

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: NARRATIVES OF HUMAN AGENCY AMONG
LOW INCOME INCARCERATED FATHERS:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Prior literature has focused on studying low income or incarcerated fathers from a deficit perspective. For example, there is ample evidence showing that high risk behaviors are associated with children who have non-custodial fathers and about mothers' perspectives on father absence. However, there is still a lack of literature about how these fathers experience agency to take control and make change in their lives in spite of the barriers they face. I conduct a secondary analysis of life history interviews of 40 fathers in a work release program. The theoretical framework that guides this study is narrative inquiry, using sensitizing concepts from McAdams' (McAdams, 2001) four themes of agency: self mastery, status/victory, achievement/responsibility, and empowerment. Out of McAdams' four themes, self mastery and achievement/responsibility were the most prominent themes of agency. Additional emergent themes of agency are found in fathers' life history narratives.

NARRATIVES OF HUMAN AGENCY AMONG LOW INCOME
INCARCERATED FATHERS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

By

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the clients at The Center for Healthy Families, who courageously shared their lives with me as a Therapist Intern and allowed me to work with them toward change.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Statement of Problem

In the United States the most recent estimate of the number of parents in federal and state prisons was 809,800 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008). More than 1.7 million minor children had a parent who was incarcerated (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008). Parents comprised 52% of the total U.S. prison population. A large majority of these incarcerated parents were fathers. That is approximately 744,200 (92%) fathers. A disproportionately large number of incarcerated fathers in state and federal prisons were of minority ethnic backgrounds. In 2007, approximately 319,000 (43%) incarcerated fathers were black and 160,100 (22%) were Latino. Only 223,700 (30%) were non-Hispanic/Latino white.

From 1997 to 2007, there was no change in the percentage of black children whose parents were incarcerated. However, there was a 25.9% increase in white fathers and 20.3% increase in incarcerated Latino fathers. This resulted in 1,559,200 children whose fathers were in prison. The number of children whose fathers are incarcerated has increased by 77% since 1991 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002). This steady or increasing number of incarcerated fathers resulted in more children who grew up without their fathers present. The incarceration and absence of fathers contributed to potential financial and emotional disruptions in family life and also

disruptions involvement in their children's development. Also, the disruptions occur again upon the fathers' return from prison, during his reintegration into family life.

From an economic point of view, it is costly to taxpayers to maintain the nation's prisons. The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics estimated that, in 2003 alone, the U.S. state and federal governments spent over \$50 billion on prisons. The average cost to house each prisoner was \$20,000 per year. Putting the figure in perspective, a prison worker in one study on incarcerated fathers commented that it would be "cheaper to send 'them all to Stanford'" (Day, Bahr, Acock, & Arditti, 2005).

Much of the literature on incarcerated and low income fathers' parenting involvement has been focused on the barriers they face to being involved with their children. Topics previously discussed in the literature about incarcerated fathers include limited financial resources, difficult relationships with the mothers of their children who controlled their access to their children, drug use, incarceration, geographic distance from their children, and poor mental or physical health (Nelson, 2004).

These fathers were commonly portrayed as "deadbeat dads" (Wimberly, 2000) or as absent from their children's lives (Sullivan, 1989). Roy (2006) discussed the unclear expectations for low income fathers. One explanation for these unclear expectations was a disconnect between the men's experiences and their own father's experiences. This disconnect occurred either through the changing societal norms between the generations and/or through men's lack of consistent father figures in their own development.

This uncertainty of roles is linked to what White and Klein (2008) described from a symbolic interactionist framework as role confusion. Role confusion results when role expectations are not clear. The lack of clarity in expectations present situations where there is lack of information on how one ought to act. Without appropriate information, fathers face barriers to making informed choices. Greater role ambiguity correlates with lessened father involvement (McBride & Rane, 2000).

With much of prior research on incarcerated fathers focused on a deficit perspective on low income and incarcerated fathers, much is still unknown about what can be found looking at the strengths that low-income fathers bring to their parenting. What are some strengths that low income fathers possess in order to make change in their lives? What or who shapes their strengths? How do they use their strengths to navigate through situations of disadvantage and challenge to become involved or stay involved with their children?

