meth. I had friends that knew people that done it.” When I asked her where her parents were when she skipped school or did drugs, as a testimony to the drug treatment program, she took total responsibility for her own behavior. Teresa’s strong role models were not strong enough to keep her away from the dangers of pot and methamphetamine, early pregnancies, and mothering while addicted.
All of the women I spoke with explained through the stories they chose to tell that they learned to do mothering by being mothered. Through their experiences as children absorbing their mother’s mothering behavior and attitudes, they developed their own mothering subjectivity very early in their lives. This subjectivity was deeply impacted by their mother’s actions. The next section will discuss how they did mothering before they were incarcerated that was reflective of their own mother’s behaviors and attitudes.

Doing Mothering

Mothering With Addictions

In this section I argue, through the women’s stories, that how the women were mothered as children greatly affected their mothering before their incarceration. Four of the women (Angela, Sherry, Karla, and Teresa) were raised by abusive mothers. They talked about their own problems with mothering as an addict. As they told their stories they reflected upon the fact that their mothering mirrored their mother’s behavior before them. The cycle of abuse spins on.

As I listened to the women’s stories and read the inmate mother literature I wondered: Are all mothers who are alcohol or drug addicted neglectful mothers? Can mothers with addictions keep their illnesses and their mothering separate? Enos (2001) told of talking with an incarcerated mother who, as she related her life story, gave a detailed account of her daily schedule as a mother, when she lived outside. She lived a conventional life during the day, but after “she had completed daily household and mothering chores...she used cocaine” (p. 149). When Enos remarked to the woman that she was “able to combine being an addict and being a mother” (p. 149), the mother clarified that she kept them “completely separate” (p. 149). For her, mothering and addiction were totally separate.
On the other hand, Angela told stories of her life before prison with five unplanned children, a number of intimate relationships, and the demands of work. In addition, she told of starting to drink at the age of 13 and of her increasing problematic and violent alcohol addiction. When I asked how she learned to be a mother she said, “I just got pregnant at the age of 16 and it was just put on me. I just had to learn on my own.” I wondered at the passiveness at this description of her pregnancy and mothering at 16 years old. Did she have the option of an abortion or adoption? Given that she was an African American girl, it was more likely that the “other mothers” in her culture would step in and help her, if her own mother was absent or unable to help (Collins, 1994). Then why did she have to learn to be a mother on her own?

Unlike the woman in Enos’ story at the beginning of this section, Angela realized that her alcohol abuse was getting the better of her mothering and relationships.

[her drinking] started getting really, really, really bad … … once I hit my 20s cause then I done had more children and [it was] … [a] stressful time happening in my relationships, and … … … … So things just got like a little heavy on me. And that was my way of how I was gonna deal with it.

I wondered at what she was leaving out. How did her drinking manifest itself as “really bad”? Was she violent to her boyfriends and children? She had admitted to being violent to her mother. Why was she in stressful relationships that produced so many children that clearly she was unprepared to mother, and her own mother and culture were unprepared to support? She told me that she worked for the school district. Through this employer she would have had access to Blue Cross/Blue Shield health insurance. If the children were such a problem, why did she not access the available and affordable birth control? Were things “so
heavy” on her that she could not find her way out of her drinking to prevent pregnancies and get out of those bad relationships? If so this was not an unusual scenario in my experience teaching with Parent Growth Program.

In the next story Angela talked about how her desire for alcohol robbed her son of his opportunity to play in the school band. When she finished telling this story, she was in tears. She acknowledged that she could not keep her mothering and her addiction separate, though she tried to do the “best she could with ... and for [her] children.” The challenge of raising five children on her own with little cultural or financial support or education, coupled with her severe alcoholism and propensity for violence had become so problematic that she robbed from her child’s educational experiences to pay for her next drink.

So there were five boys and it would get so overwhelming for me, but I tried to do the best that I could with my children and for my children. But too there was times that my drinking has got so bad that where .... ... I’m more worried about me getting the next drink that I couldn’t pay - and this sticks in my head all the time, cause I know that I had money to pay - for my child to play in the band, but I’d rather take my money and to drink it. So that was .... .... [sad face] I always think I could have done better [quietly].

Angela carried a lot of well-justified guilt for her mothering and alcoholism. She acknowledged that she had been drinking heavily during her fourth pregnancy. “When I had my fourth child that’s when I was like really at my heaviest of my drinking and I drank with them. And that bugs me too [crying].” She recognized that her heavy drinking likely caused the alcohol-related birth defect, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) or the less severe Fetal Alcohol Affect (FAA) in several of her children. The defects include brain damage, facial
deformities, and growth deficits (National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, 2006). Heart, liver, and kidney defects also are common, as well as vision and hearing problems. Individuals with FAS have difficulties with learning, attention, memory, and problem solving. While I would have liked to probe more deeply as to the condition of her children, this was so upsetting to her that I left it alone. I had to “read the gaps.”

In the following story Angela told me about how she felt about being a mom on the outside. Note what she was saying between the words: mothering was hard but she felt that she had to say that she loved it. In the same breath she admitted that she wished she didn’t have so many children. Then she denied this, but laughed to acknowledge the horrible truth of her words. She was caught up in the ideology that believed that mothers are not supposed to wish that they had fewer children or that they had to be the primary caregiver 24 hours a day (Rich, 1976). And she was frustrated with her roles and responsibilities.

I thought it was hard, but I loved it, to be a mom – if [I] wouldn’t have had as many children as I did. But no [laughing]. It was, it was a struggle. Cause like I said, … … before … … it was kind of pretty much just me, although Dad [the four younger children’s father] did [support them] financially, I was still had to be the one with them all the time. So it was kind of hard but it was frustrating at times.

Angela’s stories were clear and painfully honest. I heard her acknowledge that her five children were more than she could handle, that she was drinking to make herself feel better and to find some relief from day-to-day mothering, and that she was alone as a mother. In light of the literature on African American mothers’ culture of support (Collins, 1994; O’Reilly, 2004) I have to ask again: “Where were the “other-mothers” or the “community
mothers” in her African American culture? Children are considered resources for this culture so usually African American women enjoy the support of the entire community during times of crisis (Collins, 1994). Then why was she alone as a mother? Was it because, by her own admission, she was physically violent when drunk? She had acknowledged that her relationship with her own mother was strained because of her violent tendencies.

Angela admitted that mothering was rewarding but recognized that because of her addiction she still fell short of her own expectations. She said,

... ... ... ... the rewarding part of it all way that I got ... ... ... ... could teach my children and love them in a way that my parents didn’t, even though I lack that. Do you know what I’m saying? In a way I, I, I lack it when it came to my addiction. But ... ... ... I also was a mom as well and I could, you know, be there, help them with their homework and not be upset because I had to help my children. You know what I’m saying?

Note how long it took her to respond to my question before she could verbalize that she enjoyed teaching and loving her children. Perhaps this was because, as she said, “I lack it” due to her addiction. She believed that she fell short of her personal standards of mothering. Being incarcerated only added to those feelings. When she reflected on her mothering focus in the days before she was incarcerated she said, “I look back on all that and I realize that ... ... ... ... that maybe you could kind of consider it as neglecting my kids.” The memories brought her to tears again.

Angela also talked about her mothering style. She described herself, just as she described her mother, as “yelling and screaming, kind of like ... ... yeah.” For her, the cycle of abuse was circling around and around. She was becoming her mother. When she reflected
upon the challenges of her mothering before she came to prison she told again of being the only one with the children. Her use of the phrase where she described feeling “a little frustrated” was a classic understatement. The children’s father provided some financial support for them, but she was responsible for their day-to-day mothering. Obviously, this responsibility was too much for her.

Things that didn’t work well were me yelling and screaming, kind of like … yeah. All of that. I think that didn’t help, ‘cause often times I felt a little frustrated with my children because it was like it was just me, always there. Well, I was basically the one.

In two versions of this story Angela spoke of being the “backbone of that family.” In a reflective moment on the telephone with my own 82-year-old mother, I shared this comment with her and wondered what she thought about it. She remarked on the similarity of her life as a mother, in terms of raising me and my three siblings alone. My father was out earning a living that required him to be gone a great deal while my mother, in her words: “did it all.” I have clear memories of her slight five foot tall body tucked under the kitchen sink using a crescent wrench to open and clear a clogged drain. Dad wasn’t home: Mom took care of everything. Here is Angela’s version of her “backbone” story.

I’m the one who made sure that the house was clean, the kids was fed, they were bathed. Made sure they got to school. If they were hurt they called me. If you know…. … I’m the one who made sure that things got done. And that’s why I say I was the backbone of that family.
But when I cross-checked Angela's "backbone of the family" story with Sherry (without breaking confidentiality), she clarified it this way, much differently than my mother, in terms of welfare mothering:

That's what makes you feel like you're doing what you're supposed to be doing. If you can take care of your kids the way that everybody else takes care of their kids: they're bathed, they're clean, they're fed, they have what they need, then you're OK. You're doing something right.

Sandra Enos described children as valuable resources. They are "...the primary validators of inmate mothers' identities as mothers and as women" (2001, p. 34). She added that children are the "normalizing status" in prison (p. 34) in a world of females. This was a constant theme of the women I talked with.

Teresa spoke of her mothering while addicted to and selling meth. She described herself as a normal mom. Just as Angela described in her story above, Teresa got her kids fed every evening at 5:00 or 6:00 p.m., every other day they got baths, she got them to school, she slept at night (in spite of her addiction to a powerful stimulant), and she worked in a convenience store. But on a personal level, she realized that drugs "just ate her alive from the inside" and acknowledged they were especially hard on her teeth.

She talked of her method of discipline saying "Well, I knew not to smack my kid or anything like that." Once again, she reflected the theme of this chapter, when she said that she did not want to hit her child because it was not done to her. When I asked her how she knew this, she responded:

Because I wouldn't want—that wasn't done to me as I was a child and even if it was I know that that's ... ... . I know that that's no way to treat a child. And
that's not a way that I would want to be treated as an adult, let alone as a child.

*Good mothering.*

In the United States, there is a generally agreed upon role that describes the “good” mother. The ideal mother of the United States is based on Smith’s (1993) Standard North American Family concept. In this concept the two-parent, heterosexual, nuclear family is the standard where women raise the children and men are employed outside the home. As a culture we speak of single mothers, at-risk families, low-income families, and working mothers. These labels inherently compare these family structures to the concept of the “normal” family of Smith’s concept.

Consequently, we have an intrinsic understanding in the United States of a “good” mother and conversely, a “bad” mother. According to Ikemoto (1997), the stereotype of a woman whom society classifies as “bad” or “unfit” mother is described in the following way:

She has little education...She is unsophisticated, easily influenced by simple religious dogma...She is pregnant because of promiscuity and irresponsibility. She is hostile to authority even though the state has good intentions. She is unreliable. She is ignorant and foreign. She does not know what is best. (p. 140)

A “good” mother is one who is inherently caring and self-sacrificing (Ferraro & Moe, 2003). A “good” mother is most likely to be white, heterosexual, married, and middle class (Roberts, 1995). Given these standards of a “good” mother, many mothers in American culture would not fit into this category. Susan Douglas argued in the “Mommy Myth” (2004) that the mommy role had been misdefined and misrepresented by the media who turned
motherhood into a romanticized role where standards for success were always out of reach. No matter how hard American mothers tried, they would never reach perfect motherhood (Douglas, 2004).

Do we believe that incarcerated mothers are bad mothers? If a “good” mother is one who is inherently caring and self-sacrificing (Ferraro & Moe, 2003) and a “good” mother is most likely to be white, heterosexual, married, and middle class, (Roberts, 1995), where does this leave incarcerated mothers? Do we agree with Tebo (2006) when she stated that according to some societal perceptions of mothering, “By definition, children with incarcerated parents are defined as badly parented” (p. 12)?

Enos explained the problem with having children while the mother is incarcerated is that as we traditionally conceive of “good” mothers, they would not be involved in chronic substance abuse and illegal activities (2001). By the current definitions of the “good” mother, many women in this country do not fit into this privileged group because they are poorly educated, raise their children alone with the help of caregivers, hold down at least a part time job and are African American or Hispanic. If one were to add “incarcerated” to the list, they would certainly be excluded.

In my research, the women openly discussed what it meant to be a good mother. In a reflective moment, Angela argued her case that she did not think that being a good mother could be quantified or qualified. She related this to spanking, beating, and yelling. She clarified that the nuances of “a little rearin’” [spanking] as compared to delivering a beating were defined by the desire to intentionally lash out at their children, coupled with a loss of self-control. She said,
I think people think ... ... being a bad parent, honestly, is if someone want to give their children spankings. I even actually heard individuals say “I don’t do that.” But people think yelling at their children ain’t being a bad parent. They don’t understand that [yelling] could be worse than giving a child a spankin’. I mean my belief is ... a child might need a little rearin’ [spanking]. That’s just me but as long as you don’t abuse. There’s a point of abusing a child and then there’s a spankin’. There’s extremes.

She went on to illustrate the painful and long lasting nature of verbal abuse by telling of the woman in prison she knew who was “slow” and had been called the “F” word by another inmate that day. Upon hearing these harsh words, the slow woman’s memories of being verbally abused as a child surfaced, she became hysterical, and had to be restrained by the corrections officers. Angela told this story to clarify her point: sometimes verbal abuse was just as painful as physical abuse and certainly longer lasting. She had undoubtedly been the recipient of verbal abuse as a child and had been the initiator of physical abuse when drunk. But she believed that the memory of verbal abuse stayed with you for the rest of your life, longer than physical abuse.

For many of the women Sherry knew, being a good mother meant that the Department of Human Services had not taken their children away for abuse or neglect. This perception of good mothering is supported by a number of studies including Enos (2001), Lawless (2001), and O’Brien (2001), and books written by journalists (Bernstein, 2005; Rathbone, 2005). Sherry, who in her final months in prison had lost the custody of four of her children to permanent custodial arrangements with relatives, described the frustration she felt with her sister and other women she knew who thought this way. Note: while I cited this
narrative in chapter three to illustrate how I worked with Sherry to check stories through comparisons (Enos, 2001), I cite it here to illustrate Sherry’s perception of good mothering.

My sister, she’s a meth addict, and she never got arrested. She never lost one of her daughters, first husband took her first two and she gave her last daughter to my mom when she was three-years-old, but she kept one daughter. And that whole time, the younger daughter’s 12 now, and this whole time she’s never lost her. And she never went to prison, but she’s been in a number of meth labs. I could tell you about – she’s shot meth, she’s done all kinds of things, she’s had so many different guys in and out of her life. Her and her daughter have lived in so many different places and every time she moves, her daughter loses everything. All her toys have to start over. And she’s so tired of it. But my sister, I think, feels that she has been more successful at being a parent than I was because she didn’t lose any [children to DHS]. She didn’t lose her.

Sherry’s sister’s mothering style was a marked contrast to Sherry’s own. Her sister was addicted to meth and Sherry abhorred the drug itself and the explosive and legal dangers of the drug labs. Her sister held it over Sherry that she had never been arrested for her activities, either as a mother or a drug addict. While her sister’s children had not been removed from her custody her sister had given all but one of her children to Sherry’s and her sister’s abusive mother who had been incapable of protecting them from their father when they were children. The daughter her sister kept had been through multiple experiences with drug labs and had likely seen her mother injecting meth into a vein. Her sister moved constantly subjecting her daughter to new people and places and the loss of her childhood
treasures. Sherry had no patience with her sister's justification of her “good mothering.” In her opinion, her sister was the bad mother and Sherry was working very hard to learn to be a good mother. Sherry deeply resented any implication that she was not a good mother. Mothering was the basis of her subjectivity. However, Sherry had to face the uncomfortable reality that two of her own children had been removed from her custody and placed in the care of her abusive mother and her new husband when they were infants. But because Sherry had no control over this placement, she felt some righteousness with her mothering. She felt that she was still a good mother because she had not given her children away.

For Karla, mothers were supposed to love their children. They would demonstrate this by arriving for visits at the appointed time, sober and without boyfriends. They would not lie to their children, cause scenes in their presence, or sell them for money. Good mothers lived in houses with fathers in her familiar neighborhood, raising children that attended the local parochial school. With this basic information, Karla believed that she could be a good mother. Karla had described the frustration of being a “fat” girl in high school who suffered from a bi-polar mental illness. She glowed with the telling of the miracle of getting married right out of high school to a handsome and caring guy. She was excited to be pregnant and never experienced morning sickness, even though she “did gain 90 pounds” (literally) with the pregnancy. She loved the idea of being the mother in a family with a home. She was going to be a good mother. She told this story sharing her delight in her pregnancy and her intentions to be different than her mother.

I always thought that was something that I can do! I can be a mom! I was doing it … … . There are a lot of things I can’t … … . One of the things I really was successful at is being a mom! Everything else you know, I’ve quit or I’ve
not that I've quit being a mom, but some moms do! You know my mom walked out of my life when I was five years old. I cannot imagine doing that to [son].

With her marriage, home, and son’s birth, Karla was “normal.” Her son provided her with a “successful” identity (Enos, 2001), but she struggled unsuccessfully with bi-polar mental illness, her related need for her husband’s caring presence, her weight, her addiction, and her stealing. She admitted that she could not learn easily, follow through with tasks, and could not do a lot of things that others seemed to accomplish with ease. Karla struggled with being a “good” mother.

Like her mother, she did walk out of her son’s life when he was four-years-old to go to various women’s facilities, treatment centers, and finally prison. For her, the multigenerational cycle of mothering with addictions and mental illness was still spinning. She wanted to become a new being as the existentialist Sartre argued (1960/1968), but she struggled with her addictions and her bi-polar disorder. She wanted to be a good mother, like her grandmother, but she was fighting against the image and reality of the similarity between her mother’s actions and her own. She said,

I do have a lot of anger built inside of me and a lot of it is, and I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to get over it, I hope to God I do, but a lot of it is I act just like her. And I don’t like that person at all. .... Selfish. Self centered.

She even told of her counselor comparing her and her mother, whom she both counseled, saying, “Karla, you are just like your mother.” While living with her mental illness and her addiction to marijuana, she struggled with her mothering identity and her self
worth. She wanted to be successful, but except for giving birth to a healthy son, she fell short of her own mark as she had become more and more like her own abusive mother.

_Learning how to be normal (Going to live in China)._  

When the women were raised in abusive and drug infested homes, they struggled with "living right." And the same three women (Sherry, Karla, and Angela) who were abused as children were addicted to either alcohol or drugs (marijuana or methamphetamine). These women used drugs and alcohol to help them cope with the pain of living and reliving memories. This is a standard theme in the incarcerated women literature (Bernstein, 2005; Enos, 2001; O’Brien, 2001). Living right was difficult to do when you had little understanding of normal living and you were addicted.

Sherry’s addiction to marijuana infused her preincarceration years as a mother. She had two sons by a boyfriend early in their relationship and together they did pot. They both worked, he at a job and in a band and she “doing hair.” They split up after eight years and she “got together” with another man and quickly had a daughter and son by him. Then her fifth child, another son, was born with Down’s syndrome and, after an unsuccessful heart operation, died when he was six-months-old. Marriage was not a part of either of these long term relationships.

Up to this point, in spite of her addiction and children born out of marriage, Sherry described her lifestyle as “normal.” She did not want to be like her drug abusing parents. She was going to have a good life with a lot of love. She was going to win the battle she fought against the legacy of abuse from her father and mother. When she won, she believed she would have a good life, but she did not realize how long she would have to work to learn how to live a good life. She was raised in abuse and did not know what normal was.
You know with my dad, his abuse was to the point that where I felt like he wanted it to destroy my life, whether he was there or not, and I wasn’t going to let him win one way or another. So the abuse was gonna stop right there.

That was the end of the line with my kids and with me. And I was gonna have a good life, ‘cause he wasn’t gonna win.

Once again, Sherry told this story as a master-narrative. She told it as “controlling the form and content” of her own story and of not allowing a male with power to control her life (Houston & Kramarae, as cited in Lawless, 1995, p. 16). She said, she “felt like he wanted…to destroy my life…and I wasn’t going to let him win…the abuse was gonna stop right there.” She was going to be the engaged mother (as compared to her own mother) and stop the cycle of abuse. She was going to be in control.

When I asked her about her mothering style, she compared it to her own childhood experiences. She described it as “doing everything they [her parents] didn’t.” She said, I wanted to give my kids as much love as I possibly could. I thought that would be the best thing. You could give the kids as much love in the world as possible. Just be there when they stumble.

While she knew that unconditional love was a vital component to mothering, she readily admitted to not knowing how to live a normal life as a mother. She acknowledged that the mother role model of her childhood left her unprepared. She did not know how to be a normal mother. She used the metaphor of “living in China” to describe her unfamiliarity with a lifestyle free of drugs and abuse, and she described her frustration with her abusive and non-supportive parents.
You know ... even though there was abuse and there was drugs ... it had become the norm for us to be able to function through it and to be able to maintain sanity, I guess. So that, that's what we did [as children]. And after Dad was gone [to prison], everybody said you need to live the normal life. I didn't know what that was. That's like telling me to go live in China, and if you think about going to live in China right now, you don't know their culture, how to talk, how to get food, how do you go into the store, and know what's what. You don't even know what their food is on the market .... So everybody said, “Go there and live in China.” But it wasn't appealing to me 'cause I had no idea of how to do it. You know. So what I did was try to make my life normal with a little bit of that too. You know, a little bit of my old life. So I went to school, got a job, still kept smoking pot, and did the best that I could.

Sherry wanted desperately to learn to live a life without the taint of her childhood experiences. Just as the abused women and children described Elaine Lawless’ research (2001), Sherry was accustomed to screaming, verbal and physical abuse, and the instability of living with drug addicted parents. After her father was incarcerated and the trial in the small rural town was over, she told of people in the community telling her (“everybody said”) to start a new life. I sense that well-meaning individuals wanted her to forget her past and start fresh. Perhaps they gave her this advice to encourage her to begin a new life or this may have emerged from their disgust, horror, and weariness with the sorry details of her former life. Perhaps it was her own mother she turned to for this advice, and who gave it to her hoping that she too could turn away from her broken guilty past and start anew. But
anyone with experience with trauma knows that one cannot simply forget or discard memories at will, but must work through them through time and telling (Lawless, 2001; Clark, 2001). Sherry was not going to be able to learn quickly how to live “the normal life.”

During the three conversations I had with Sherry, she told versions of this story or referred to “living in China” five different times. Being unfamiliar with another coveted lifestyle was something that she spent a good deal of time thinking and talking about. She had dissected her metaphor down to cultural expectations, speech patterns, and food acquisition: “…you don’t know their culture, how to talk, how to get food…go to the store… . You don’t even know what their food is on the market.”

She chaffed with the frustration of not knowing how to live this elusive life and blamed her mother. She wanted a new start, a new life. After all, it was not her fault that she grew up in those circumstances. In an attempt to move toward this new lifestyle, she described her gradual melding of school, work, and pot addiction with mothering. But her mother’s attitude about how she was living and raising her children caused her continual frustration. Her mother had remarried and was living a “normal” life in a small rural town and criticized Sherry for not making the change herself. Apparently her mother had been able to shed her old abused body with its painful memories and start fresh in a new small town with a new (non-abusing) husband. If this was the situation, Sherry’s mother was an unusual statistic in the world of abused women (Lawless, 2001). In her turn, Sherry blamed her mother for not protecting or supporting her and for not providing her with more guidance. She found her mother’s criticism of her lifestyle very hard to accept. Sherry was also angry that her mother would not accept any responsibility for the abuse and neglect that she suffered.
[My mom] feels that she was also a victim of my dad, so it was none of her doing how we were raised. … … I-she just thinks that we should have known to live different. And I’ve tried to tell her that’s like telling me to live in China. I don’t know how to live there. This is how I’ve lived and … … now you were part of raising that. She will not take any … … She had nothing to do with it. She said it wasn’t her doing… My mom always said, “Don’t do this, don’t do that, don’t do this, don’t do that, you should do this, you should do that.” But she never said, “This is how you’re gonna get here.” You know, “This is how we’re gonna do this, this is how you’re gonna change your life.”

Sherry was the “good girl” among her “drug people” friends because they all did methamphetamine and she “only” smoked marijuana. But when her infant son died, she told of a change in her mental health and a change in her attitude toward her boyfriend and the child’s father.

I really stopped caring about what was going on in my house. Before that [the death of the child] [he] did his meth somewhere else. Everything after that [death] I didn’t care. We did it in my house more. Then it was in my house and I wanted it [meth] away. And I thought I’d fight fire with fire and I thought, “Well, it’s always here and people are always here, so I’ll start selling it away from him.” And I thought, “Well, meth will take his family away.”… So I thought, “Well, I’ll sell the drugs that you’re doing.” [B: You did this for the money?] And to hurt him too. You know, ’cause it was your meth that I was taking away. So, yeah. That didn’t work. We both got arrested.
This narrative has many layers. She spoke of not caring about her home, and I
presume her children, after the death of her disabled infant. She indicated that she allowed
the meth to come into her home, but in the next breath she objected strongly to it and wanted
it away. She used the phrase “fight fire with fire” to express how she would get the meth out
of her home and by selling his supply. She expressed words that connote anger, aggression,
and payback. She wanted to get back at him for the loss of their infant son in a way that
would cause him pain. She would take away his drugs and his “drug family” friends and
make money at the same time. But I wondered at what she had not told me. I wondered at
what she had not told herself. Was she aware that she likely was clinically depressed after the
death of her disabled infant? Was her life so abnormal that she didn’t recognize this change
in herself? Did she blame her boyfriend and his methamphetamine addiction for the birth
defect and subsequent death? In another interpretation of this phrase, while she admitted
stealing and selling the drug to get back at her boyfriend for the meth in her home, did she
hear herself when she said, “…meth will take his family away”? Was she planning to take
the money and leave him with their children? Did she believe that his meth had killed her
child? Did she believe that by taking the drugs away she could ease her own pain? By her
own admission her plan to take the drugs and sell them backfired, since they were both
arrested. In a foretelling of her relationship with her children, the meth did take her children
away and destroyed the “normal” home she had worked so hard to create.

Then she told of the pivotal event when she became aware of how her melding of
work, school, addiction, and mothering was not normal. In this story the police came into her
home, they took her children away, and she went to jail for a week and thought about her life.
It wasn’t until I got arrested, the cops came in my house and raided our house and then I realized that this was not right. You know this was not right. This was not how people normally lived or anything like that. They took my children from me and then I went to jail for seven days and sat there and thought about a lot of things and thought about life and how people should live it and everything. And I decided it was time to turn a page.

It was after she was arrested that she came to a new understanding of how the rest of the world defined “mothering.” She said, “When I got arrested I realized that I really did need to move to China really bad. This was it. And so I needed to go someplace to learn things that I hadn’t learned. You know, how to function.” She said,

When I got arrested I realized how the rest of the world looked at people like me. You know, ‘cause the cop coming into my house and talking to me about you know, parents who do drugs … “This is what you are to us, you’re junk, your life’s garbage. You don’t deserve your kids. You don’t deserve a family.” For the first time in my life I realized how the rest of the world was seeing me, my friends, and everything. And I was like, “Oh my gosh! I can not believe this. I have to change it.”

In her various versions of this story, the policeman coming into her home and giving her the harsh reprimand (“you’re junk…garbage…don’t deserve your kids…family”) seemed to be the tipping point in her perspective of her lifestyle (“[f]or the first time in my life…”). Sherry reflected about mothering and what it meant to be a mother in terms of giving her children the lives they deserved. In this next story note that she too clarified that as a good
mother her children were clean, fed and played with, but then she qualified this by using the phrase “living right.”

I was good at being a mother, but I wasn’t good at living right.

[B: Living right. What does that mean?]

Getting stoned. They [her children] can smell it. They can tell people are around that stuff. [son] used to ask me about it. When he got old enough, he knew I was getting stoned. So the part of being good at being a mother I meant: they had their baths every other day, they got fed. I played with them and talked to them about things. I was good at the mothering thing, I just wasn’t good at giving them the kind of life they deserved. You know. Living in a normal home where people are normal that come to visit. That aren’t all messed up and...I’m not going to my room every hour and shutting my door on them. ...I’m sure my son had to worry about what time of day to bring his friends over...What’s it gonna smell like in there... . Who’s gonna be there?

For Sherry “living right” meant living in a normal home where normal people came to visit and where the mother did not shut the children out of her bedroom so that she could smoke dope in peace. Living right meant that a child could bring his friends home and not worry if his mom and her friends would be involved in drug activities.

Mothering Without Addictions

Two women in this study mothered without the handicap of addictions: Sally and Courtney. Sally mothered as had her mother before her, using firm logic, love, and good communication skills. Sally was not her children’s friend, she was their mother. She was very close to her own mother, in their relationship with each other, and in the physical
location of their homes in their small farming community. Sally explained that every day she would call her mother when she left the house and again when she returned home. They lived about two blocks away from each other. Sally’s sister lived in town and her brother lived in a nearby town. In this story Sally described her mothering as loving, protective, and unchanging.

I’m able to give out love or to love somebody. Like I said, to care for ‘em or be there with them when they need me or … … I protect ‘em. … my kids come first. I buy for them before I buy for myself. Or … I do for them before myself. And I’ve told them…, “If anything ever happens or you do somethin’ that you’re not supposed to do, don’t be afraid to tell me or come talk to me.”

I said, “I’ll probably be upset or be disappointed with you, but it’s not that I—I won’t stop loving you, just because.”

Being a mother was what she was: protective, guiding, loving, and nurturing. In my field notes I wrote:

I see Sally as an assured and self-directed mother person. She said over and over in the first two interviews (directly and indirectly) that her kids come first. She is clear with how she operates. She is unswerving in her parenting style.

Courtney had been a mother only for two years before she was incarcerated. She lived with her mother and boyfriend, the father of her son. She worked at a convenience store and provided in-home day care. She described her young son as a “Mommy’s boy” saying that they were always together. Unlike other young mothers she knew, she did not leave her son with her mother to go off and party. He was her “everything.”
Conclusion

In this chapter, three of the six women described their early childhoods as filled with abuse and addiction and reflected upon how they echoed their mothers in their own mothering. Sherry told her stories with a master-narrative where at age 14, in spite of her mother's inability to be roused from her abuse-induced paralysis, she and her sister put her father in jail for drugs and abuse. For the next several years she struggled with learning to live "normal" as a mother and carried her abuse and addicted lifestyle into adulthood. Angela realized that the yelling and lack of loving she employed with her boys were reflections of her own abusive mother's style, and like her mother, she found herself without the support of the African American women in her community. And Karla reflected that she was following the same cycle of addiction and neglect as her mother, acting out the selfishness and instability that characterized her mother. Teresa told of living in a stable home with good role models but succumbing to the temptations of skipping school and marijuana at the age of twelve. Without a strong parent figure she was left to her own headstrong teenage activities. She acknowledged that her meth addiction had gotten in the way of her mothering. She also refused to blame her parents for her lifestyle. Courtney was raised in a passive family that allowed her to feign illness, live with her boyfriend in her mother's apartment, give birth to her son, and leave school at 15-years-old. Since she was incarcerated at 18, leaving behind a two-year-old, she had little opportunity to hone her mothering except to passively want to be with her son all the time and just love him. Of all the women, Sally had lived the most "normal" life. She was raised in a close family in a small rural town. She married and raised four children, working part-time to help make ends meet. Her mothering was as stable as her mother's: nurturing, protective and assertive.
These women, through their stories and their reflections, acknowledged that they learned to be a mother just as they learned to shave their legs, through observation, trial, and error. How they were mothered was clearly reflected in how they mothered their own children. They believed that good mothers kept their children clean, fed, and clothed. And they acknowledged that drug addictions and mothering did not mix. In the end, their children had been shortchanged. The women in this study did reflect the basic premise of this chapter: how they had been mothered was directly reflected in how they mothered their own children before they were incarcerated.
CHAPTER 5- MOTHERING FROM THE INSIDE

Introduction

Being incarcerated was a painful, disorienting, and depressing experience. For the newly incarcerated women family relationships were cut, all personal freedom was lost, and there was a community of prisoners to cope with 24 hours a day. But for incarcerated mothers, imprisonment created upheaval and loss in their mother roles and identities. While the actual incarceration was understandably wrenching, through their participation in required prison intervention programs they experienced an altering of their understanding of themselves as individuals and mothers, and their always fluid and changing (Bloom, 1998) nonunitary subjectivity evolved to adjust to their new awareness of themselves in all their roles and responsibilities. At times it was an agonizing process, but one that the women in this study found to be a revealing and important experience in their life journey.

In chapter four I argued that how women were mothered as children was directly related to how they mothered their own children. In this chapter I will explore how imprisonment and their involvement in intervention programs changed their lives and caused them to conduct considerable reexamination of their identities as mothers that they felt were important. This chapter has three major sections related to the women’s experiences with mothering from inside the prison. These include: 1) the pain of mothering from the inside, 2) the mothering transformations these women experienced by being incarcerated and involved in intervention programs at the prison; and 3) a discussion of how the Storybook Project of Iowa engaged the women in mothering through books and tapes and provided them with a sense of accomplishment (Girshick, 2003) as they met their children’s needs for nurturing,
literacy, and guidance. The third section includes a final subsection on the impact of the volunteers on the incarcerated mothers.

**The Pain of Mothering From The Inside**

In this first section I will review the women’s initial shock of being separated from their children and discuss how their mothering identity was affected by the loss of their ability to do mothering. I will discuss how “good mothers” would not be forced to mother from prison and the impact this awareness has on their children. Finally, I will examine their inability to manage mothering from prison and give voice to their guilty relief at being free from the daily tensions of being a mother on the outside.

**Somebody Took My Arms Away**

Cristina Rathbone is a journalist who gained access to Massachusetts MCI-Framingham, the oldest women’s prison in the country, and talked with a number of incarcerated women as they gave an account of life inside prison. In her book “A World Apart: Women, Prison and Life Behind Bars” (2005) she told a story of Denise Russell, the mother of a 9-year-old boy. Three weeks after Denise was incarcerated and in spite of her best attempts at mothering from inside, her son Pat, whom she had placed with her mother-in-law rather than with her mentally ill and violent husband, was so distraught at her “sudden and disastrous absence” (p. 9) that he threatened to kill himself with a knife, and was promptly admitted in a psychiatric hospital. Denise, feeling helpless as a mother, took the pills prescribed by the prison’s Psychiatric Services and tried to sleep to forget that her child was unprotected in a psychiatric hospital while she was in prison. After a while, she “...trained herself to live with that gaping vortex of fear and guilt and manag[ed]...” to focus on “...her much reduced present” (p. 17). She “constructed a box around Pat” so that the pain
didn’t drive her crazy (p. 17). For Denise Russell and the women in my study, the loss of
their ability to mother and their mothering identity while in prison was an extremely painful
experience.

The women’s loss of their identity and their ability to mother began with their
sentencing and admission to the prison. Sherry’s story began from her perspective as an
abused girl-woman-mother. She spoke of being “emotionally beaten down” by the time she
arrived at the prison. Being incarcerated reminded her of her childhood when her abusing
father and mother would tell her she “could be sold for 2 cents.” From her perspective inside
the prison’s razor wire-topped fence she finally believed that she “wasn’t worth anything.”
She believed that she had been thrown away and was no longer useful or functional to
society. This was because of the loss of her freedom and the loss of her mothering control:
she had to give her four children away, including her two-week-old son. By losing her
children, she had lost her mothering validity and a primary portion of her identity.

Echoing the feelings of other newly incarcerated women (Koban, 1983; Henriques,
1996; Poehlmann, 2005a; Sharp & Marcus-Mendoza, 2000) Sherry told of the emotional
upheaval and depression she experienced when she was initially separated from her children.
She said that she “wasn’t going to kill herself” but she felt as though her life was over. She
spoke of her anger at being warehoused for three years before she could gain access to an
intervention program in the prison. For about a year, her perceived loss of control and
mothering identity caused her to give up hope.

In one of her final mothering acts prior to her admission, Sherry placed her two-
week-old son and one-year-old daughter with her abusive and abused mother. I use the
expression “abusive and abused” to remind us of how her mother was abusive to Sherry and
her sister and at the same time was abused by her husband. While making the mothering arrangements for her two infant children Sherry’s body still bore the signs of her recent pregnancy and delivery. Undoubtedly her breasts were still producing milk and her uterus was still flaccid and enlarged. Her hormone levels had yet to return to normal. Her pelvis and arms were accustomed to carrying her two children, one in utero and one on her hip. For Sherry the loss of her children meant that she lost a part of her body and had lost her mothering identity. She described it in this way.

It just felt like somebody took my arms away. You do so many things, you function so much with your arms, and being taken away from life and having your kids gone…everything you use to function is gone.

According to Mumola (2000), 65% of women incarcerated in state prisons had minor children and a similar number (64%) lived with their minor children prior to their incarceration. And like 53% of the mothers in state prisons across the nation (Mumola, 2000), upon her incarceration Sherry’s four children were placed in the care of their grandparents. It should be noted that the incarceration of men is less likely to create issues of children’s caregiving, in part because only 44% of men in state prisons have minor children living with them prior to admission (Mumola, 2000), and because those men simply leave the children in the care of a female relative. Incarcerating women brings with it the significant question of who will take care of the children while their mother is away. There are a number of living arrangements available for these children. For example, the children may live with fathers, boyfriends, grandparents, aunts, sisters, friends, or be placed in foster care. However, the reality of these placement options is not as successful or plentiful as originally conceived. In Teresa’s situation, her two children who were initially placed with their father/her
boyfriend then were removed from this situation because he was doing drugs, and finally were placed in the care of her sister. Angela’s five boys were split up: the oldest stayed with her mother and the four youngest were living with their father, her new husband. And while the youngest children lived with their father, her mother had partial custody of them, because as Angela said, in spite of her dislike of her mother, “I felt my mother was more responsible… ... [than her husband].” Angela’s decision to place her oldest son in the care of her mother and her mother’s willingness to care for him reflected the racial trend of African American families where often the children go to live with other family or community members (Enos, 2001) because they are cherished as cultural resources (Collins, 1994). Courtney’s son was placed in the care of her mother but he enjoyed the daily company of his cousins. Karla’s son lived with his birth father/her ex-husband and his step-sister and step-brother. Sally’s children lived primarily with their father/her husband in their small rural town, but her parents and sister all accepted responsibility for the daily care of her children. For all incarcerated women, foster care was the option of last resort (Mumola, 2000) and was one that none of these women had to employ. Several of these women had to place their children in the care of relatives who had demonstrated abusive and abusing behaviors. Quite simply, when it came time to relinquish their day-to-day mothering responsibilities, they had to do with the family they had or put their children in foster care.