In general, human agency can be conceptualized as the sense of control, and choices one has over his/ her own environment and circumstances (Bandura, 1997). According to social cognitive theory, agency is a strategy that individuals can use to overcome challenge through drawing on a bank of positive or successful experiences involving control. More specifically, McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, and Day (1996) borrow from Bakans (1966) definition of agency as the “existence of the organism as an individual manifesting itself in self-protection, self-expansion, and mastery of the environment.”

From prior literature, we know that human agency, sometimes referred to as self-efficacy, is known as a motivational and important factor that contributes to

individual life satisfaction (Welzel & Inglehart, 2010). We also know that greater personal agency is linked to greater overall mental health (Thoits, 2006). Fathers' sense of agency can be enhanced by increased social support (Hudson, Campbell-Grossman, Fleck, Eleck, & Shipman, 2003). In addition, men who have a greater sense of agency over their children's development are more likely to be economically and physically involved fathers (Braver et al., 1993). Fathers who are more involved in their children's lives have been associated with lower levels of recidivism and easier adjustment during reintegration into mainstream life (Petersilia, 2003). Thus, it would be important to study the underlying individual characteristic of agency to better understand how fathers can be empowered to have well-adjusted relationships with their children and their families during incarceration and upon reintegration. However, there has been little research to understand how agency is formed and how agency is used when choices and resources are limited, such as is the case for many low income, incarcerated fathers.

1.2 Purpose

I examine how McAdams (2001) codes for agency help us understand a group who is highly limited in their voice, resources, and choices. Agency identifies what control or choice lies within oneself. Accessing this information about the sources of someone's capability identifies what areas need to be strengthened or can be empowered to help others help themselves. I look at what measures individuals can take to improve a situation, reach a goal, or reach a purpose. I identify which areas

could be targeted to activate strength, ability, and empowerment from the perspective of family members, community members, helping professionals, and litigators. I looked at agency as it increases personal control and thus diminishes helplessness and hopelessness from inability to improve one's life condition. Accessing agency frees individuals from reliance or dependence on unsustainable or costly resources, including government dollars and long term therapy. Accessing one's agency also engages a person in developing alternative options ahead of time in readiness for many financial setbacks such as unemployment.

To address these agency codes, I performed a secondary data analysis on interview transcripts from 40 incarcerated fathers who were incarcerated in a work release program in northern Indiana. Using qualitative methods, I analyzed the interview transcripts of fathers' life histories, which focused on their experiences of significant turning points in their lives.

Using this information, program and policy developers could better understand the processes of human agency, which is an internal resource accessible to the fathers. In turn, practitioners and program developers can design intervention and prevention strategies better suited to motivate, mobilize, and empower low income and incarcerated men to be responsible and involved fathers. With increased involvement, the fathers can find intrinsic gratification in contributing to the next generation and thus a sense of generativity (Kotre, 1984). Also, children will have additional social support in their lives. Otherwise, children tend to live with their mothers, grandmothers, or foster parents. Without both parents' support, children of incarcerated parents are at higher risk of dropping out of school, engaging in

crime, and becoming incarcerated (Dallaire, 2007).

1.3 Literature Review

1.3.1 Incarcerated and Low Income Fathers

For decades, researchers have focused on women and mothers when studying low income and minority families and caregiver roles in these families (Miller, 1993). This focus can be partially justified, given that in the U.S., a significant proportion (25%) of children under the age of 18 live in female-headed, single-mother households (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002). However, there are underlying class and gender role assumptions that also play into the focus on women. Whereas the traditional middle class norm prescribed for the role of women in the home and family is the caregiver, men are expected to contribute to families as the provider. Men who do not or are not able to fulfill the norm of their gender role to provide the “package deal” of providing a house, committing to the mother of his children, and working for a stable income are looked down upon (Townsend, 2002).