**Traumatizing the Children**

The women recognized the shock their incarceration had on their children, but because of their own loss of control they were unable to avoid it. They knew that a “good mother” would not have been arrested or need to locate alternate care for their children. Like their mothers’ feelings, the children’s reactions to their initial separation from their mothers
included sadness, worry, confusion, anger, loneliness, sleep problems, and developmental regressions (Poehlmann, 2005b). As their separation from their mother progressed, they tended to suffer anxiety and attention deficit disorders or from posttraumatic stress (Bernstein, 2005; Gabel & Johnston, 1995; Moses, 1995; Sharp & Marcus-Mendoza, 2001; Sharp, Marcus-Mendoza, Bentley, Simpson, & Love, 1999). According to a recent study by Poehlmann (2005b) the trauma the children experienced could have been alleviated by providing them with secure caregiving situations (Poehlmann, 2005b). This is to say, the more stable and continuous the care arrangements the mothers make for their children, the greater their feelings of security and the lower the trauma they would experience through their separation (Poehlmann, 2005b).

With sadness Sherry discussed the trauma her second son experienced at her arrest and incarceration. She said, "It really devastated him. ... I think he kind of went into a shock. He doesn't remember home life and he was seven at the time so he should have remembered." In an effort to recover their former relationship she told of using his love of dolphins as a symbol of her love. She said,

Before I left [for prison] I gave him – we collected dolphins together – so I gave him all my dolphin stuff, everything. So if I found a book at Storybook that had anything to do with dolphins I would send it to him and that's like ... reassuring [him] that I loved him. Recognizing the repercussions of her actions, Sherry worked to rebuild their mother-child relationship and to patch the holes in her mothering identity. In spite of her attempts, their relationship had yet to fully recover. For Sherry and this son, the cycle of abuse, lack of
protection by the mother, trauma to the child, and anger and a fractured relationship was still spinning but in her son’s generation.

*When They Mess Up*

“Good mothers” are home with their children and provide them with immediate guidance during those times when the child has exhibited poor judgment. But women who are incarcerated must hear of these events from others often long after the incident occurred. And because of this they are helpless to provide the immediate feedback that they know their children need from their mother. Angela described the following situation that had occurred in her family. Her oldest son, age 12, who lived with her mother, was having problems at school. He had touched a girl inappropriately and because Angela was estranged from her mother she did not know about it for a month. She discussed her frustration with not being there for him, saying,

> When my son did get in trouble, I couldn’t talk to him right then. So it made it difficult. By the time I got to talk to him, it was a month or two down the line and now it’s … too late. Well, it’s not never too late, but it was too late. And he’s like “Well, why are you chewing me out? Why are you saying somethin’ to me now, its two months down the line? It’s done and that’s over with.” You know, and I mean I could write him a letter, which that’s what I did. But it’s not the same as you being able to just talk to him or see him face-to-face to say, “Now, you shouldn’t have did this or you shouldn’t have did that.”

In this story, Angela expressed frustration that she did not know of the problem and that she did not talk with her son right away about the incident. She acknowledged that by waiting a month (or two) to bring it up and set him straight, it was too late. Note that she
stopped herself and admitted that it was never too late to discipline, but she knew that it really was-discipline is best handed out when the incident is in the recent past. She admitted she could write him a letter, but knew that would not carry the same mothering power as her face and voice in the same room.

Frequent visits and contact are important for the emotional health of both the children and their incarcerated mother (Moses, 1995; Poehlmann, 2005a, 2005b; Sharp & Marcus-Mendoza, 2001; Sharp, Marcus-Mendoza, Bentley, Simpson, & Love, 1999). Angela had admitted that she did not see her children frequently. While they lived only 30 minutes away from the prison, rarely did the younger boys’ father or her mother come to visit or bring the children to see her. Phone conversations with her boys were infrequent as well. She admitted to speaking with her husband on a daily basis, but acknowledged that the younger children were rarely called to the phone. Since her relationship with her mother was strained, and her mother cared for her older son, Angela was uninformed about his life until there was a crisis. Having more frequent contact with her children would have improved her relationships with them (Poehlmann, 2005b).

In spite of and perhaps because of her admitted non-initiation of contact with her children, Angela lamented her loss of mothering effectiveness. She cried when she said, “I can’t always do things for them when things happen.” Her eldest son was dealing with identity issues related to his absent parents and how he fit in that scheme. His birth father had been in and out of prison and was currently in prison on a fifteen-year-sentence. His mother had been in prison for two years. Angela described him as “emotionally just a wreck.” She knew that he was missing her mothering presence in the home, but she could not do anything about it from prison. She said,
I think sometimes he feels like you know his brothers’ got their dad. When I
was there they had Mom too. … I think he feels like he doesn’t have anybody.
He feels some form of emptiness in him...because he doesn’t have either one
of his parents. I believe that it affects him that he doesn’t have his real dad.
Because he does know him, but he doesn’t know him, because he’s been in
and out of jail all his life. But now that I’m not there it makes it even worse.

Like all the women, Angela was frustrated with not being an active mother. Since she
was away from her five boys, she had heard that they were not doing well in school, a
problem that is recognized in the literature (Moses, 1995; Sharp & Marcus-Mendoza, 2001;
Sharp, Marcus-Mendoza, Bentley, Simpson, & Love, 1999). She said,

... my children are lost without me. I feel like ... they don’t get as much love
as they need. And I think they want me there. They’re used to me. They know
me. … … they know Mom will be there for them. And I think that me being
gone it makes it harder on them because it’s not the same as your mom,
somebody else takin’... … … it’s hard on ‘em [crying] on all my children. I
think ... me being here has affected the way they perform in school, a lot.

In spite of her inability to be a good mother on the outside, due to her addiction and
predilection for physical violence, in the story above she still believed that she was an
important presence to her children. She conceded her husband’s care of the children but felt
that without their mother her boys “were lost.” As an African American woman she
recognized her responsibility and power as a mother ("they don’t get as much love as they
need," “they know Mom will be there”). If I rotate her words, I believe that she was
admitting that she was lost without daily involvement in her mothering identity.
She also described how tough it was on her husband to be the caregiver and financially support the family. Her loss of her ability to function as a contributing member of this family, including financial support, was a source of grief and guilt.

I know when I first got locked up he told me how much of a struggle it was. He said there was times when my children and him didn’t even have food .... I mean, he’s a very prideful man so he won’t go and ask. He’ll try to do what he can, but that’s just kind of hurtful. You know that you were the backbone of your family and now you’re gone and now here they are just ... struggling. [crying]

Guilty Relief

For incarcerated women, generally children are valuable resources in that they are the primary validators of the mothers’ identities and as women (Enos, 2001; McMahon, 1995). But Angela, a severe alcoholic, burdened with her five boys and a husband that could not financially support them, depressed because her oldest son was going through hard times, and overwhelmed by her inability to mother from prison, was willing to admit that it was much easier to mother while she was inside. When I asked her about this, she reflected that it was because she was not dealing with the daily issues of mothering. For Angela, prison was a painful but useful timeout (Enos, 2001).

Angela’s stories illustrate the complicated and conflicted nature of the relationships and feelings related to mothering from prison. Her four youngest boys lived with her husband and their father. Her oldest boy lived with her mother since both of his parents were in prison. Since her relationship with her mother was scarred by violence that had been initiated by both women, her relationship with her oldest son was suffering from her extended absence and lack of contact. She had just married the father of her four youngest children while she
was in prison. She knew that it was due to her violence related to her addiction that she was in prison, away from the children and husband who needed her. And as a result she felt guilty and depressed, spending her days reading and crocheting. Often her husband did not bring the children out to the prison for frequent visits or call them to the telephone to talk with her mother. With the exception of her new marriage to her long-time boyfriend, her life in prison was a series of frustrations and fractured relationships.

**Transformation Through Prison Intervention Programs**

In this second section I will use Teresa’s voice to begin my discussion on mothering transformations in prison. In the final weeks of her incarceration, she reflected upon the 29-months she had spent there and she told me of the transformative nature of her experience.

I just know that ... coming here ... has made me realize [crying] the things I want out of life. But not only that, [I realize] the things I don’t want to do in life. [I don’t want] to keep repeating the mistakes I have [made] in the past.

In this section I will argue that through the experiences of being involved in the prison’s intervention programs these women’s identities as individuals and as mothers were transformed. It was through the intervention programs and courses: residential drug treatment program with its Victim Impact course, parenting classes, and the Storybook Project of Iowa; that the women reflected upon their past and planned for their futures.

**Mothering Transformations in Prison**

Four of the six women I spoke with told stories of their transformation experiences at the prison: Teresa, Karla, Angela, and Sherry. They described the residential drug treatment program as having provided them with tools for living a “clean life.” The Victim Impact course in the treatment program gave them a wake-up call as to their mothering with
addictions. The Storybook Project of Iowa gave them an opportunity to foster healthy relationships with their children through books and reading. And their time inside the prison gave them an opportunity to think about who they were and what they had done to themselves, their children, and the other victims they had injured.

Two weeks before she was released, Teresa talked with me about her prison experiences. Her incarceration provided her with access to a GED program and intervention programs: residential drug treatment program with its Victim Impact course, parenting classes, and the Storybook Project of Iowa; that increased her self-confidence. Before she was admitted she had walked away from school at 12 to feed her growing pot and methamphetamine addiction, gave birth to her children when she was 17 and 19, and prior to her imprisonment, did not think she was smart enough to learn anything. Through the prison programs she learned who she was. Earning her GED was pivotal to her developing self esteem. Participating in the drug treatment program required her to explore deeply her evolving nonunitary subjectivity as an individual and as a mother. Through this process she became empowered. Coming to prison was a proving ground and a growing place for her.

I thought drugs were more important than getting’ a GED or getting an education and I didn’t think I was really smart enough. And I know by coming here and going through the treatment ... and ... just finding out who I really am, I know I can do anything I set my mind to and I know an education is very important.

Teresa was the most careful about stating her need to be honest with me as part of her new life. She was making an attempt at a new beginning. She told stories of how the residential treatment drug program affected her, providing her with tools for living. Like the
other women who had a similar experience at this prison, she talked of *choosing* to take advantage of her new experiences. And she was telling her stories with painful honesty.

I just know that ... coming here ... has made me realize [crying] the things I want out of life. But not only that, [I realize] the things I don’t want to do in life, to keep repeating the mistakes I have in the past. ... The treatment I went through here, it was nine months. It was in-patient. ... It gave me the tools and classes and stuff to let me change my life. It was my choice to take in what I was being taught and apply it to my life. And that I have.

She spoke of her hope for the future and grief at her past. She spoke of the power of the drug treatment program. But she reiterated that the application of the experience was her choice.

In the following story, Teresa talked about the pain of missing her children and family but admitted that she needed to be incarcerated and go through these intervention programs to improve her life.

And I just know that ... ... it’s been very painful being away from my children and my family as long as I have [crying], but this is what I needed to change my life around. To be able to realize the things I want out life and the things that I want not only for myself, but for my children. I don’t ever want my children to have that life. And I know that if I’m not a positive role model for them because all children usually look up to their parents. And I want to be, I just want to do things right and to guide them in the right direction so that they never fall in the same footsteps as myself or their father, ever.

In this story she spoke of her need for time for reflection (“realize the things I want out of life”) in terms of her life goals (“for myself...my children”). Through this reflection
and awakening experience she realized that she was leading her children down a destructive path, and recognized that she wanted to be a better role model to them. Most of the women talked about wanting to be a positive role model to their children. Teresa spoke of this and added that “children usually look up to their parents.” Reading between the lines told me that she realized she was a negative role model for her children by engaging in the behaviors she did prior to her arrest and to add to that, so was their father who was also incarcerated for drugs.

In the narrative below Teresa admitted that the drug addicted-drug selling life she lived was the only thing she knew how to do. Since she had supported her family by selling meth, this really was an area of entrepreneurship where she had experience. But now she knows that she can do other things with her life. She has had a chance to stretch her mind, reflect upon her actions, and consider her future. In her old life the happiness she thought she enjoyed was a false front to the inner pain she experienced.

Before coming here I thought that that was the kind of life to have, you know, its fun. It was just, that’s the only thing I thought I knew how to do. And I know that I can do anything I put my mind to. And doing and selling drugs is not the life that I want. And people might think that they’re happy then, but they’re not. Your life’s living hell and you’re miserable.

The Victim Impact course in the treatment program helped Teresa understand the trail of victims she had left behind. When I asked her what happened to her family when she was doing drugs, she responded emphatically “… they get hurt! When people do drugs they create many victims, you know, and a lot of people don’t realize that. You create many victims and you hurt many people every day.”
In her next story she discussed her concern for other people in her life, who were living this lifestyle. She described that because she had come to a new understanding of the self-destructiveness and victim-taking nature of her former life, she experienced pain at observing other’s behaviors. She readily acknowledged that her experience in the prison programs was pivotal to her change in identity. Listen to her words.

I know now that … … … being where I’ve been to see another family member do the same things that I have – it hurts me. You know, you can sit and you can tell somebody this is what I’ve done. This is what’s gonna’ happen, this is what could happen. … …But they would probably have to experience coming to someplace like this … to realize … … that that’s not what they want in life. I mean I feel that you could talk and talk all day to somebody, but once they’ve start doing drugs they have in their mind that … they know what they’re doin’.

I wondered who else in her family was following down the path of drug addiction and distribution she had paved. Who was it she had tried to save but realized that “you can talk and talk all day” but they will not make a change in their lifestyles until they are imprisoned?

I asked Teresa how she felt about coming to the prison after her ten years of mixing mothering with addictions and drug dealing. As she spoke these words her demeanor changed from passionately aggressive to passive acceptance: “… it was kind of a relief.” She added, “It was like ‘I know there’s more to life than what I was doing, here’s my chance to either change it or to live the life I have, and I don’t want that kind of life.’ ” When I asked if coming there was a life-changing experience for her, she responded firmly, “It’s been a very
positive experience for me.” With this admission she acknowledged the transformative nature of her experiences at the prison.

Karla, incarcerated in the Violator’s Unit for six months, was required to attend the Victim Impact class. She told of her transformative experience there.

We had a program that we knew if we took them and used them to our ability they’d be tools that we could take with us that would change our life! ... I will never forget the things I learned there. ... [I learned] that it wasn’t about me. It was about who I hurt and the people who were affected by me. And what I did. And that was the first time that I ... was able to really look at that and think “NO, it’s not about me.” You know, “Oh poor Karla, she’s the addict.” No, it’s about “I’m sorry that I stole from you.” Or “I’m sorry that ... I was not there when I said I would be.” That’s the kind of thing that’s sad ... for me. ...But I’ve used some of the skills [since] I got out and I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing and it feels good.

By confronting herself through this program Karla acknowledged her selfishness and thoughtlessness related to her addictions. She admitted she had hurt and stolen from people she loved. In the past she expected them to give her grace because of her addiction. Through this program she came to a wrenching awareness of her former behavior and was saddened by what she saw in herself.

As part of the Violator’s Unit programming she was required to participate in group counseling sessions. In the following story she told of her anger at being confronted in the presence of the other women, and with being “grouped with the other women;” of the feeling
of being kicked when she was down, and of the realization that her addiction had made her a bad mother.

My counselor said to me and actually this was in front of the whole group. [in a “can you believe it” voice] We were talking about...moms and how we are all bad moms. ‘Cause look at where we’re at. None of us are taking care of our children. We all are bad moms. She kept saying this over and over. And I was getting pissed. I’m \emph{not kidding}. My neck turned bright red. I was just like. And the girl next to me “Karla, are you ok?” and I said, “No, I’m not OK. I can not listen to this. I can not have her tell me this over and over.” [agitated]

‘Cause think about it. I’ve already-I already feel about this big [gesturing with her thumb and forefinger]. You know here she is telling me that I’m a bad mom. She wasn’t just telling me, she was telling everybody. So I raised my hand. She’s like “Karla.” And I said, “You know what, ...I’m sitting here listening to you and I can’t listen to you any more. I’m not a bad mom. Even in my sickest days of using I still had Sam around. I may have not been reading him a book, but I didn’t feel like I was a bad mom.”

But boy, let me tell you, she put it down. And I was a bad mom. She knew what she was talking about. But just hearing that made me so-I just wanted to go up and just shake her-because who [was] she to tell? But she made a very good point. And the point was if I continue to be like that, I’ll never be able to be a mom. You know I’m thinking she was instilling that in our heads because we need to hit rock bottom in order to get better. And I
think that was what people think, you know, I’ve got to rebuild my relationship with my child.

In this story, Karla did not like being singled out in front of the entire class to be told that she was a bad parent because she was in prison. After all, as she argued like other incarcerated women (Enos, 2001), she was a good mother because her son had not been removed from her care. And like most newly incarcerated women, she insulated herself from the rest of the prison population by telling herself that she was not like the other inmates, she only had to serve her sentence and she would be back to her old life (Enos, 2001). In addition, Karla made sure that her ex-husband and her extended family kept her preschool aged son uninformed about where she was. For Karla, this counselor was creating cracks in the façade that she had so carefully constructed. She did not like it. As a result of this painful experience Karla admitted that it brought to her attention her selfish ways and helped her understand herself as a mother. She realized the counselor was bringing them to a low point to admit their past to rebuild their futures with their children.

Angela told a similar story of her frustration with the aggressiveness used in the drug treatment program to force the women to acknowledge that they were bad mothers. Listen to her explain, once again, how in spite of her alcohol addiction she was a good parent because she still “had” her children.

My children are my world. I love my children. ... Yup, I really do. And you know, this is what kind of bugs me, is that like in treatment when we first started and when I first started down there, they’d like to throw your children in your face... . Let you know what you did to them and things like that. I’m cool with that. That’s fine. But listen ... I was with my children. I mean I
partied. I wasn’t the best mom, but I had my children the majority of the time with me. And for them to just make it like ... you weren’t a good parent to your children because you were in this addiction – I think that’s wrong for them to say, because not everybody’s addiction just ... ... messed their life. ... I’m not gonna say that I was the best mom, though I was dealing with my [addiction] ... ... [While] I was in that addiction I was able to still be that parent to my children. I still had them. I still made sure they were clean, they were fed ... they weren’t fully neglected, but I’m not gonna say that they weren’t neglected. You know what I’m saying?

The memory and retelling of this incident made Angela angry and defensive. In her narrative, she relayed that she did not like being confronted with her addiction as it related to her mothering. She was a “good” mother because her children had not been removed from her care. She did admit that she was not the best mother but she excused it because she was dealing with an addiction. Note that she used the phrase “they weren’t fully neglected.” It is revealing that Angela had created categories of neglect to absolve herself of full blame for her mothering behaviors. To her credit, when she revisited this story she said, “I look back on all that and I realize that ... ... ... that maybe you could kind of consider it as neglecting my kids.” The memories and realization brought her to tears.

In spite of her frustration with the confrontational approach taken by the treatment counselors to make the women face their addictions and their relationships with their children, Angela enjoyed taking classes and learning how to mother differently than yelling and screaming commands at her children just as her mother had before her. “I’ve taken classes and I’ve really learned to just cherish my children-moment by moment...I don’t have
to do all that yelling and screaming.” She admitted that the yelling “scared them as well.” She had learned to “talk to my children...and that...makes it easier. You get a better understandin’ where they’re coming from.” The program did make an impression on her. She obviously knew of no other way to mother than to mirror her mother before her.

In a reflective moment, Angela admitted to worrying about how her children would respond to her when she returned home. She hoped to be released in July 2006. She said,

And then you wonder ... when you get out. Are your children going to have a grudge against you?... [H]ow will I handle that? This is the kind of question that I ask myself. How am I gonna handle this if my child has a grudge against me? Everything may seem cool now, but once I’m out there, it’s a different thing.

As an African American mother, Angela should have enjoyed her mothering as a site of power. Rich (1986) explained two themes in this culture that are somewhat different than the Western patriarchal mothering tradition: 1) mothers and mothering are valued, 2) mothers and mothering “are what make possible the physical and psychological well-being and empowerment of African American people and the larger African American culture” (O’Reilly, 2004, p. 11). The purpose of mothering in this culture is to “preserve, protect, and ...empower black children so that they may resist racist practices” (O’Reilly, 2004, p. 11) and grow up. Consequently the mothering role must hold power to accomplish the empowerment of the culture’s children. Angela, by her concern that her children would hold a grudge against her, admitted that she had lost her mothering power. She worried how she was going to deal with her children’s anger and insolence. How was she going to regain her position and power in this family and in her community? There was no easy answer.
For Angela, Teresa, and Karla intense experience with the prison’s intervention programs caused them to review how they had mothered their children as women with addictions. It had changed the way they were doing mothering, how they wanted to do mothering, or in Karla’s case how she was doing mothering after her release. In addition, imprisonment and the accompanying required involvement in the intervention programs caused them to think about their lives and to recreate who they wanted to be when they were released. In these programs the women were forced to face their addictions and how they affected their mothering, to explore what it meant to be a “bad” mother, and to acknowledge that effective communication skills and positive role modeling were important to a mother-child relationship. These women were forced to make new meanings of themselves in terms of their identities, of their addictions and of themselves as a mother.

In contrast, Sherry sought out transforming experiences. In spite of having dropped out of school in 10th grade, Sherry was the only woman who read voraciously and positioned herself to attend classes to learn parenting and life skills. She said, “They always give you the parenting magazines and all that stuff. I read everything I possibly could.” She was the woman who took an active approach to turning her life around after she was arrested for dealing methamphetamine and before she was incarcerated. After her arrest and before receiving her sentence she admitted herself into a 24-hour halfway house program for homeless, chemically dependent, pregnant and/or parenting women who had substance abuse problems and were in need of assistance with recovery, self-sufficiency, parenting, and life skills (House of Mercy, 2005). It was there that she began to find the answers that she was seeking to how to live her life “in China.” This included giving up her drug addiction.
Once I was at the House of Mercy I felt like. ... I was finally learning all these things that I never knew about living right. ... I always thought I was a good parent. ...I do believe that I still was, but I never realized then that I was putting drugs first .... [T]hat came as such a powerful blow to me when I realized that this wasn’t right.

In this story, Sherry talked about her realization that being a good mother meant giving up her addiction to marijuana. This meant she would give up her life-long comfort, a childhood security blanket, for her own children. She had been smoking pot since she was eight. The drug gave her emotional and physical relief from pain when she was abused and gave her pleasure through her adulthood. Her addiction to the drug, that represented freedom from abuse, was standing in the way of her desire to live a normal life as a mother. I am sure there were many moments when she wondered whether the desire to live right was worth giving up her relationship with her comfort, security, and pleasure. And while she wanted to be free to start a new life without abuse, her addiction was a daily reminder of her painful past.

Sherry expressed frustration at her loss of control to continue her development as a “normal” person after she was incarcerated. Once she was admitted at the women’s prison she described her feelings at being locked up and not able to attend self-improvement classes. She went there to “nothin’” and was going to have to “sit there” waiting for three years for her turn in the programs. Sherry wanted to take control of her life and was still angry, five years later, when she told the story, that the prison system had short circuited her personal agenda. Taking away the personal control of inmates is the foundation of the prison system.
Once again, Sherry told her story as a master-narrative where she wanted to be the woman in charge.

After six months of being in all these classes and doing all these things [at House of Mercy], I went in there [prison] to nothin’. They throw you in a room with a bunch of women and that’s where you stay until they can get you shifted into their system. And the way that they like to do things is the treatment there is nine months long. So they want you to take that at the end of your sentence. Well, I had a four year mandatory. So I was goin’ to have to sit there for three years ... waiting to complete what I started [at House of Mercy].

In this next narrative Sherry discussed how she had to learn to manage her emotions. She was the oldest child of a drug addicted and abusive father and mother. She was raised in a home where yelling and name calling were the norm. At the House of Mercy she began to learn how to manage her emotions so that she would be a better mother. She admitted that though she had not beaten her children, she had yelled at them, but “I never yelled at them all that much” justifying this by saying that “you have to get after your kids sometime.” Angela would have advised her that from her experience any yelling and name calling was too much. Angela still bore the emotional scars of her mother’s verbal abuse. In this story Sherry admitted she needed help with controlling her emotions. Sherry said,

So I had to learn a lot about my emotions and that’s what I went to House of Mercy for. I never beat my kids. I never yelled at them all that much, you know. You have to get after your kids sometime[s]. But I didn’t know how to – what to do with my feelings.
In the piece that follows, Sherry talked about how important her prison experience was to her personal growth. She acknowledged that she needed help with her addiction and managing her emotions. She knew that even if she could have avoided a prison sentence, she would have needed another intervention program to help her learn how to “live in China.” She simply had too many years of life experiences to remodel. Then she expressed her strong desire to get into the prison’s treatment program so that she was making progress in her transformation. She closed with circling this back to her commitment to her children, as well as to herself.

Prison was huge ... with my personal growth. ‘Cause at the House of Mercy I was only there for six months. And even at six months I realized if I didn’t go to prison I was going to need a lot longer time, ‘cause this was a lifetime [to relearn]. This was how I was brought [up] and... taught to live. ...[T]he first year that I was in prison I was really frantic to get back into treatment and feel like I was doing something to change the things I needed to change. I needed to do that for my children [and] even then, to better myself.

Through the narratives of Sherry, Angela, Karla, Teresa, and Courtney I have shown that involvement in the prison’s intervention programs changed these women’s understanding of themselves as individuals and as mothers. Their participation in the residential treatment program, parenting class, and programming in the Violator’s Unit was vital to their revisiting of their experiences and events, to becoming new beings [Sartre, 1960/1968]. Their evolving nonunitary subjectivities in terms of their individuality and their mothering were also transformed in this process.
Storybook Project of Iowa

In this final section I will discuss how the Storybook Project of Iowa engaged the women in mothering through books and tapes and provided them with a sense of accomplishment (Girshick, 2003, p. 179) as they met their children’s needs for nurturing, literacy, and guidance. Their stories were told from inside the prison as well as from the outside provided by those who had been released into their communities. I will conclude the section with a final discussion on the importance of having volunteers who are sensitive and supportive, and have an interest in mother/child literacy.

I want to begin with two quotes, the first from Courtney. Because of my conversations with her, she asked her seven-year-old son what he thought about Storybook. Her son said, “Well, I like them [books] because I love you and you read them to me....” For Courtney’s son a mother’s love and reading go hand in hand.

The second quote is from a children’s book entitled The Kissing Hand (Harper & Leak, 1993). This story was published by the Child Welfare League of America to help children in difficult situations be reassured that they are loved. In this book the little raccoon does not want to leave his mother to go to school. His wise mother leaves a kiss on his paw to comfort him while they are separated. The storyline of book has touching implications for children whose mothers have been incarcerated.

“The Kissing Hand?” asked Chester. “What’s that?” “I’ll show you.” Mrs. Raccoon took Chester’s left hand and spread open his tiny fingers into a fan. Leaning forward, she kissed Chester right in the middle of his palm. Chester felt his mother’s kiss rush from his hand, up his arm, and into his heart. Even his silky, black mask tingled with a special warmth. Mrs. Raccoon smiled.
"Now," she told Chester, "whenever you feel lonely and need a little loving from home, just press your hand to your cheek and think, 'Mommy loves you. Mommy loves you.' And that very kiss will jump to your face and fill you with toasty warm thoughts." (Harper & Leak, 1993, p. 7-11)

Like Courtney's son and other children whose mothers have been arrested and taken to prison, the young raccoon must learn to cope with being separated from his mother to go to school. This book is a simple yet thoughtful way to reassure children of their mother's love during stressful circumstances. It is one we stock on the shelves of the Storybook Project of Iowa.

*Storybook Project of Iowa*

In a large Midwestern state women's prison, a mother-child support program known as the Storybook Project of Iowa has been in place since 1998 and involves inmate mothers recording their voices as they read children's books onto tapes each month. Volunteers operate the tape recorders and mail the tapes and books to the children. Since the project's inception on July 6, 1998 over 7,000 books and audio tapes have been sent to more than 600 children in the past seven years. Six hundred mothers have read. Twenty trained volunteers have given an average of more than 750 hours of time each year. This project is a not-for-profit organization with a 501(c)(3) tax status. It is funded by private foundations, individual donations, and local and state grants. It is governed by a Board of Directors made up of professionals with experience with incarcerated women, literacy, parenting education, and an individual who has been incarcerated and involved in the project. The project has several goals: 1) strengthening the mother/child relationships, 2) enhancing literacy through reading books aloud, 3) increasing the women's self esteem as individuals and mothers, 4) reducing
recidivism through nurturing the family relationship, 5) assuring the women that they are important to the outside community. Hereafter I will refer to the Storybook Project of Iowa as “the project” or as “Storybook.”

At this prison, inmates were allowed five visits per week and no more than five adults were permitted on their visitation list at any given time. There was no limit to the number of children. Involvement in Storybook provided the women with an opportunity to have an additional ‘visit’ with their children that had the added benefit of lasting a long time through the children’s rereading the books and replaying the tapes. It was an elective program available to mothers who had completed the parenting course at the prison. In the project the women reestablished or nourished their relationships with their children and families by connecting with them through reading and books (Enos, 2001). In addition it has been argued that through these relationships the mother’s ability to stay out of prison is strengthened and recidivism lowered (Showers, 1993).

For these women, mothering from prison was restricted and required financial resources. The women were physically separated from their children; they had limited contact with them and had relegated their day-to-day mothering tasks to others. I learned that there were five ways to engage in mothering while in this prison. These included: 1) phone calls, 2) visits, 3) one Sunday afternoon a month Kid’s Day Activities, 4) letters and cards, and 5) Storybook. Participating in any of these options made prison life more tolerable and enhanced the women’s mothering identities.

Each of these options required financial resources for participation: 1) the fee for making a phone call was $2 per 20 minute call; 2) visits required a caretaker to drive the children out to the prison, located 30 miles from town; 3) Kid’s Day Activities involved the
mother’s participation in a weekly support group. It also involved organizing a monthly
Sunday afternoon children’s event in the gym or classroom where the children were
supervised by teachers and volunteers as they made crafts, played in the gym, watched
movies, or ate treats with their mothers. There was a $1 fee/child/month to offset expenses;
4) mailing letters and cards required funds to purchase them and the postage; 5) Storybook-
the prison charged $2/package mailed to cover the media rate postage through the U.S. Postal
Service. While the women that I interviewed had prison jobs that paid approximately
$1.50/day (different jobs pay different wages), they all acknowledged that life in prison was
much easier if someone on the outside provided some financial support.

When I began my conversations with the women I would start by asking them to tell
me about the project. I would begin with the smiling request: “So, tell me about
Storybook…” Often the women would sit forward and tell about how they became involved
in the project and what it meant to them. Teresa was excited to tell me how appreciative she
was to be part of the project. She said, “Storybook has been a wonderful thing...Storybook is
a great thing.” She added, “For myself and...especially for people that don’t get to see their
children ... [through Storybook the kids] get to hear their [mom’s] voice...[T]hat makes ‘em
feel closer to ‘em... .” Teresa was pleased to have been asked to summarize her perspective
of the project.

**First Time Stories**

According to the women’s stories, before participating in Storybook, they had been
forced to come face-to-face with their addictions, their prison sentences, and their mothering
inadequacies through prison intervention programs such as parenting classes, the treatment
program, and/or programming in the Violator’s Unit. It was not surprising then, with little
variation among the stories, the women told of their extreme anxiety about their first time with the program. Angela described her feelings with the phrase, “I didn’t want to mess up.” She told this story of her first time reading.

My first time with Storybook I didn’t really know what to expect but once I got in there I was nervous. Very, very nervous. I didn’t think I would sound good or I would stumble over my words, which, that’s what I did anyway. I believe you were my first one [I helped her as a volunteer and expressed surprise]. Yeah, you helped me! And you made me feel very comfortable. [laughter] …[Y]ou told me, “Its OK, your kids can hear you stumble…” . So that really just made it … easier for me. [I was] excited and thrilled that I can send my children books and that they can hear my voice and that I can tell them I love them on the tape. [I read] Harry Potter and Nate the Great. … I read to my five boys.

In this story Angela described her initial anxiety, how a volunteer helped her feel comfortable, and how excited she was to give current books [Harry Potter] that her children loved. She explained that part of her anxiety was because she did not know what to expect of the experience. She felt anxiety over making a fool of herself in front of her children, the volunteer, and the other inmates in the room. Once I reminded her that she was reading for her children and not performing on a radio show where her reading had to be perfect, she became more calm. Her excitement was obvious in sending books to her children with a tape recording of her voice telling them she loved them. With her family’s limited income before her incarceration she had not been able to give her children books. Through the project
Angela had sent brand new books to her children with her voice narrating them. This meant a lot to her because she loved books and reading and wanted to share this with her children.

Sherry told how she spent her first year in prison in extreme distress and described maternal depressive symptoms that are common to newly incarcerated women (Poehlmann, 2005). She added that she distanced herself from the other mothers to retain her sense of being different and not belonging at the prison (Enos, 2001). In this story she told of how she gradually found her emotional balance over time as she had more frequent contacts with her children (Poehlmann, 2005a).

When I first went to Storybook and the Mother’s Support Group I was just [new] to [the prison]...[A]fter trying so hard to keep my kids in my life by the time I got there I was literately praying to die. I didn’t want to kill myself or anything, but I was like, “God, I can’t. This is just too much. Life’s been too hard. I don’t want to do it anymore.” And so I just went through my days carrying that sadness and that pain. I didn’t really talk to anybody for the whole first year that I was there. So when I went in the room [Storybook] it was a room full of books, and ... ... it was just like trying to go through the motions. And then I sat down with the book, the first book...and it was a kid’s book and my kids weren’t there, but it was a way that I could still be with them, and it was just a whole turmoil of feelings... . Should I be happy? Should I be sad? And then I was sitting there with somebody I didn’t know, trying to read to my kids and be – sound like the mom that they knew.... [S]o the first time was really a whole range of different feelings .... ... And then after the first visit, after they’d [say], “Mom,” they’re like “Ahhh, I got your
story... and I love it"... . And then it just got easier every time. A little bit more of that sadness left every, every time and every visit... . 'Cause I only got to see them the one time.

In the above story Sherry told of how she was able to participate in the project and another mothering program ("Mother's Support Group") at the prison during her first year, but in doing so, she felt as though she was going through empty motions. She was depressed and traumatized. She described going into the classroom where Storybook was held and seeing books. Surely this brought back all the emotions of sitting with her children in the evening or reading together after school. This was accompanied with the pain of realizing that she was incarcerated and was fighting for custody of her children. She described the unreality of the entire event including sitting with a strange lady and trying to go through the motions. She tried to end the story on a happy note by remembering that it got easier each time after the children expressed their delight in the books and tapes. Even this contact with her children helped her regain some of her mothering identity and relieved some of her initial depression (Poehlmann, 2005a). But she ended by remembering the feelings of only being able to see her children once during her three year incarceration. Somebody had taken her children away.

In her story below Courtney described her own experiences of the first time reading with the project. Both Courtney and Sherry talked about not knowing how to feel the first time. Courtney talked about the emptiness of being lost as a mother and the nasty aspects of guilt for not being with her child. She contrasted this with the feeling of being connected versus the anger that she was separated from her son in the first place. She expressed many contrasting feelings in this story.
It was hard. It was really emotional. Just like thinking about being able to read to him and him having to listen to me on a tape recorder was kind of hard. But after the first couple of times it got easier... Now it’s not so hard. I know the first time was really, really hard. I had to stop a few times....I was just sad and...kind of lost, I guess. I felt like made me feel guilty and bad and just ‘cause I have to do that for him, even thought it’s a good thing because it helps bring us closer, I feel. But at the same time it’s not [a good thing], because I should be there reading to him ... not over a tape recorder. I think that when I first did it I was more sad and [I]...always thought about having to read to him over a tape [instead of being beside him]. [I]t kind of drove me crazy. At the same time it was good, but ...

In the following story Teresa also shared her anxiety about sounding stupid and shaming herself in front of her children while reading. As I heard their stories, I began to realize that the women had developed a defense system in prison and (understandably) did not want to appear vulnerable when they read to their children. They already felt so much guilt and grief at their separation from their children that they were hyperconscious about how they sounded when reading.

I was a nervous wreck because ...I was embarrassed before [she learned to read better], if I didn’t know a word or somethin’ like that. So it was like...my voice was all crackly on tape. And I said, “I know I sound so stupid!”...but it didn’t matter because it was for my kids.

Sally, unlike the other women, saw her kids each week and talked to them every day on the telephone. Yet her first time with the project was still difficult. She expressed her
sadness at the loss of her day-to-day mothering knowledge. She did not know what books to send to her own children. She was disconnected from their lives and this was very painful. She even had to sing Happy Birthday to her children on a tape recorder. Her life had hit a new low. She described her first time reading as

...scary. [sad laughter] I was nervous. I'd picked out these books. The lady [volunteer] I'd read to said, “Just relax and pretend like you’re reading to me. Or that your kids are sitting here.” I was still nervous. I know that the first time, some of the words I either turned ... around or I skipped a word and [said,] “I’m sorry,” but the first time was really kind of nerve wracking. ‘Cause I didn’t know what books to send and I cried. ...I don’t regret it [crying on the tape]. [crying now]. But after I’d read about two-three months I got to where...it was a little easier. But I’d always do a little talking to them before I’d read the story or if it was their birthday. They told me I could sing Happy Birthday to them. I’m not a good singer ...[laughs]. They were sad [crying]. But I was happy ‘cause I got to talk to my kids, they could hear me...my voice. Even though it was just a tape.

Karla told of her first time reading with Storybook by foretelling the story with her feelings about her own mother’s inconsistent behavior. She remembered how upset she would become as a child at hearing her absent mother’s voice and did not want her son to have this experience. She digressed by sharing that she did not talk to her son nor did he visit her in prison, by her own choice. She wanted her son to have the stable life that she missed. I think she was still trying to reassure herself that this was a good decision. But she
remembered choosing the favorite book in the bookshelf for first time readers and while reading it reduced herself and the volunteer to tears.