For many low income fathers, there is an inability to provide. This inability to provide economically is often attributed to unwillingness to provide. In the view of those outside the group, low income and minority fathers are relegated to an absent or invisible role in their families (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). This marginalizing view of these fathers has led many to assume that low income fathers are uninvolved and disinterested in their children’s lives (Hamer, 1997).

Many low income fathers studied by Roy (2006) share stories about their

own fathers' presence and absence. Roy (2006) summarizes the interview accounts of 77 African American men involved in responsible fatherhood programs in the Midwest. They grew up with fathers whose involvement can be characterized by three levels: stability, liminality, and inquiry (Roy, 2006). Some men, typically of the older age groups in the study, had fathers who were committed and/or married to their mothers and were continuously present in their lives growing up. Men, who had relationships with their fathers marked by stability, expressed respect for their fathers who "never head[ed] for the hills," despite challenges (Roy, 2006). It is as if the normative expectation in the community was for fathers to leave at some point in their lives and it was an extraordinary father who did not. Men who grew up with these "stable fathers" viewed their father's reliability as a model for parenting. Although they desired to become fathers like their own, the men did not necessarily achieve the same level of involvement. Men whose father's involvement was characterized by liminality, or ambiguity of coming and going, comprised over half of the sample. Approximately a third of the men did not know their fathers while growing up; this proportion was higher in the youngest cohort. These men narrated their experiences as inquiries about what it meant to be a father, and whether and how they themselves would fill that role.

As the above classifications of fathers indicated, the stereotype of incarcerated fathers as simply absent from their children's lives was a misconception. In fact, most low income fathers are involved early on, around the time of their children's birth (Carlson & McLanahan, 2003). However, as changes such as employment statuses accumulated in the men's lives (Eggebeen, 2002), their continuous involvement

with their children was variable and could be characterized as “transitory” (Roy, 2004). They were neither actively involved nor withdrawn from their childrens lives but caught in between the two states. Despite actions that suggest transitory involvement, most incarcerated and low income fathers aspired to fulfill conventional values of fatherhood (Jarrett, Roy, & Burton, 2002). They wished to follow the prescribed social achievement norms of first finding steady work, then getting married, and then fathering children. Many wished to work steady paying office jobs where they could provide for their wife and children. However, numerous barriers come between this expressed desire and their actual ability to fulfill their dreams.

1.3.2 Normative Identity of Fatherhood

Incarcerated fathers faced a set of challenges to fulfilling conventional norms for fatherhood. These norms prescribed that the primary role expectation is that good fathers ought to provide for their children and second, they should actively participate in their children’s development. It is evident that these fathers ascribed to this view of “good” fathering in the distinction between terms of daddies and fathers. Men believed that a “daddy” contributed the easy or biological piece into making children. However, it was taking responsibility for providing and investing time in his childrens lives that made a man a father (Roy & Dyson, 2010). Fathers were less likely to be involved in their children’s lives if they were unable to fulfill provider expectations to support their children and partner (Johnson, 2000). Thus, two identified problems in fathering were lack of finances to provide for their children

and lack of continuous involvement in children's lives.

There are interrelated barriers to provision for and involvement in childrearing that come from various sources and could be understood by looking at contextual, individual, and relational factors. These barriers are reviewed in the next sections.

1.3.2.1 Contextual Barriers

Contextual barriers to men earning a stable income included economic and socio-cultural conditions. Roy (2006) used a life course framework, which emphasized historical context in examining these barriers. Based on distinctive economic periods of change in which the men were born, participants in life history interviews were separated into three age cohorts (Roy, 2006). Men in the oldest cohort were above 35 years of age. They entered the workforce while their local industrial sector in Chicago still provided sufficient working class jobs. However, by 1982, when the middle birth cohort became legal adults, the economic recession brought the unemployment rate up to 30% in low income African American neighborhoods (U.S. Department of Labor, 1976-2003). The third and youngest cohort of men entered adulthood after steady industrial job opportunities became scarce to none. While working class jobs disappeared, new policies also limited support for personal financial needs. The Clinton administration changed welfare policies in 1992, which excluded "able bodied" men from receiving welfare benefits. Economic conditions such as these provided the backdrop for compounded barriers for low income African American men to be fathers.