The girls [in the Violator's Unit] had told me about it: the first Mondays of the month they have Storybook. We can pick out a book and read it to your child. Well, I just had these thoughts about when my mom was gone. She wasn't in prison but she was out of my life and she would pop in every so often. ... I remember [how] just listening to her voice on the phone or reading a card from her just got me so emotionally upset. ... [S]o I was just picturing that happening to [son]. He was told that I had gotten trouble and was going to treatment. And I was gone for 10 months. And during that time I chose not to talk to him. Because I just did not know how he would react and he was doing well... ... [H]e didn't even visit me. That was a decision that I choose and it was very hard, but I did that because I didn’t want him...I felt like if things were OK now, why put fuel? Why if his dad's [doing a good job]... they're in a little family and they're doing OK. I know [son] would go to my parents ... and he would talk about me. But as far as keeping contact with him – I did not. So when the Storybook came, and of course, the book that I picked out – I remember [the volunteer] saying this too, “Oh my God, why’d you pick the most saddest book?” But it was ... *I'll Love You Forever*. So I read that and I believe that I got a little emotional as I was reading it.

*Literacy*

Children of incarcerated mothers are at greater risk for academic underachievement than others. Several studies have provided evidence that children who lived in low-income
families display lower levels of academic self-efficacy and literacy achievement relative to other children (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Dearing, McCartney, Weiss, Kreider, & Simpkins, 2004). In addition, low levels of maternal education place children at exceptionally high risk for failure in terms of literacy (Rauh, Parker, Garfinkel, Perry, & Andrews, 2003). But with maternal involvement in their education these children may have more positive attitudes and success towards literacy. Maternal involvement in education is described as 1) instruction, 2) modeling, and 3) reinforcement (Hoover-Dempsey, Battito, Walker, Reed, DeJong, & Jones, 2001).

For these women, involvement with their children’s education through instruction was difficult, although Courtney told stories of teaching her son to read in the visitor’s room using homemade flash cards and children’s books. Through the Storybook Project modeling and reinforcement of reading were easier to do. The project allowed the mothers to model reading on tapes and to reinforce the modeling through the gift of a book and their words of love. Teresa was candid about how the project improved her own literacy and reading skills and how she believed that she was modeling this for her children.

Storybook has taught me to not be embarrassed, to just pick up a book and read it to my kids. Its just my kids, no matter what they love me and if I don’t know a word, its just them and I know that there’s many people out there that aren’t very good readers. And I realized that. There’s nothing to be ashamed of if I don’t know a word. ...[R]eadin’ ‘em Storybook, I just pick out a book and read it to ‘em. It just seems like the more I read the better that I become and the words just come. I dropped out of school at a young age, in 6th grade... And by getting my GED in the time that I’ve been here and doing
Storybook has helped me improve my reading skills. And at the same time it has gave me a chance to do somethin' for my children that ... they always liked me to do when I was at home with them and that's to read them books before they go to bed. So by me being able to read them books and to have my voice on tape to send to them, it just gives them a chance to hear my voice and I know that I'm not there physically with them, but when they hear my voice on that tape, I know I'm there with them. And like I said, being here my reading has improved 100%.

In the following story Angela described how her involvement in the project allowed her to model her commitment to her children's education. She was able to give them books and encourage their reading. Note that she had to admit it had helped her with her reading too. Reading books aloud had helped her and she believed it helped her children's literacy. According to the literacy literature, she was correct (Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, DeJong, & Jones, 2001).

I was just excited and thrilled that I can send my children books and that they can hear my voice and that I can tell them I love them on the tape....[T]hey'll be able to expand their reading. ... They'll be able to get somethin' that they weren't able to get before, 'cause they didn't have books before I started doing this. Now they got books! And so, now they can do a lot of reading. And then I just got to say though, it helped me kind of with my reading as well. I'm not saying that I'm a bad reader or can't read, but I'll say that some of the books, there's words in there that I couldn't even pronounce. But as I
got to reading more and more it helped me making progress as well. So if it’s helping me, I know its helping my kids.

In addition, the project gave the women opportunities to discuss books in visits and phone conversations by asking their children what they liked to read and what they could read to them next. It also allowed the women to support their children’s reading at home and at school because the project opened the conversational door to reading and literacy. For instance, when Angela learned from a volunteer that her children should be reading at least twenty minutes a day at home, she talked with her children about this in the next phone call. She was as involved with their education as her limited circumstances and fractured relationships allowed. And according to the literacy literature, through the modeling and reinforcement of learning she was encouraging their positive attitudes toward school and literacy that facilitate academic success (Hoover-Dempsey & Sadler, 1995).

When you guys tell me to “write something in the book or tell your children to read 20 minutes a day,” I take that and I let them know because I believe its going to help. And when I do that, [I tell them] “[R]ead at least 20 minutes a day,” “[R]ead the book that I sent you. Make sure that you read it. So I know what the books about or tell me what the books about.” And it encourages them to hear that from their mom. And it really makes them want to do this.

When the children were in first and second grade and old enough to be reading chapter books, the volunteers advised the mothers to read the first chapter or two on the tape, then ask the child to finish reading the book on their own. On the tapes, the mothers would often ask the children to tell them how the book ended in a book report, a letter, or during a
phone call. In the following narrative, Sally talked about how she discussed the books with her children.

[On] Sunday ... they’d come up [to the visiting room and she would ask,]
“Did you get your books?” “No, not yet.” “Well it should be comin’.” Well then they’d get it the next weekend and we’d talk about the books I sent them. And I’d ask them to tell me what it was about... ... “What’s the best part of the book you liked?” ...Or sometimes on a Sunday they’d come, I’d say “Now I’m doing Storybook [on] Tuesday, is there any book in particular you’re lookin’ for?”

Next Angela told this marvelous story of how she learned more about her oldest son’s reading interests through the project. Listen to the extensive dialogue she related in telling how she gave her oldest son (who she admitted was a troubled child) a book of poetry that he loved. This opened up conversational pathways that she hungered for and allowed her to stay in a relationship with him through another popular book of poetry. Note her appreciation of the project’s volunteer in working to locate the book for her.

I believe that Storybook has helped my relationship with my children a lot....

We can talk about the books. I can find out what they like to read and what they don’t like to read. ...Like I think it was, no, not last month but the one before I sent my oldest son the book My Man Blue. And it was a poetry book. And I was just so excited about that book and to send it to him. And so I had talked to him...I think the following month, because you know I don’t get to talk to him all the time and he’s not where my younger kids are where I can talk to them every day on the phone. So when I did get ahold of him I said,
“Did you get your book?” He said, ‘Yeah, I really enjoyed that book.” I said, “You could understand those poems?” He said, “Yes, I could understand them.” He said, “Mom, I love poetry.” He says, “I read poetry a lot at school.” I said, “Well, what books do you read that’s poetry?” He said, “Silverstein.” He says he loves Silverstein books. So I asked the lady here [at Storybook] and she said she’s going to look and see if she can find a Silverstein book so I can give him one of his own copy. ... It just felt good because I didn’t know that my child likes poetry, but that opened the communication by me sending that book and just listening to him. And him telling me what kind of books that he likes...

**Storybook as “Good” Mothering**

The women struggled with redeeming themselves as “good” mothers to themselves and their children. They were aware that society thought that they were “horrible people.” Courtney, who at 24 had served five years of her sentence and would remain in prison for 37 more years, talked about her view of the general public’s perception of women in prison. She believed that people needed to understand them as individuals before judging them for their crimes. Note that she told this story from her father’s perspective. It was a painful telling of her reaction to her father’s experience.

A lot of people out there view prisoners as “Ooo, so scary” and ... they think really negative and if they’ve never had an experience to where their child has been in prison or someone they know we’re horrible people in their eyes. Just because we’ve committed crimes. ‘Cause I’m, I know like when every thing happened with me there was some guy that said something to my dad and my
dad said, "You know, you can’t judge nobody. What if it was your daughter, you probably wouldn’t feel that way." So I know there’s a lot of people out there that. I mean even before I got locked up I’d see stuff, certain people, and I’d think, how can they do such a thing? But ...you don’t know them or what was going on in their life. So yeah. I believe that society really looks at us, looks down upon us, which is understandable at some point. But at some point they don’t know us or what happened in their life.

Courtney talked about the pleasure and satisfaction she felt in knowing that she was one of the long-time participants in the project. She said, "In a sense it makes me feel good to know that I’m one of ‘em that has come up here faithfully." Again, with her participation in the project she was setting herself apart from the general prison population (Enos, 2001).

To my surprise, in the next breath she shared her concern that her son would turn against her when he was 13 or 14. She was worried that he would think that she had not done all she could do to be a “good” mother from prison. In this story she talked about saving her receipts (“withdrawal slip”) from paying her two dollar fee as evidence and as a defense against his future anger. Note that when he turns 18-years-old she will no longer be able to participate in the project due to the guidelines of the Department of Corrections.

I’ll never quit doing it [Storybook]! I’ll do it till he’s 18! [laughing then sobering quickly] ... ... I keep every withdrawal slip, just in case, if something would happen to his books, I can show him that I did this for him. I have every single one of them [B: Why did you start doing that?] ... ... Well, first I wanted him to know that even though I’m here I’ve tried everything to keep being a mother to him, no matter what. I just don’t want him to grow up and
I'm scared that like right now he comes up so often that when he's 13 or 14 he's gonna stray away, you know. Cause he's gonna be a teenager and want to do stuff. Or maybe he's gonna-you never know-turn his back on me. Anything could happen just because when they're older they might realize that you weren't there for me. So I just want to show him that even though I wasn't there physically, I was doing everything I could for him. Even though we were apart. Well, 'cause I can't imagine a child not being mad at their parent for being gone. I would be. Most definitely I would be. Well, my mom tells me ..., "Courtney, he's not gonna be like that. He loves you too much." But because loving me so much, might make him even more like that.

In this story Courtney spoke of trying to be a good mother from prison. Storybook was one of the tools she used to demonstrate this to her son and herself. The guilt she felt at her incarceration was tremendous. Obviously she had fixated on this to the point of organizing evidence (like a court case) against his potential anger.

Courtney went on to tell of her fears of losing him. If he no longer recognized her as a significant person in his life or stopped visiting her, her identity, her bright focus for each day in that dark place would be gone. She began the story by telling me that her son was "her life." She added, "If I ever lost him I don't know what I'd do."

Just because he's my kid, he's my son, you know? So everything that happens to him happens to me. And...I just love him. I love him more than anybody. I mean in my heart I don't think he would ever. I really don't think he would ever forget about me or ...not come up here or anything like that. I really don't because we're too close. But I know there's gonna be a point in
his life where he's like, why did you leave me? You know. [B: And what will you tell him?] I don’t know... I mean I’ve told him already where he’s been like, “Well, why do you have to be here, Mom? Why can’t you come home?”

... Its not that I wanted to leave, it’s just somethin’ that happened.

In the above story Courtney drew a picture of them as one being because her life was so limited that the focus of her existence was on her son and his next visit. Her relationship with her son was the only positive thing in her life. This feeling was supported by considerable research (Owen, 1998; Sharp & Marcus-Mendoza, 2000). She was terrified of a time in the future when she would not receive the distracting, loving, and validating visits from her son (and from her mother who drove him out). Her life would become very narrow. Then in this story she cracked open the door to the worry of how to tell her son of her sentence. She explained that she had already tried to tell him that she was not fully responsible for her actions that resulted in her long sentence. With this story, Courtney allowed me into her deepest terrors: she will be left in the prison without the joy of her son’s visits and he will accuse her of not loving him.

Teresa, like the other women, talked about wanting to do anything possible to do something for her kids. She was searching for ways to be a mother and to validate her mothering identity. Certainly she was very aware that she wasn’t “out there to do things for them” but Storybook gave her the opportunity to “just be there to read to them. To just do things that a mother and children do.” She added, “So anything that I can do in here for my children, I do it. ... I know that reading Storybook would be something that they would like and it would be somethin’ for me to them.” She felt that she was a better parent because she
was with them on tape. She said, “So by me being able to read them books and to have my
voice on tape to send to them, it just gives them a chance to hear my voice and I know that
I’m not there physically with them, but when they hear my voice on that tape, I know I’m
there with them.”

Angela added to the mothering value of the program by discussing how important it
was that she paid for the privilege of participating in the project (by paying two dollars for
postage) just as she would if she were on the outside. Her self-esteem as a mother increased
because she was paying for an enrichment program for her children.

Although we don’t have to pay for these books, we can feel like we’re paying
our part toward something good for our children. ...So I think that gives you a
sense of responsibility... .Although you guys come out to help us, still it isn’t
free. Still if you were out on the street you would have to pay, so that’s a way
of being able to ... you’re really doing somethin’ for your children. ...You’re
doing something just by spending that $2. It’s a sense of responsibility.

**Storybook in Retrospect**

I asked each of the three mothers who had been part of the project while incarcerated
but were now living in their Midwest communities to tell me stories about what they took
away from their experiences with Storybook.

**Sherry**

Sherry was the strong and wise 37-year-old mother of six children, five of whom
were alive. She had lost partial custody rights of her four oldest children to family members
but still shared alternate weekends with them. At her release, she experienced great distress.
Upon winning her appeal she was suddenly released and driven to a YWCA in the capital
city. She had no money, no clothing (she was still in prison garb), no transportation, and no family. She had no way of getting the money she had saved carefully in prison until she drove back out (30 miles with no public transportation) to return her prison-issued clothing. Within the first couple of days she was lucky enough to see an old friend who drove her to the prison so she could become financially secure for the immediate future. Sherry, like the women in O’Brien’s study (2001), did not have even her minimally basic needs met upon her release. O’Brien (2001) argued that the most basic levels of food, clothing, and safety (Maslow, 1970) must be met before a mother can begin to meet her high needs for “love and belongingness, self esteem and self-actualization” (p. 131). In spite of her rocky road upon release, soon Sherry married another ex-inmate and gave birth to her sixth child as she explained, “I needed my babies quickly as I could.” She needed to reestablish herself as a mother.

Sherry talked about being emotionally beaten her whole life but it was when she came to prison that she started to believe that “I could be sold for two-cents” and to question her self-worth. Because of the validity she felt in her mothering identity, being removed from her children felt like “somebody took my arms away.” She described coming to prison and having “ideas, wonderful ideas” of things to do with her children and the frustration of her loss of control over her mothering. She was dependent upon her children’s caregivers to give them the things she had mailed and to mail her children’s school work back to her, and admitted they often did not do these things for her. In three years she enjoyed only one visit with her children. Similar to other incarcerated women, her visits were blocked by the children’s grandparents (O’Brien, 2001). She said, “I couldn’t do anything, you know?” For Sherry, Storybook represented a program where people understood her frustration and loss
and wanted to help. She described her feelings about the project. It felt like “[s]omebody wants to give me back my hands for a minute. I can send my voice to my kids, I can send a book to them and every time they turn it on I’m there, I’m in touch with my kids.”

O’Brien (2001) described women who were successful in making it in the free world as those who had retained a sense of control over their mothering. Sherry, who always told her stories with a theme of control, spoke of retaining this by making the books and tapes a surprise gift.

Sometimes I would send it home with them when they would come up for Kid’s Day and sometimes I would mail it to ‘em. So sometimes it would be a surprise. … they’d be sitting at home playing and then all of a sudden there’s Mom from clear over here… . So that… was a relief for me, in here. It was something that kept me going.

In the following story she reinforced Girshick’s (2003) point that the value of parenting programs for incarcerated women “lies in the sense the mother may feel about her worth as a parent. That she can mother and mother well, that she is vitally important to her family, gives a sense of accomplishment and a sense of self” (p. 179). Sherry shared the following story.

Storybook was a part of me that I could send home with them. …[T]hat was the best thing. Being able to send my boys some part of me, to my kids, that they could listen to whenever they felt like it … was a huge relief. …I don’t even know how to explain it. …Like saying, “I’m still here, and I still love you.”…So it was a relief for me because like my son was seven at the time…and he was a momma’s boy, so I felt better knowing that he had a piece
of me in his room that he could go to at any time. Anytime that he wanted to, there’s mom.

Sherry needed to mother and she needed to try to mother well. She was a horribly abused child, introduced to pot at age eight by her father and abused by him while her equally abused mother stood by unable to defend her, or her siblings, or to attend to her needs for safe and consistent mothering, a safe home, and an education. While this reflects Lawless’ (2001) experiences with the abused women she interviewed in the safe house, it was a miserable and traumatic way for Sherry to grow up. The amazing aspect of Sherry’s character was that she was able to rise above this and seek out opportunities to revise her understanding of what a good home looked like and what a good mother was. While waiting for her prison sentence to be handed down, she admitted herself to a community residential treatment program where she could get counseling advice and take parenting classes. While she was incarcerated she worked the system so that she could enter the residential drug treatment program early in her sentence (rather than having to wait for the final nine months of her sentence) and “work on herself.” It was there she began to learn how to be a good mother in China.

While I was interviewing her, Sherry’s 18-year-old son had moved home to live with her and her husband after living with his grandparents since her imprisonment. Her conversations with me caused her to ask him about his memories of Storybook. Even though it had been almost two years since she had been released, she realized that Storybook was still an important part of their relationship. She relayed this story.

My 18-year-old told me he liked the books and he liked listening to the tapes, but they put him to sleep. But I told him I was glad that I was about reading
him to sleep. That’s what you try to do when they’re little [even though he was 12 through 16 at the time of her participation in the program].

She was thrilled that her oldest boy would tell her that she had read him to sleep while she was in prison. When I asked her to reflect further of what Storybook had come to mean to her and her family, Sherry shared this story.

I took away more than I thought that I did because my children are still bringing me the tapes and the books . . . . It’s coming back and ... keeping in touch. I kept the bonds that way, the bonds that I did have with my children. That was one of the things that I could do. [13-year-old son] and I are working on our relationship . . . . He recently brought me back his Storybook tapes in a box. ...And I said, “What’s that?” And he said, “These are your tapes.” I said, “You don’t want them any more?” And he said, “I don’t need them any more, Mom. I have you now.” So I think that kind of explained a lot to me about what they meant for him, you know.

Of all the stories that I heard from the women, this was the one that made me a little emotional. This is the son who did not remember his early home life because of being traumatized at her arrest and incarceration. This was the child for whom she read dolphin books in an effort to nurture their earlier relationship. And several years later this son gave her back the books and tapes in a ceremonial way, to make a point of saying that their relationship was on track and he loved her. This is the power of Storybook.

Sally

Sally was the mother who was the most engaged in the lives of her four children. Her husband would bring two of their children to visit each week and her parents would also visit
keeping her advised of the children’s activities in school. She spoke to her children every day on the telephone. The school even mailed their report cards and notices of activities to her in prison. She made sure that she read the books on her children’s school reading lists so they received “reading points.” When her ten-year-old daughter complained that Sally would only read the first one or two chapters of a chapter book, Sally related, “But I had four kids to read to! [laughing] But she [her daughter] just thought it was neat following along if I read.” Her daughter just wanted to be read to by her mother.

Sally’s story was one of community-based tragedy and support. She was married and lived in a small rural Midwestern community. Before her arrest, for twelve years she was an in-home caregiver to children in the town. I believe, as did the members of her community, that she was wrongly arrested and incarcerated for four years for child endangerment. When the county sheriff arrested her the parents of the children she cared for went to the sheriff’s department to protest. At the announcement by the sheriff that they should take their children to the doctor to be examined for signs of abuse, Sally told this story of the support and commitment of the people in her town.

[T]his one guy…said, “If I do that will you let her go? ‘Cause there’s nothing wrong with my boy. He don’t even want to come home with me. …[H]e loves coming here [to her home].”

She told of her community’s support on the day she returned home. She told of being greeted with a banner blowing in the winter wind over Main Street, of people standing on the sidewalk to welcome her home, and of a huge potluck dinner at her parent’s home on a bitter cold day. In an additional affirmation of her trustworthiness around small children and to the community’s affection, after her return home she was hired to work in the elementary school.
Her stories of her imprisonment were those of constant contact with her family, notes from the school about her children’s progress and activities, and of receiving hundreds of birthday cards on her birthday. While she felt guilty that she received such frequent contacts while other women did not, these kept her connected vitally to her family, children, and community. She recognized that she could not truly do mothering from in prison, but she was doing her best to stay connected and in control. And her family and community were doing their best to make up for the painful event and separation by acts of kindness for four years.

Sally talked of her mother’s support while she was away from her children. Even though she saw her children every week and talked with them every day on the telephone, she used Storybook to stay in touch with the daily activities of her children’s lives, no matter how small. Note her use of the phrase “they looked forward to it.” I know that reading with the project was painful for her. Naturally it reminded her of her unjust imprisonment and her separation from her children and close family. But, because it was important to them, she did it faithfully each month and even served as a clerk in the program.

They’d [her children] take their books and their tapes up to my mom. My mom said that one day [the youngest] was sitting there. You know, I’d read what was on the page but if I seen something on there I’d say like “[daughter], what’s on that tree?” I’d just be talking to her. And my mom said [daughter] was sitting there with her one day ‘cause she wasn’t in school yet. But [daughter] said “Grandma’s here Mom, she just said…” Mom said, “It was so weird, cause she was…It was like you were there talking to her.” The kids looked forward to getting my books every month. I’m not a smoker but there are so many mothers out there that don’t read to their kids. And I said even if I
was a smoker I would hold money back to read to my kids. 'Cause a lot of them said, they’ve got to have their cigarettes. Maybe they do, but they could save two dollars.

In this story above she talked about, how even to her mother, her voice on the tape sounded like she was present in the room. Her family desperately wanted her home and accepted even the wonder of her voice on tape as a surrogate presence. Sally was critical of the women at the prison who did not participate in the project suggesting that the fee was a small price to pay for staying connected to their children. She had little patience for women who did not take their mothering role seriously.

While upon her return Sally wanted to get rid of everything related to that time away, for some reason she had chosen to keep the tapes of the project. When I asked her what she took away from Storybook she told of cleaning the house after she returned from being away for four years, room by room, top to bottom. I believe she did this in an effort to take back her home, washing away the taint and horror of the arrest and trial. She told this story about running across the tapes while cleaning and deciding to save them as a memory of that time away.

We’ve got all these [Storybook] tapes upstairs too! [laughing] Little cassette tapes. And I probably could get rid of those. [B: objects] No, I’m not going to but … I could get rid of those ‘cause the kids probably won’t ever listen to them again. …And then I got to thinking. I want to forget about that place up there [the prison]. Not the Storybook, you know. Then I think-no, I’ve got to keep ahold of them… . They’re all like in shoe boxes… .I’ll keep them. We’ll probably laugh one of these days and I’ll probably laugh saying “Oh I sang
this! I sang Happy Birthday and I sounded like...” I was just glad that I made it through the first one [read]. I’m really glad I did it. Even though I was up there and they’re here, I just I’m really glad I did it.

With this story Sally further illustrated how important she felt the project was to her children’s lives. Through the project she was able to give her children a birthday greeting and a book. While she knew it would be some time before she could laugh about the experience, she was willing to do so for her children.

**Karla**

Karla was the non-custodial, divorced mother of a seven-year-old son. She lived in the same neighborhood and attended the same church with her extended family, ex-husband, and son, but she was having a problem with finding a job in a nursing home with her drug charge. She related her reentry into her family this way:

When I came back and he was in kindergarten, he was reading. And he could just pick up anything and read it. He’d sound out the words. My aunt is a teacher and she worked with him while I was gone. And I couldn’t believe it. That’s what he’s doing right there [points to a picture on the kitchen wall]. That’s my first night out of [prison] and I’m sitting at the table listening to him. Yeah, he’s readin’ a book to me, see? I’m sitting there listening to him! We’re both looking at the camera but that’s what that picture…that’s my very first night out. I went over to my parent’s house and got [him]. So if you want to show that picture to anybody, that’s Storybook when I came home!

This happy story of Karla’s homecoming told of the meaningful connection she made through the project while she was away for a total of ten months, incarcerated at the women’s
prison for six. Because of her experiences with her own mother and her absences and lack of follow-through, Karla felt that it was important that she keep her distance from her son while she was away. She did not call him; she did not allow him to visit her. But she did send him books and tapes through the project and it was with this common experience that she reentered his life after prison. Karla believed she was a better mother because of her experiences through the intervention programs at the prison and especially through Storybook. And she was working to apply these to her life outside. But Karla’s mental illness, addiction, and her prison record made it difficult to get a job in a nursing home and financially support herself. Like several women in O’Brien’s research (2001), Karla did not request custody of her son after returning home. She did not have the financial or emotional support necessary to resume the role of primary caregiver and was satisfied with the non-custodial visitation arrangement she had with her ex-husband and his wife.

Karla described the separation and anger that family members and caretakers often felt for the women. She told of her ex-husband refusing to get the tapes out for her son to listen to. To circumvent this obstacle, the women often found a more sympathetic relative and mailed the packages to them for distribution to their children. This was the case for Karla. Her aunt was the conduit for the packages and support for the books and tapes. She said, “My aunt said they would put them in the car and they would listen to them.” Karla realized that her ex-husband was likely trying to protect their son from the emotional pain that hearing her voice might cause. But in spite of her bad memories of her own childhood, she wanted to stay connected with her son. “ ‘Cause to me that was the worst thing about my childhood was wanting to see my mom but couldn’t and then hearing her voice. And just how emotional it was. It was very emotional.” In the following story, Karla recalled her
concern with how her son would react to hearing her voice and her worry that she should not be part of this project. She added that she focused only on him when she read to him.

How’s he gonna react? He’s gonna cry and want to see me and he can’t. And I thought, maybe it’s better if I don’t do this, so he doesn’t hear my voice, then he won’t feel bad. That was what I was torn. That’s you know. I’m glad I did the Storybook. And I do not regret, I know this sounds maybe harsh to somebody, but I do not regret him not coming to see me. And the reason why is because … it’s kind of scary driving into [prison]. And it’s pretty institutionalized looking. And I didn’t want him having that vision of where I was at. He was fine with the fact knowing that I was in treatment, but he did not come up there at all. It gave me that time to be into [her son] for however long it took me to read that book. The whole focus was him and it made me feel close to him. Even though he may not have read the book, but it made me feel close to him. You know like I was calling out to him, you know, “Mommy’s here.” And then I would always leave it with “Mommy loves you very much and I miss you.”

Even one-and-one-half-years after her release Karla justified her refusal of her son’s visits by wanting to spare her son the memories of visiting his mother in prison. I do not think her fragile self esteem could have withstood it if he had reacted negatively to this experience. In her mind, it was better to keep him away. But she allowed herself contact with him via the books and tapes. This was a safe distance to her and gave her some much needed time with him, to work out her feelings and to be a mother from afar.
Karla shared that the project was not only a source of comfort for her son, but was comforting to her as well. She could nurture her mothering identity through the project.

It made me just feel like a mom! You know it’s hard up there...you know you miss your kids and it’s terrible. But I guess for my part of it ... I knew that [son] was in good hands. I knew he was around my family and [ex-husband’s] family and they’re wonderful people. And so to me it was more of ...a comfort and it just ...made me feel I was more involved with him even though it wasn’t shown directly but just the emotional part of it was...it gave me hope. I looked forward to it every single month.

And I loved it and to me I think it was one of the things that...I needed in that program. I didn’t want go six months without having any type [of contact with her son]...And I loved doing that. And I wrote him at least two-three times a week fun little cards and stuff. And then Storybook, to me, was just a plus for a parent, for moms. Just something more that we can do for our children, because they’re without us and we need ‘em in some way.

Karla’s story was similar to one Nell Bernstein (2005) told of an incarcerated women she had interviewed who described mothering in the following way, “You become a mother [by]...fulfilling your child’s needs” (p. 169). And for all the women, participating in the project partially fulfilled their need for their mothering identity by doing something for their children.

Volunteers

To become a volunteer with this program, the Board of Directors had developed an application process with four parts: 1) written application, 2) interview with the program
coordinator, 3) reference check, 4) background check with the state and the Department of Corrections. The program coordinator administered the process and closely screened the volunteers to identify individuals who had the personality to interact with vulnerable women in prison, an interest in supporting mother/child literacy, a desire to volunteer on a long term basis in a prison environment that required flexibility and willingness to accept rules, and the ability to represent the program at the prison with the inmate mothers without direct supervision by the corrections officers or the program coordinator. In addition to the application process, they were involved in two volunteer orientation training programs, one that was required by Storybook and the other by the prison. The volunteers were responsible to facilitate the “reads” on the first Monday morning and the second Tuesday mornings and afternoons of each month. Twenty volunteers had been trained by the program coordinator and were involved. The volunteers were to greet and make the mothers comfortable, help them choose a book, coach them as they read (as needed), operate the tape recorder (required by the warden), and provide mailing supplies for the packages of books and tapes.

The long-time volunteers in this prison intervention program were all female with children and grandchildren of their own. They participated in the project with amazing regularity. Many of these women had volunteered on the same days of the month since the early days of the program in the summer of 1998. They believed in the importance of the project and were committed to interacting with the inmate mothers. Many of them had a Christian commitment to visiting the women in prison and one had a son who had been incarcerated on drug charges. Proselytizing of the Christian faith was not encouraged by the program but demonstrating kindness, sensitivity, and thoughtfulness were valued volunteer traits.
The background, behavior, and motivation of these volunteers matched those in the volunteer literature. According to Penner (2002) volunteering is defined as a long-term behavior where people participate in an unpaid activity on a regular basis. Shenfield and Allen (1972, as cited in Bales, 1996) considered religious belief to be a motivating factor to volunteerism. Wuthnow (1999) agreed that church-going mainline Protestants are the most active of volunteers in non-religious activities. And once people begin to volunteer, longitudinal studies indicate that a large percentage of them continue to do so over time (Omoto & Snyder, 1995; Penner & Finkelstein, 1998; Penner & Fritzsche, 1993). Van Til (1988) described five characteristics of volunteerism:

(a) People volunteer to satisfy personal and social goals and needs, (b) the individuals who volunteer typically do so after carefully weighing alternatives, (c) the realm of voluntary action is complex and multifaceted in which different organizational tasks appeal to different motivational forces, (d) concern for others, although not purely altruistic, remains an important force among volunteers, and (e) the motivation to give is shaped by broader social realities (e.g., to leave the world a better place). Successful volunteer programs engage volunteers with tasks that are meaningful and contribute to the effectiveness of the program. (p. 114)

The volunteers in Storybook knew they were a vital aspect of this program. Their sensitivity and a willingness to support the inmate mothers were one of the keys to the success and longevity of this program. When I spoke with the incarcerated women, I asked them about the impact of the volunteers on their participation with the project. All of the women spoke of the volunteers' kindness with them. They enjoyed their positive attitudes.
Sherry said, “[The volunteers] were always bubbly and ready to go and it didn’t matter how many people were waiting or how late it was getting, nobody was ever harsh or said, ‘We got to get up and go.’ ” Courtney also spoke of their caring nature, “They’re always very nice and...they seem caring and everything.” She indicated that unlike other volunteers in the prison programs, the Storybook volunteers were nice and interested in her life and child.

Angela reflected upon the volunteers working to accommodate her needs for different books. She shared this story to illustrate her experiences.

There’s not a time I’ve never come up here and you’ve [Storybook] said.

“Well, I can’t”...I’ve never had that experience. Every experience that I’ve had with you guys is “We can get you the book” or “We’ll try to get you the book next month, or if we can’t we’ll just wait until we can find it.” I’ve never had to experience of you telling me, “No, I can’t get that book for you.” [negative voice and face] And that means a lot, it means a lot. Every time, if I can get a Harry Potter book and which you made sure I had every Harry Potter book...! [laughing]

Sherry was the only woman to verbalize the awkwardness of having the volunteers sit with her, especially with the traumatic first time. This was the one time in our conversations she did not speak of control, but mentioned her feelings of shyness, her vulnerability around the volunteers. In light of her concern about not knowing how to live in China, it is hardly surprising that she would feel hesitant around the volunteers who were life-long residents of “China.”

“It’s when you’re sitting there and you’re wanting to reach out and touch your kids, but ... they’re not there. That you had to do that on the recorder and
you had somebody you don’t even know sitting there…when you’re reading a book to your kids, your little kid or your baby or something, you want to be animated with the book and I was just shy enough that it made me feel kind of funny [chuckling] with somebody I didn’t know sitting there. You know? But …I got over it. I’d hear other people … go in there and just do their thing!

Note that she used the expression “reach out and touch” to describe her desire to connect with her children. This is the same woman who described mothering from prison as having her arms taken away. Obviously being in physical contact with her children was an important part of her mothering. She was articulate in her conflicted feelings about wanting to do something so normal for her children as reading to them. She verbalized the emotional pain she felt that they were not physically in the room with her and the artificiality of the tape recorder to communicate her love. She did laugh at her shyness over reading to her children in front of a stranger and admitted that she learned to accept this as a part of the program after she heard other women singing, crying, and talking to their children.

I asked Courtney if she would have been part of the program even if she did not like the volunteers. She admitted that it would have been difficult by saying, “It’s a lot easier when you feel comfortable with ‘em.” But Courtney believed so strongly in Storybook that she would have ignored the volunteers and carried on. She was committed to the program. However, when I asked Angela and Teresa the same question, they admitted that they probably would not have made it through the first time or returned for a second time. The attitude of the volunteers was critical to getting these women through the first anxious experience.
Teresa spoke of the gift of time and attention the volunteers gave to the inmates through the program. She recognized that volunteers had lives of their own and were busy people, but she was thankful for the volunteers’ attention (Hairston, 1991). She also recognized that the volunteers enjoyed coming out to be with them, so she saw this involvement as a positive experience for both parties. The inmates enjoyed meeting new people outside of their very small and closed community, and the volunteers wanted to be with them.

Obviously it means a lot to you guys and it's important for you...to come out here, and it's somethin' that you like to do or you wouldn't do it. But at the same time...it gives us a chance to meet people and get to talk to people outside of here that are wonderful people. I know it's because after coming out here and you get to know people...they begin to care about us. And we begin to care about them. They're just great people.

I believe that Teresa and the other women perceived the volunteers to be representatives of the larger community. They wanted to get to know the volunteers and they welcomed the volunteer’s attention and commitment in them. I think that this was a way for the women to begin to see themselves as good mothers. If the volunteers were supportive of them as they engaged in a mothering activity, then surely they were becoming better mothers, they rationalized. And Girshick (2003) argued that through this “sense of accomplishment” gained in part through their engagement with the volunteers the women were better prepared for lives with their children and their family (p. 179).

Through the women’s stories it is clear to me that the Storybook Project of Iowa is a successful mother-child support program for incarcerated women. It has met its goals to 1)
strengthen their mother/child relationships, 2) enhance literacy through reading books aloud, 3) increase the women's self esteem as individuals and mothers, 4) reduce recidivism through nurturing the family relationship, and 5) assure the women that they are important to the outside community.

Conclusion

Through the narratives of Sherry, Angela, Karla, and Teresa I have shown that involvement in the prison's intervention programs changed these women's understanding of themselves as individuals and as mothers. Their participation in the residential treatment program, parenting class, and programming in the Violator's Unit was vital to their revisiting of their experiences and events, to becoming new beings [Sartre, 1960/1968]. Their evolving nonunitary subjectivities in terms of their individuality and their mothering were also transformed in this process.

The Storybook Project of Iowa was a tool all the women used to help them actualize their "good" mothering from prison. Through it they reestablished or nourished their relationships with their children and families with connections through books. Their involvement in the program had the added benefit of strengthening their own and their children's literacy. And it has been argued that through these relationships the mother's ability to stay out of prison is strengthened and recidivism is lowered. In addition, the volunteers played a critical role in the program. The inmate mothers acknowledged that the kindness and support of the volunteers was important to their involvement in the program and to their ongoing mothering evolution.
CHAPTER 6-CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

To conclude this study I will revisit the purposes of this research: 1) analyze incarcerated mothers' narratives to learn how they understood mothering, 2) explore how their understanding evolved through their prison experience with intervention programs and with the Storybook Project of Iowa, and 3) provide the women with an opportunity for reflection through the telling of their stories.

In this research, using the feminist narrative approach, I have explored how three incarcerated and three formerly incarcerated women, all involved in the Storybook Project of Iowa, understood mothering and how this evolved through their experiences with prison programming. A segment of this study was designed to provide them with an opportunity for reflection and a new understanding of themselves (Sartre, 1960/1968) through telling their narratives of mothering (Clark, 2001; Coles, 1989; Lawless, 2001). This research represents a unique study of a mother-child support program, the Storybook Project of Iowa.

In the methodology section of chapter three, I described the feminist research approach as one that is based on gender and the accompanying distribution of power and privilege (Lather, 1989). I added that feminist research involves ways of knowing that are "culture-bound and perspectual" (Lather, 1988, p. 570; Bloom 1998, Collins, 1990; Harding, 1991; Munro, 1998) and that this knowledge is "historically situated and structurally located" (Lather, 1988, p. 570). I defined narrative research with a feminist and postmodern approach as that which "focuses on the 'self' for data collection and data analysis" (Bloom, 2003, p. 310). In addition, I quoted Leslie Rebecca Bloom's three goals that give structure to narrative research: 1) individual lives are the primary source of data, 2) "narrative research is
concerned with deconstructing the 'self' as a humanist conception, allowing for nonunitary conceptions of the self” (2003, p. 310); and 3) “using narratives of the ‘self’ as a location from which the researcher can generate social critique and advocacy” (p. 310). In an effort to meet Bloom’s first two goals, chapter four of this dissertation used the women’s stories as a foundation to the discussion on how mothering is learned through observation, trial, and error and is imprinted on their psyches at a young age. Chapter five took this basic information: how you were mothered as a child is what you do as a mother to your children, and explored 1) how the women’s mothering was impacted during their incarceration, 2) how it was transformed by their incarceration and their involvement in the intervention programs at the prison, and 3) how the Storybook Project of Iowa was a key part of their mothering transformation in prison.

In this final chapter I aim to 1) provide a structural critique of the cultural system that surrounds these women, 2) advocate for the messiness of mothering categories, 3) summarize the healing aspect of the women’s reflections, 4) describe the ethical issues related to conducting narrative research with female prison inmates, 5) provide policy implications and recommendations, and close with 6) a personal reflection of this study.

**Structural Critique**

As I listened to the women’s stories of their experiences in the residential drug treatment program, the Victim Impact course and the other intervention programs (with the exception of the Storybook Project), I heard them share their commitment to taking ownership of their actions and acknowledging that they had made choices in their lives that were “bad” and had severe consequences for themselves and their families. But only one
woman expressed frustration with the system that they were caught in – that they were raised in.