With the above context in mind, the problem behind men's lack of sufficient income to provide can be traced in part to the lack of sources of income, or a scarcity in jobs. The available jobs were typically clerical positions, or low tier service sector positions that offer little opportunity for advancement (Jarrett et al., 2002). Even these low mobility jobs attracted many applicants, irrespective of age. The competition for these jobs, however, often occurred between teenage sons and their fathers or even grandfathers (Jarrett et al., 2002).

Tied closely to the lack of stable and desirable jobs, there was a problem with an expansion of alternative economies. These alternative economies involved illicit forms of income such as stealing, hustling, and drug dealing (Williams & Kornblum, 1985). These alternatives allowed some men to make the income in a day that would have taken them a week(s) at a regular low-paying job that fits their qualifications. Though illegal, these activities provided alluring alternatives to men who are caught between the decision to let their children starve and making large sums of fast money (Jarrett et al., 2002). Some men did not consider themselves as criminals for participating in these bustling alternative industries. They justified that they did not choose the path but participated in the underground economies only because they were left without a choice (Johnson, 2000).

Other barriers to work were discriminatory practices against racial minority men. Some of these were overt while others were less blatant. Racial discrimination is among the obvious and common problems to gaining an equal footing in the courtroom and finding work. These represent system-level problems in assuming and treating minority men according to stereotypes as criminals (Roy & Dyson, 2010).

The subtle practices which excluded minority men from jobs laid in the nature of service-oriented work (Williams & Kornblum, 1985). Workplace values aimed at promoting customer satisfaction filter employees whose appearance, lifestyle, or speech do not fit the “mainstream” standards (Williams & Kornblum, 1985). Low income men identified this emphasis on “soft skills” of presentation as a method of exclusion from the workplace.

Also, coming from working class low income families, many men did not have an extensive network of resources for finding work (Jarrett et al., 2002). In contrast, many middle class children had parents who tended to work in jobs and professions that resembled what they themselves aspired to do. They had the option to draw on their parents’ established network of colleagues, friends, mentors and others for support in exploring career options. However, these low income fathers were typically not afforded the same opportunities.

Another opportunity that low income fathers lacked was achievement of an education beyond high school. When the men were in school, their achievement was oftentimes limited by more immediate demands on their time. Some parents did not value education but rather encouraged their sons to quit school because the family needed the income to make ends meet (Johnson, 2000).

Also, there were barriers to these men getting to and from school or work because of neighborhood and spatial limitations. In areas where gang activity dominated the streets, random violence and shootings were common. Many fathers interviewed expressed concern for or experienced being shot because they passed through an area at the wrong time (Roy, 2004). Some fathers had outstanding

arrest warrants and attempted to avoid areas where they committed a crime or where there were higher chances of running into law enforcement (Roy, 2004). This avoidance also limited their willingness to travel to school and work.

1.3.2.2 Individual Barriers

In addition to contextual barriers, low income fathers experienced personal issues that inhibit their support of and involvement in their children's lives. Men who were marginalized by society as incarcerated, low income, and minority men must come to terms with messages of failure and find an identity suitable for success. Roy and Dyson (2010) discussed two types of masculine identities which offer differing scripts on how these men ought to behave.

The street masculinity identity prescribed a life that would have been functional to protect the men from dangerous street environments. Men who adhered to a street masculinity rejected social norms and engaged in delinquent or violent behavior.

An alternative masculine identity fit men who became an able provider and participant as a father. If men perceived that they were unsuccessful at being a father because of an inability to provide, they likely withdrew from family interactions altogether (Johnson, 2000). Many would tell themselves that they would visit their children only after securing a stable job so that they could provide. Until that time, there was discontinued involvement because provider expectations of fathers suggested that these men had nothing to offer. If there is a sense of continued fail-

ure to provide, an alluring alternative was to build their sense of street masculinity instead.