As I have stated before, women in prison represent a vulnerable group of survivors. Half of the women I spoke with reported that they had experienced physical or sexual abuse prior to imprisonment. This matches national statistics for women incarcerated in state prison systems (Harlow, 1999). And like the national statistics, the women in this study, prior to their incarceration, struggled with low income and “with being undereducated, unskilled, and under or unemployed” (Dressel, Porterfield, and Barnhill, 1998, p. 92). Most women who are incarcerated are arrested because they have committed non-violent crimes and drug-related offenses (Ferraro & Moe, 2003; O’Brien, 2001; Smart, 1995) in a futile attempt to provide for their children. These crimes include prostitution, larceny, shoplifting, check or credit card fraud, forgery/counterfeiting, and drug possession (Bernstein, 2005; Bloom, Chesney-Lind & Owen, 1994; Chesney-Lind, 1997; and Waterson, 1996).

Currently, the U.S. economy is in a recession and mothers are finding it increasingly difficult to provide for their families. Poverty rates are rising and Congress continues to reconsider the structure of key assistance programs that support these families. Between 1995 and 2004 the number of women in state prisons has grown nearly 53% as compared to male prisoners (32%; Harrison & Beck, 2005) and at least 70% of these women have minor children (Greenfield & Snell, 1999). Females are more likely to have a drug offense (31.5%) as compared to males (20.7%) who were more likely to serve time for violent crimes (Harrison & Beck, 2005). One of the reasons for this rapid growth is the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). In this federal legislation women are expected to work toward attaining economic self-sufficiency with
limited educational opportunities in a short time span or experience limits on entitlements, including subsidized child care. Recently congress voted to increase the number of hours these women are required to work without increasing their child care entitlements. This type of legislation has driven low income women with children to locate legal or illegal sources of income.

This legislation coupled with policy shifts that have led to strict laws requiring women to be incarcerated with similar sentences as men has caused many children to be removed from their mother’s care to the care of grandparents (53%) or other relatives (26%; Mumola, 2000). There are three reasons for the increased rates of incarceration: the “war on drugs,” the implementation of mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines, and the “get tough on crime” attitude (Bernstein, 2005; O’Brien, 2001). These three factors have led to the imprisonment of many mothers for non-violent property crimes and drug-related offenses. The war on crime is a war on women, the poor, and minorities (Donziger, 1996).

The women in this study had been caught in this system where economics, racism, class elitism, and legislation play a pivotal role in the selection of the choices they could make. In prison they were brought face-to-face with the socially unacceptable choices they had made before their imprisonment. In the intervention programs (except the Storybook Project) they were required to be confessional in their reflections of their “bad” behavior and victim-taking. But these women did not have the same menu of choices as many other citizens. Low income, unemployed or underemployed single mothers do not live in communities where there are strong schools, mentors and role models, and opportunities for self-improvement and community engagement. These factors are critical to empowering individuals, families, and communities. Only Sherry expressed frustration with the system
that did not protect her from her father’s (and mother’s) abuse, with school personnel that allowed her to fail 10th grade three times, and with a prison system that did not allow her to “make something of herself” while incarcerated. While it is highly unlikely that the current prison system, through their intervention programs, will teach the women to develop skills to critique the system they must function in, this would deepen the women’s understanding of their “choices” and empower them for social change.

Resisting “Good/Bad” Mother Categories

In this study I have advocated that through their participation in prison intervention programs: residential drug treatment programs with its Victim Impact course, parenting classes, and specifically through the mother-child support program, the Storybook Project of Iowa; the women were engaged in an evolving state of being: their nonunitary subjectivities as daughters, mothers, wives, girlfriends, and individuals went through a gradual and often painful transformation. This transformation is expected and natural when imprisoned. As early as 1964, Zalba noted that a woman’s separation from her children and subsequent change in her mothering role struck at her identities as a woman and a mother. Recently Enos (2001) stated, “Inmate mothers are, by virtue of their imprisonment, living apart from their children and face a variety of challenges in constructing and maintaining identities and roles as mothers” (p. 33). Through these prison programs the women in my study explored their identities as addicts, as addicted mothers, as abusive mothers, and as children of addicts and abusers. Through these programs they came face-to-face with their own understanding of “bad” mothering and “good” mothering. Like Angela, they created categories of neglect to justify their mothering with addictions. And like Karla, they sat in an open circle and faced
their anger at being told they were “bad” mothers, recognizing that they had to hit bottom before they could begin to reconstruct themselves as “good” mothers.

I began this study by referring to McMahon’s two categories of motherhood: 1) the status of “being a mother,” and 2) taking on the responsibility and adequately performing the tasks involved in “doing mothering.” (1995). As the inmate and formerly inmate mothers told their stories of learning to mother and of being a mother to “make sense of [their mothering] experience” (Clark, 2001, p. 83; Cole, 1989; Lawless, 2001), I have listened to, reflected upon, and analyzed their narratives. I have come to the conclusion that mothering resists categorization. The categories of “doing mothering” or “being a mother” are too narrow. As Hayes stated, “Every mother’s understanding of mothering is in some sense unique” (1996, p. 74). Mothering is not limited to being a birth mother or doing the daily responsibilities of mothering. It is as rich and varied as human emotions. It includes but is not restricted to giving birth to a child and giving it up to adoption, acquiring a child through adoption, caring for a foster child, caring for children in a daycare, and caring for children who are relatives (but not restricted to caring for them on a daily basis). All possible configurations of mothering include the verb “to care.”

Additionally, creating distinct categories of “good” or “bad” mothering is value-laden and does not allow for the grey areas that naturally color human behavior and understanding. While each of the women I spoke with told stories of what it means to be a “good” mother: to feed, cloth, bathe, and get children to school; they struggled with what it meant to be a bad mother. Like Angela, some mothers created variations of bad mothering that include “fully neglecting” and “not fully neglected.” Through the conversations I had with them and the literature I read I do not believe in putting human behavior into these distinct categories that
resist clear definition. After all, as I have asked before, what does it mean to be a “bad” mother? How do we quantify a “little rearing” or “getting after your kids sometime”? At what point on the continuum does this slip into child abuse?

Initially, all the mothers resisted but finally accepted the “bad” mother categorization that the prison counseling staff espoused in the residential drug treatment program. This was to say: good mothers were not incarcerated or addicted. While I understood that one of the program goals was to bring the women face-to-face with their addictions as it related to their mothering, it bore troubling similarities to the women’s prisons of the 1870s. In those prisons fallen women were imprisoned until they acknowledged the “error of their ways” and became “female paragons of society” (Harris, 1998). As a feminist researcher I found this process to be manipulative and oppressive, lacking in empowerment and social critique.

I concluded chapter four with the statement that how the women themselves had been mothered was directly reflected in how they mothered their own children before they were incarcerated. Having written this earlier, I must clarify it now by noting that all the women in this study were open to opportunities for growth, learning, and reflection. They attended the intervention programs at the prison. They wanted to know how to be “better” mothers to their children. They were willing to talk and reflect with me in an effort to think through how they were mothered and how they mothered from prison. They were willing to go through this often painful reflective process where “the telling becomes the glue to holding some of our memories together to create a newly constructed holistic self” (Lawless, 2001, p. 6) to become new persons and new mothers. Certainly there is no program or experience that will completely erase the imprint that early experiences make on a woman’s psyche of what it
means to be a mother, but these women were willing to *edit* that imprint with their new understandings and experiences.

**When Reflection Became Healing**

I began this study with the belief that the reflective process of telling their stories about how they were mothered, how they mothered their own children before their incarceration, how they mother(ed) while in prison, and how they mothered through the Storybook Project of Iowa might be helpful to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women. I believed that providing the women with opportunities for sharing their narratives would allow them to critically reflect upon their mothering in the past and to guide their actions in the future. Through their stories I have learned that the women found a measure of healing and were able to become a new "being" through revisiting prior life experiences (Sartre, 1960/1968). It is important to acknowledge that the telling of their stories was painful for them. Although the women cried and revisited the shame and trauma of their own childhoods and mothering, it was through the telling of their stories that they told of experiencing a measure of healing. Qualitative researchers acknowledge that while providing a venue for storytelling is not therapy, it can have therapeutic outcomes if it is done with care, ethics, and sensitivity.

At my first meeting with Angela she came into the prison classroom with a mile-wide smile on her face. She was excited to talk with me about Storybook. But through the course of our exchanges she often cried. Some of our conversations were so intense that I would have to change the subject to give her emotional space to compose herself. She talked frankly about her short comings as an alcohol-addicted mother of five boys. In our final discussion she shared that according to societal norms she may have been considered a neglectful
mother and that she may have “half-stepped” in her mothering before prison. I asked her how she felt about our talks. She called them “healing” but readily admitted the intensity of our times together. She related that she would go back to the “yard” or her “unit” and “think about the things that you talk to me or ask me about” and would think about “how I answered the question.” She reflected that she even worried about making someone in her story “sound too harsh” but added that if she did so, “That’s just how it is.” She finished this reflective moment by talking about her experiences with this study by explaining,

“[I]t has helped me. [B: How? quietly]...It’s not as painful now that I talk to you. You know what I mean? It’s a little easier. You see the last two [times] I cried and boo-hooed. ...But it’s like it’s easier to say, “Well, this is how it is and this is how my life was and these are the things I need to change.” Then it just helps me... when I hear myself say these things it also helped me say, “This is what I need to do.” It’s a healing process.

Sherry too described her experiences with this study as “a healing thing. Every time I can tell my story and it can help somebody...it makes life a little more worth it.” She was the mother who acknowledged that each telling brought the pain of remembering, “I don’t want to keep re-feeling it, but its still there.”

In my final meeting with Teresa she described talking with me as “a little life story” and she too described the process as “healing.” She added, “The more I talk about the things I’ve done, the more it helps me not feel guilty or ashamed of the things I’ve done.” And, “[Keeping secrets] makes you sick.” She finished with, “It just helps you grow by talking about it. So, it’s OK for me to tell people things that I’ve done.” Teresa saw the GED and drug treatment programs as pivotal to her finding a new self and a new life (O’Brien, 2001).
As I explained earlier, two weeks after we finished our talks, Teresa was released into the community and her children were returned to her. My conversations with Teresa represented a final debriefing of the mothering transformation she experienced in prison. They provided her with opportunities for reflection and for making sense of the experience (Clark, 2001). While I could not follow Teresa’s life after her release from prison, I have no doubt of the sincerity of her intent to be a transformed individual and mother. But as O’Brien (2001) found in her research, for many women entry into a new life with two children, a former drug addiction, no job, debts, no public or private transportation, a prison record, a network of drug abusing and selling friends, and minimal education is very difficult. A legal source of income will be her greatest resource in achieving a successful reentry in the community (O’Brien, 2001).

Taped to Karla’s kitchen wall were the following words: “Be who you really are; then do what you need to do, in order to have what you want.” Most of these women were struggling to find out who they really were, without the tyranny of their drug addictions and childhoods of abuse. They were doing what they needed to do when they chose to take the information learned and the experiences they had in the prison programs to become new individuals and mothers. And they readily admitted that they had to continually reflect and renew their personal identities and their image as a mother to have what they wanted: a fresh start to live a “normal” life with their children and families.

Courtney and Sally had mothered without the tyranny of addictions and abuse and had not attended the residential drug treatment program. Consequently, they had not experienced the “bad/good mother” indoctrination process that marked the other women’s mothering orientation. While Courtney dealt with feelings of guilt because of her long
incarceration and separation from her son and Sally grieved at being unjustly separated from her four children, in their stories neither woman shared the transformative prison experience the other women experienced. Rather they spoke of working to maintain their connections with their children while separated. And because Courtney had been incarcerated for five years and was facing another 37 years, she was hungry to talk with someone new and valued the opportunity this research provided to “let you get to know me.” She was the mother who believed that “people out there view prisoners as ‘Ooo, so scary’ and...they think really negative.” By contributing to this research she felt she cleared up some public misconceptions about incarcerated women. And she said, “It just feels good to talk about Storybook and talk about my son with someone new.” From her hindsight perspective Sally used our talks to reflect upon her painful experiences but shared, “It doesn’t bother me talkin’...I enjoyed visiting with you!” Both women agreed that our conversations caused them to think about their mothering and to engage their families in talking about mothering. It was a positive reflective experience for Courtney and Sally.

**Ethical Practices**

Conducting narrative research with female prison inmates brings with it a special set of ethical issues. According to Bloom (2002) ethical considerations of all research studies begin with the formulation of the research problem and end with the stories we share with others. She added that these considerations drive how we conduct our field work, guide the theory choices we use for interpretation, and require us to engage in thoughtful self-reflexivity.

Incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women represent a vulnerable population. Because of this, it is important to come to the study willing to demonstrate respect for the
women, to demonstrate a willingness to “hear what they are saying,” and to not harm them by probing too deeply with questions and leaving them distraught.

Respect is manifested in a number of ways: being sensitive to their culture (abused, addicted, single mother, low income, undereducated, unskilled, race); being honest when explaining the purpose of the research during the informed consent process, avoiding government-type questions when developing the interview schedule, setting up appointments in comfortable environments, asking for clarification of anything you do not understand, providing them with accurate transcripts of “their words” as soon as possible after the interviews (using codes to protect their identity) to avoid being perceived as “stealing their words,” being honest throughout the interview process when explaining the reasoning behind questions that they may perceive to be intrusive, cross-checking with them (confidentially) to clarify attitudes, themes, or perspectives; and offering to provide them copies of the finished document in a format that is allowed in the prison setting (no metal binder clips).

I believe that conducting ethical narrative research requires sensitivity to their fragile emotional state. Asking women to tell stories of how they were mothered and how they mother(ed) from prison can bring back painful memories and cause emotionally unsettling reflections. While it is tempting to probe their stories for clarification, their feelings must be treated with gentleness, kindness, and respect. When their stories became too painful for them to remember, redirecting the interview to other less painful questions reduces the tension and allows them to collect themselves. Making the women so distraught that they can not finish is to be avoided at all costs. Certainly any hint of an interrogation must be avoided.

This research was designed to offer the women opportunities for reflection and, as previously stated, the women found this process to be healing and enjoyable. However, they
could have been hurt. While I made every attempt to conduct ethical research as described above, I am not a counselor and made sure the women knew this. Storytelling is not therapy sessions, but as a result of our conversations they could have sought the professional care of the prison counselor or a therapist in the community. This was a risk that I and the women took willingly, but it was a risk, nonetheless. I believe that this research was successful, in part, because of the ethical practices I described above.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Breaking the Cycle of Abuse

The children’s book, *Love You Forever* (Munsch & McGraw, 1986) is a favorite with the women participating in the Storybook Project of Iowa. With predictable frequency, the women choose it for one of their first “reads” with their children. From experience the volunteers know that this book will bring the mother to tears and will likely have the same result with the volunteer who is listening. The book provides the mothers with an opportunity to explore and share their ongoing love for their children, in spite of their behaviors and addictions as a woman and as a mother. The story also provides a literary approach to this final section. The story takes the reader through the generations of a mother’s love from her son’s infancy to his manhood. Running throughout the story is the refrain: *I will love you forever*. The incarcerated women love to tell their children this message.

I’ll love you forever,
I’ll like you for always,
As long as I’m living
My baby you’ll be. (Munsch & McGraw, 1986)
The sub-theme of this children’s story is that a mother’s love will flow from generation to generation. This warm and lovely image has a cold and ugly side when mothering with abuse and addictions. For women who have been raised in a home with physical, emotional, sexual, and verbal abuse and whose mothers modeled abusive mothering characteristics to them, the idea that they will “love” their children forever has tragic, traumatic, and painful implications. By their own admission, how these women were mothered was clearly mirrored in how they mothered their own children. The love that they espouse so frequently is often manifested in the ongoing cycle of abuse and addiction that they pass down to their children. However, I heard the women tell stories of their transformations in prison through becoming involved in the prison’s intervention programs: residential drug treatment, parenting classes, and in the Storybook Project of Iowa. The abusive behaviors and modeling does not need to flow from generation to generation. I believe that the women can stop the damage with their generation through participating in the intervention programs, gaining self-esteem and confidence in their evolving mothering identity through a mother-child support program, and engaging in self-reflection, and applying the tools they have been given in the classes. As a nation there are a number of ways we can support them in their efforts.

**Conclusion One:** The parenting class, the Victim Impact class, and the residential drug treatment program provided the women with transforming experiences and tools for living. The Storybook Project of Iowa strengthened the mother-child relationships, enhanced the children’s likelihood for educational success through emphasizing literacy (Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, DeJong, & Jones, 2001), increased the women’s self esteem as individuals and mothers, reduced recidivism through nurturing family relationships...
(Beckerman, 1989; Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Girshick, 2003; Johnston, 1995; McCarthy, 1980; O'Brien, 2001), and assured the women that they were important to the outside community.

Recommendation One: The Department of Corrections should continue to support these programs financially and to welcome the programs into the prison.

Conclusion Two: There is a lack of a consistently offered, quality parenting class in this prison. When Storybook was organized in 1998 the warden required parenting classes as a prerequisite to participation in the project. This worked very well for a number of years. When the women arrived at the prison, they were informed of the opportunity to take parenting classes and therefore to participate in the project. The women were excited about these opportunities to make changes in their lives and take advantage of the family support project involving books and tapes.

In recent years, frequent budget cuts to the Department of Corrections forced a number of staff reductions and reassignments. One of these cuts caused the parenting class to be discontinued. With the loss of the class, new prisoners from the general population were not able to participate in Storybook. Only those women who resided in the treatment program and the Violator's Unit could do so. Obviously, this caused a sharp decline in the number of women participating in the project.

Recommendation Two: Parenting classes should be available to the general prison population with the added option of participating in the Storybook program. As was found in this research, the drug treatment and parenting programs provided the women with a critical self-examination of their mothering identities and an evolved understanding of themselves as individuals and mothers. Their participation in the mother-child support program allowed
them to apply this experience to their mothering through books. Note: Since January 2006
the program coordinator for the Storybook Project of Iowa has taught the parenting classes.
With this move the project has gained control over the bottleneck in the women's
participation in the project and has been providing consistent and quality parenting
education.

Conclusion and Recommendation Three: As a teacher-educator in family and
consumer sciences (FCS) I believe there is a need for FCS professionals to be involved in
providing parenting and child development classes to vulnerable populations such as inmate
mothers. They may be involved at a variety of levels including grant writing, program
administration, curricula development, public policy advocacy, and teaching. FCS educators
have the integrated and multi-disciplinary background to address as a practical problem the
perennial question, "How shall I raise my child?" These courses should be developed with
the philosophical orientation of engaging the women in self examination to explore how they
believe children should be raised, for instance: as a validation of their identity, to be socially
acceptable, as a strong individual in the face of social and cultural oppression, to be
respectful and compliant, and/or to be a risk-taker. This is truly the grass roots work of FCS
parenting and child development educators. This is significant work for FCS educators and
for others who interact with children, families, and the prison system. Mothers separated
from their children to serve prison sentences affect us. Our schools, our neighborhoods, our
churches, our budgets are impacted by incarcerated mothers and their children. Children are
robbed of the presence of their mothers, family bonds are weakened, neighborhoods are
drained of women, and children rely on exhausted and impoverished grandmothers or paid
strangers for care (Bernstein, 2005). These programs are generally funded by grant dollars
and not-for-profit organizations such as the Storybook Project of Iowa, and they offer FCS professionals an alternative way to address the mission of the profession: “to improve the lives of individuals, families, and communities” (American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences, 2006).