Men who met repeated obstructions in their attempts to gain agency over an identity or areas of their lives were at risk for mental illnesses such as depression (Real, 1994). Symptoms of depression in males often manifested in different ways than typically defined by diagnostic literature. Typical symptoms of depression included fatigue, decreased appetite, or in rare cases, unusual weight gain, insomnia or need for more sleep, decreased interest in typically enjoyed activities, decreased memory and ability to concentrate (American Psychological Association, 2000). In contrast, Real (1994) argued that depression in males often went unrecognized and kept hidden behind a front of alcohol, substance addiction or violent behaviors.

1.3.2.3 Relational Barriers

Incarcerated and low income fathers experienced barriers to being fathers in large part, based on the relationships they had with their children's mothers and their partners. Financial stress often led to conflicts between the men and their partners (Jarrett et al., 2002). When there was relationship conflict or relationship dissolution, the mothers often gained custody of the children. These women became "gatekeepers" for the men's relationships with their children (Roy & Dyson, 2005) so that men had restricted access and limited contact opportunities with their non residential children. Also, men perceived that their resources and roles were strained between providing for their own biological children and providing for their current

partner and her children who live with him.

For the men who did actively contribute resources and time to both their own biological children and their partner's children, there were likely others in the community who made demands on their time and involvement as well. Other women sought these responsible men out as uncles, mentors, or other non-kin male role models (Jarrett et al., 2002). Combined, these multiple barriers put incarcerated and low income fathers in a place of "accumulated disadvantage" (Roy & Lucas, 2006).

1.3.2.4 Supportive Factors in Fathers' Lives

Despite the plethora of barriers to being good fathers, there were also supportive factors that protected these fathers from becoming distanced from their children. The most important factor in fathers' provision for and involvement in their children's lives was attaining and maintaining steady employment with a stable income. Fathers who were committed to their relationship with their children's mothers were also more likely to provide continuous support for the family. Fathers who exhibited positive attitudes toward parenting were more likely to stay involved with their children, regardless of their relationship status with the children's mothers (Johnson, 2000). Fathers who had stronger connections to social support networks were also more involved. In developed kinship networks, the men often relied on their own mothers in arranging childcare while they worked (Jarrett et al., 2002).

In Nelson's (2004) review of low income fathers, he identified from Braver et

al.'s (1993) 3-wave longitudinal study of non-custodial parental involvement that “two of the most important predictors of both visitation and child support were the amount of control the noncustodial father felt he had over the parenting of his child(ren) and how much control he believed he had over the divorce settlement.” The emphasis on personal control, or in other words, agency was evident as a significant influence in fathering involvement.

1.3.3 Definition and Overview of Theoretical Frameworks on Human Agency

For the purposes of this study, the most fitting view of agency was seen in the story of fathers as individuals “manifesting [themselves] in self-protection, self-expansion, and mastery of the environment” (McAdams et al., 1996). The following overview of human agency through the lens of multiple disciplines served to gauge the use of agency across the board. Human agency was used and defined with slight variations by each disciplines.

Similar views to McAdams et al. (1996) that added to the dimensions of agency are philosophical, psychological, and theoretical. From a philosophical perspective, Sen (1999, p. 53) discussed agency as active involvement in determining ones course in life and “not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs”. From a psychological, and specifically social cognitive perspective, Bandura (2001) described an agent as one who “intentionally make[s] things happen by ones actions.” He elaborated that the “core features of agency enable people to play a

part in their self-development, adaptation, and self renewal with changing times.”

Bandura also offered four dimensions to explain the concept of agency (Bandura, 2001; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; McAdams, 2001). Bandura (2001) dimensions were intentionality, forethought, self reactivity, and self reflectiveness. Intentionality referred to having a thought-out plan and strategy for action. The motivating force that allowed humans to anticipate desired outcomes by visualization and imagination was forethought. Self-reactiveness was the process by which humans are able to regulate and maintain a chosen course of action in light of contextual influences. According to Bandura (2006), the most distinct property of agency that made humans unique is self-reflectiveness. This property best captured the idea of meta-cognition, or the ability to reflect upon and adjust one’s actions and thoughts.