**Conclusion Four:** In the midst of analyzing the data it occurred to me that these women were equating their addictions with bad mothering. The counselors in the residential treatment program emphasized that addictions and good mothering do not mix and the women accepted this with some reservations. Angela was the mother who believed in categories of neglect for her children; she advocated that they were not “fully neglected,” not fully accepting the “bad mother” image that was being forced upon her. According to the women’s stories, one of the objectives of the treatment program was to force the women to acknowledge that since they were addicted mothers, they were bad mothers. Further, it was to convince them that good mothers take care of their children twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and that good mothers love their children with an endless well of selfless or agape love. But I believe that we need to explore further what was meant by bad mothering and good mothering.

In her landmark feminist book on mothering and motherhood, Adrienne Rich (1986) wrote that she was “haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is ‘unconditional’; and by the visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded identity” (p. 23). As I listened to their stories, I heard the women tell me that the counselors in the treatment program were advocating this type of motherhood: agape love and a unitary subjectivity. And I was hearing the abused women tell me that this was a love that they had had little exposure to and were not sure they could emulate or even find within themselves. As Angela said, “I
love my children, I really do…but…[my] children were just put on me.” According to Rich (1986), our Western patriarchal approach to motherhood is one that is “deeply oppressive” to women in that it expects all women love their children all the time. Rich (1986) reflected upon this cultural expectation of mothering to her 21-year-old son. She quoted him replying, “You seem to feel you ought to love us all the time, but there is no human relationship where you love the other person at every moment” (p. 23). Rich explained to him “women – above all, mothers – have been supposed to love that way” (p. 23). Is it possible that these incarcerated mothers had a point when they objected to the assumption that their addictions automatically made them bad mothers? Is it possible that addicted mothers can function as reasonably good mothers? Is it possible they can function in this way until their additions escalate into child abuse (neglect or physical, emotional, sexual, verbal abuse), violence, or other crimes: drug production, sales, and stealing (Tebo, 2006)? Certainly this is something for our prison advocates, legislators, and courts to discuss.

Recommendation Four: As a nation we need to consider how to intervene in the lives of these addicted mothers to prevent their addictions from escalating into criminal behaviors. Sharp (2003) argued that “instead of after-the-fact attempts to undo the damage of maternal incarceration, finding alternatives to prison is a more fruitful direction” (p. 161). If these alternatives took the form of residential drug treatment programs in the community where they were able to see their children, become “clean” and learn how to live a “normal” life, gain an education and employable skills, then they would avoid the trauma to their children of their arrest and separation, the considerable expense of incarceration, and a prison record. But Teresa and Sherry agreed that the traumatic experience of their arrest was one that set them on the path to becoming free of their addictions and taught them another way to go
about mothering and living. If incarceration is unavoidable, then alternative sentencing programs that allow mothers and children to stay together in community-based facilities should be supported. According to Ekstrand, Burton, and Erdman (1999) in eleven states there are programs that keep infants with their mothers. The downside to some of these programs is that after the initial bonding period of three months, the children are separated from their mothers.

It should be noted that it will be difficult to promote the second alternative in this state given that the Iowa Department of Corrections does not yet record data on the number of women with children who are under the age of 18. But a reasonable goal is to promote increased community support of the House of Mercy and other half-way houses like it.

**Conclusion Five:** Sherry's haunting story of her abrupt reentry into the community brought to light the critical need for relocation support of the women upon their release. In her research O'Brien (2001) found that the single most telling predictor of a woman's successful reentry into the outside world was locating a source of legal income. As I discussed earlier in this paper, there is considerable evidence that much of women's criminal behavior is economically motivated (Carlen, 1988; Chapman, 1980). In addition to paying their bills, having a job would provide the women with a "sense of personal reward and autonomy" through their successful employment experiences (O'Brien, 2001, p. 118).

**Recommendation Five:** The Storybook Project of Iowa should seek long-term funding to organize and staff a post-release program to assist the women in their re-entry into their communities. These services should include job assistance to locate and maintain a legal source of income (O'Brien, 2001), housing, transportation, and counseling.
Upon Reflection

For many years, and in the process of conducting this research and writing, I have asked myself why I am drawn to working with women who have been abused and who themselves were abusive mothers. Why am I compelled to seek out these women’s stories and struggle to listen to them? After all, these stories are soul-wrenching and upsetting. So why do I find their stories horrific and yet heroic? Perhaps it is because I did not give birth or raise from infancy children of my own, though I wanted to, that I seek to understand mothering. Perhaps it is because I believe that in helping the women understand themselves they will be more capable mothers to their children thus reducing the cycle of child abuse. I only know that I believe it is important that I listen to them, learn from them, and help them “toward empowerment and transformation” (Lawless, 2001, p. 157). As Lather said, “What I suggest is that we consciously use our research to help participants understand and change their situation” (1986, p. 263).

Then again, perhaps I am motivated because I know that according to surveys, 115,500 minor children (31,100 single-mother households) are affected by their mothers’ incarceration in state prisons (Mumola, 2000), and that these damaged children are part of our communities, our neighborhoods, our schools, and our churches (Bernstein, 2005). Perhaps it is because I also know that many people do not consider the children or the families of incarcerated women when they advocate for legislation and programming. Families of incarcerated women impact every facet of our society and exact an enormous toll on our culture. I only know that it is important for me to be involved in the lives of these women, be supportive of them, develop programs for them, and advocate for them in ways that will positively impact them and their children.
REFERENCES


May 18, 2004

Betty Chamness Trost, MC, CFCS  
College of Family & Consumer Sciences  
1055 LeBaron Hall  
Ames IA  50011-1120

Dear Ms. Trost:

Thank you for your doctoral level research proposal to study the impact on female inmates who are involved in the Storybook Project at the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women. This volunteer family enrichment project has been a successful part of family life for many offenders at the institution.

Please feel free to contact Warden Diann Wilder-Tomlinson directly at 515-967-4236 X 203 or email to diann.wildertomlinson@doc.state.ia.us or Deputy Warden Sheryl Lockwood (Sheryl.lockwood@doc.state.ia.us) to make arrangements to commence your research work. The Department looks forward to receiving a copy of your research results and wishes you the best in your academic and career pursuits.

Sincerely,

Gary D. Maynard, Director

cc: Warden Wilder-Tomlinson  
Jeanette Bucklew, Deputy Director – Western Operations  
Michael Savala, General Counsel

The mission of the Iowa Department of Corrections is to:  
Protect the Public, the Employees, and the Offenders

APPENDIX B

DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS
FINAL LETTER OF APPROVAL
May 18, 2005

Betty Chamness Trost, MC, CFCS
College of Family & Consumer Services
1055 LeBaron Hall
Ames IA 50011-1120

Dear Ms. Trost:

Thank you for your doctoral level research proposal to study the impact on female inmates who are involved in the Storybook Project at the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women. This volunteer family enrichment project has been a successful part of family life for many offenders at the institution.

The Iowa Department of Corrections authorizes you to conduct this research and engage in any potential follow-up activities for the next five years.

Please feel free to contact Warden Diann Wilder-Tomlinson directly at 515-967-4236 x 203 or email to diann.wilder@iowa.gov or Deputy Warden Sheryl Baney (Sheryl.baney@iowa.gov) to make arrangements to commence your research work. The Department looks forward to receiving a copy of your research results and wishes you the best in your academic and career pursuits.

Sincerely,

Daniel R. Craig, Deputy Director
Western Operations

Cc:  Warden Wilder-Tomlinson
     Michael Savala, General Counsel
     File
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE-INMATES
Interview Guide-Inmates

Note: Questions to be asked over three separate interviews, each 1-2 hours in length.

Interview one:

1. What is your name?
2. When were you born? Where?
3. What ethnic group do you associate yourself with?
4. Who do you consider to be your family? [names, relationship, location-city/state]
5. Tell me about your marital situation when each of your children was born.
   [married, divorced, separated, living together; names of children, birth dates, locations]
6. Who are they living with right now?
7. Who do you read to?
   a. What books do you like to read to them?
      i. How do you choose your books?
      ii. What are the children’s responses?
8. Tell me a story about your first time reading with Storybook. [when, to whom, what book(s), volunteer names?]

End of first interview

*************

Interview two:

9. Since you’ve had a chance to read the transcript of our earlier conversation, was there anything we talked about that you would like to talk more about now?
   [clarify impressions and answers, data]
10. Did you read to your children before you were incarcerated? Tell me about that.

11. When did you begin reading with Storybook?

12. Why did you want to be part of Storybook, at first? Did you have a goal or purpose?

13. What did you need to do - what did you need to complete here at ICIW - to become part of the project?
   a. What was the process?
   b. How long did it take to get in?

14. Tell me about how you feel when you read with Storybook.

15. Have your feelings and experiences with Storybook changed over time? How?

16. Have your experiences differed from what you expected? How so?

17. What reactions do you get from your children/family to the books and tapes?

18. How did you get financial support before you came here? [work, public assistance, spousal support]

19. What did you do during the day, before coming to ICIW? [work- where? when?; at home with the children…]?

20. Who supported you, as a mother? [friends, mother, in-laws, neighbors]

21. Did they help you with child care arrangements? [If not, who?]

22. What do you think it means to be a mother?

23. What are things that mothers do for/with their children?
   a. How do you know this? Who or what taught you this? [family, friends, TV, books, magazines, WIC, Family Nutrition Program, Mother's Support Group at ICIW]
24. How did you learn to mother your children?

25. What are parenting approaches that have worked well for you? Tell me a story about these.

26. What are parenting approaches that have created difficulties? Tell me a story about these.

27. When did you first think about what it means to be a mother? [child, teen, pregnant woman, incarcerated woman]
   a. What were the circumstances?
   b. When do you think about it now?

28. How do you mother your children from here?... Tell me about doing mothering from ICIW, before Storybook and with Storybook.

29. What are some of the challenges to doing mothering that you’ve experienced here? Tell me about this.

30. How does Storybook affect your mothering from prison?

31. How do you feel about yourself when you do Storybook?
   a. Has there been a change in this, since you began to read with Storybook?
   b. Do you see that this will be a long term change?

End of second interview

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Interview three:

32. What did we talk about in our first two conversations that you would like to talk about now? Do you want to revisit any of your earlier comments, now that you've read the transcript of our conversation? [clarify impressions and interpreted data]

33. Tell me about your educational experiences [what, when, where, last attended, feelings about]

34. How and where do you learn best? [formal school environment, casual learning environment, mentoring situation, self-reflection]

35. There are always volunteers helping with Storybook. Tell me about your experiences with them.

36. Have they had an impact on how you see yourself as a mother? On how you've learned mothering?

37. What will you take away from being at ICIW? How has that impacted who you are and how you mother?
ADDENDUM D

INTERVIEW GUIDE-FORMER INMATES
Interview Guide-Former Inmates

Note: Questions to be asked over three separate interviews, each 1-2 hours in length.

Interview one:

1. What is your name?

2. When were you born? Where?

3. What ethnic group do you associate yourself with?

4. Who do you consider to be your family? [names, relationship, location-city/state]

5. Tell me about your marital situation when each of your children was born.
   [married, divorced, separated, living together; names of children, birth dates, locations]

6. Are they living with you right now? [If not, who?]

7. Who did you read to when you participated in the Storybook Project?
   a. What books did you like to read?
      i. How did you choose your books?
      ii. What were the children’s responses?

8. Tell me a story about your first time reading with Storybook. [when, to whom, what book(s), volunteer names?]

End of first interview

*************

Interview two:

9. Since you’ve had a chance to read the transcript of our earlier conversation, was there anything we talked about that you would like to talk more about now?
   [clarify impressions and answers, data]
10. Did you used to read to your children before you were incarcerated? Tell me about that.

11. When did you begin reading with Storybook?

12. Why did you want to be part of Storybook, at first? Did you have a goal or purpose?

13. What did you need to do - what did you need to complete at ICIW - to become part of the project?

   a. What was the process?

   b. How long did it take to get in?

14. Tell me about how you felt when you read with Storybook.

15. Did your feelings and experiences with Storybook changed over time? How?

16. Did your experiences differ from what you expected? How so?

17. What reactions did you get from your children/family to the books and tapes?

18. How do you get financial support? [work, public assistance, spousal support]

19. What do you do during the day? [work- where? when?; at home with the children…]

20. Who supports you, as a mother? [friends, mother, in-laws, neighbors]

21. Do they help you with child care arrangements? [If not, who?]

22. What do you think it means to be a mother?

23. What are things that mothers do for/with their children?

   a. How do you know this? Who or what taught you this? [family, friends, TV, books, magazines, WIC, Family Nutrition Program, Mother’s Support Group at ICIW]
24. How did you learn to mother your children?

25. What are parenting approaches that have worked well for you? Tell me a story about these.

26. What are parenting approaches that have created difficulties? Tell me a story about these.

27. When did you first think about what it means to be a mother? [child, teen, pregnant woman, incarcerated woman]
   a. What were the circumstances?
   b. When do you think about it now?

28. How did you mother your children from ICIW?... Tell me about doing mothering from ICIW, before Storybook and with Storybook.

29. What are some of the challenges to doing mothering that you experienced there? Tell me about this.

30. How did Storybook affect your mothering from prison?

31. How did you feel about yourself when you did Storybook?
   a. Was there a change in this, since when you began to read with Storybook?
   b. Has this been a long term change?

End of second interview
Interview three:

32. What did we talk about in our first two conversations that you would like to talk about now? Do you want to revisit any of your earlier comments, now that you’ve read the transcript of our conversation? [clarify impressions and interpreted data]

33. Tell me about your educational experiences [what, when, where, last attended, feelings about]

34. How and where do you learn best? [formal school environment, casual learning environment, mentoring situation, self-reflection]

35. There were always volunteers helping with Storybook. Tell me about your experiences with them.

36. Did they have an impact on how you see yourself as a mother? On how you’ve learned mothering?

37. What did you take away from being at ICIW? How did that impact who you are and how you mother?

38. How would you describe yourself now as a mother?

39. How does this differ from before you went to prison, or during prison?

40. In hindsight, tell me about how the Storybook Project impacted you. Your children. Your family.

41. What impact did the project have on your mothering?
ADDENDUM E

CONSENT FORM
Consent Form

Title of Study: Doing mothering from prison: Using narrative to explore the experiences of participants in a family literacy program

Investigators: Betty Chamness Trost, MS, CFCS
Beverly Kruempel, PhD

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

Key points of this study:

1. The purpose of this study is to learn more about how your involvement with the Storybook Project of Iowa has affected your mothering. You are being invited to participate in this study because you have been involved in the project for some time, have experience with it and know how it has affected you and your relationship with your children. Through your participation in this study you may develop new insights about yourself that will enable you to understand yourself as a mother, an individual, and as a family member.

2. If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will last for approximately six months. You will be interviewed three times over a period of several weeks. The interviews will last for approximately 1-2 hours and will be tape recorded. You will be asked to talk about your experiences with the project and to tell stories as they relate to your mothering of your children, based on your experiences with the Storybook Project of Iowa. How you structure your stories and what information you choose to share will be up to you. You can skip any question you do not want to answer and still participate in the study. These documents and tapes will be destroyed five years from the beginning of this study.

3. If you decide to participate in this study you may find that this experience has changed how you see yourself and your mothering. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by providing insight in how a prison family literacy program affects the mothering of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women. There is no direct benefit to you.

4. A risk involved with this research may be some emotional discomfort if you choose to talk about any life experiences that were painful to you. However, what you choose to share in the interviews will be up to you.

5. Your participation in this study will not cost you anything, and you will not be paid a monetary gift.

6. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. You can withdraw your consent at any time without...
penalty and have the results of your participation, returned to you, removed from the records, or destroyed.

7. Participating or not participating in this study will not affect your prison status or treatment. Your participation in this study will not affect the parole board’s decision as to your parole.

8. Your identity will be kept confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without your prior consent, unless required by law as described below. Information that you share with the researcher will remain confidential (that is, it will not be linked to you by name or shared with anyone in a way that would identify you) except for any information about child or elder abuse, or a threat of violence to yourself or others. Information in these areas will be reported to the authorities.

9. The tape recordings of your interviews, as well as the researcher’s notes will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s office at Iowa State University, and these will be available only to the researcher and her major professor. However, federal government regulatory agencies [NIH] and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. The transcripts and all the researcher’s notes will use a pseudonym for you, not your real name. The tapes themselves will be erased by 7/1/2010. In addition, it is possible that the research being done here will result in professional presentations and publications, but you will in no way be personally identified in the way in which the results will be shared. For purposes of reporting the results of this study, a pseudonym will be used to protect your identity.

10. You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study. If you like, you can receive a report of the findings of this study.

11. For further information about the study contact Betty Chamness Trost, Doctoral Candidate, (515) 294-6446, btrost@iastate.edu or Beverly Kruempel, Major Professor, (515) 294-0864, bik@iastate.edu. If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects, please contact Ginny Austin Eason, IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, austingr@iastate.edu, or Diane Ament, Research Compliance Officer (515) 294-3115, dament@iastate.edu.

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the signed and dated written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant’s Name (printed) 

(Participant’s Signature) (Date)
I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits, and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

(Researcher’s signature)  (Date)
APPENDIX F

IRB LETTER OF APPROVAL
TO: Betty Chamness Trost

FROM: Human Subject Research Compliance Office

PROJECT TITLE: Doing mothering from prison: Using narrative to explore the experiences of participants in a family literacy program

RE: IRB ID No.: 05-317

APPROVAL DATE: August 1, 2005       REVIEW DATE: August 1, 2005

LENGTH OF APPROVAL: One year    CONTINUING REVIEW DATE: July 31, 2006

TYPE OF APPLICATION: ☑ New Project ☐ Continuing Review

Your human subjects research project application, as indicated above, has been approved by the Iowa State University IRB #1 for recruitment of subjects not to exceed the number indicated on the application form. All research for this study must be conducted according to the proposal that was approved by the IRB. If written informed consent is required, the IRB-stamped and dated Informed Consent Document(s), approved by the IRB for this project only are attached. Please make copies from the attached "masters" for subjects to sign upon agreeing to participate. The original signed Informed Consent Document should be placed in your study files. A copy of the Informed Consent Document should be given to the subject.

The IRB must conduct continuing review of research at intervals appropriate to the degree of risk, but not less than once per year. Renewal is the PI's responsibility, but as a reminder, you will receive notices at least 60 days and 30 days prior to the next review. Please note the continuing review date for your study.

Any modification of this research project must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval, prior to implementation. Modifications include but are not limited to: changing the protocol or study procedures, changing investigators or sponsors (funding sources), including additional key personnel, changing the Informed Consent Document, an increase in the total number of subjects anticipated, or adding new materials (e.g., letters, advertisements, questionnaires). Any future correspondence should include the IRB identification number provided and the study title.
You must promptly report any of the following to the IRB: (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

Your research records may be audited at any time during or after the implementation of your study. Federal and University policy require that all research records be maintained for a period of three (3) years following the close of the research protocol. If the principal investigator terminates association with the University before that time, the signed informed consent documents should be given to the Departmental Executive Officer to be maintained.

Research investigators are expected to comply with the University’s Federal Wide Assurance, the Belmont Report, 45 CFR 46 and other applicable regulations prior to conducting the research. These documents are on the Human Subjects Research Office website or are available by calling (515) 294-4566.

Upon completion of the project, a Project Closure Form will need to be submitted to the Human Subjects Research Office to officially close the project.

C: AESHM
Beverly Kruempel