The identity theory definition of agency was discussed in literature on parenting agency as “the ability to achieve internalized goal states represented in identity standards despite changing or opposing environmental conditions” (Tsushima & Burke, 1999). Hitlin and Elder (2007) referred to identity agency as the type of human agency used in regular day-to-day life, which aids one in achieving desired goals that adhere to norms in a given role. Hitlin and Elder (2007) conceptualized three other types of agency: existential, pragmatic, and life course. Existential agency addresses the broadest analytical scope across all circumstances and times. It describes the basic notion of actors (primarily humans) who have “free will” or the ability to think and make choices independently of others in society. Pragmatic agency focuses on describing the present time of how actors creatively adapt or react to unanticipated “novel situations.” Life course agency paints agency with long

brush strokes toward future planning and “retrospective analysis.”

1.3.3.1 Narrative as Guiding Theoretical Framework

Narrative inquiry, which had both methodological and practical implications, was the primary guiding approach for this present study (Daly, 2007). As a method of research, narrative inquiry allowed participants to provide an autobiography of their remembered lives in an open-ended way, with little direction from the interviewer. The interviewer’s main responsibility was to communicate the area of interest to the participants so there is a common understanding of their shared interests. Narrative analysis also provided a framework of questions that challenged underlying assumptions built into the stories people tell about their lives. These questions examined the author’s perspective, sense of identity or self, characters within their stories, and characters who have been left out. It also dug into the relationship between the author, characters, and the historical and cultural setting in which the story was embedded. Commonly, narrative analysis was situated to illuminate the “dramatic turns” or turning points in the life story. At large, narrative analysis not only provided a way to study individual lives but also to step away and look at the cultural discourses, as reflected in the life stories of individual authors. Clinicians also developed practices in narrative therapy which aligned with the above deconstructive questions in order to work with clients to re-story their problem-saturated lives (Nichols & Schwartz, 2008).

Using the narrative metaphor of ones life as a story, McAdams (2001) dis-

cussed themes of self-mastery, status/victory, achievement/responsibility, and empowerment. These themes helped to operationalize the more abstract definitions and classifications of agency overviewed above.

Self mastery described the expression of agency through a perfecting of the self. This can be seen when a “protagonist” self reflects, gaining “dramatic insight into the meaning of his or her life” (McAdams, 2001). Also, a person might become more self aware of goals, or plans in life following a significant life marker. Basically, self-mastery characterizes any idea or event occurring which contributes to strengthened sense of control over his/her life or identity.

Status/ victory themes appeared when a person gained significant recognition, honor, or status over peers. This allowed the protagonist in his or her own story to feel a sense of “winning.” McAdams distinguished this from other achievement actions that simply meet expectations.

Achievement and responsibility themes occurred when the protagonist was able to successfully assume and fulfill roles where another person or people were dependent upon him/her. This included times when the protagonist overcame significant barriers in order to fulfill normative goals and expectations.

Empowerment themes could be seen when the protagonist developed a self which is magnified or enhanced by association to someone or “something larger and more powerful than the self.” The empowering figure could be a higher power spiritual force, authority figure, role model or other person “who provided critical assistance or guidance for the individual.”

Better understanding of agency through the first hand narrative accounts of

fathers would provide a more complex and complete picture of them as protagonists in their personal narratives. Instead of being resigned to knowing only their inadequacies, there would be a more balanced understanding with what capabilities they possess. Increased understanding about how the dimensions of agency work in the mens' lives would demonstrate areas that can be strengthened in order to empower the men. Program and policy developers could empower fathers by helping them help themselves instead of fostering dependency by taking away what choice, control and ability they possess through court mandates or other involuntary actions. Understanding and developing fathers' agency would uncover more opportunities for the fathers to lead active and fulfilling roles in their own families. Narrative inquiry is supported by the body of theoretical influences known as grounded theory, which is informed by symbolic interactionism (Daly, 2007).

1.3.3.2 Narrative Approach Situated in Symbolic Interaction Framework

The Narrative approach is buttressed with symbolic interactionist framework. Symbolic interactionists are deeply concerned with understanding how humans perceive reality, make meaning, act on perceived reality, and convey meaning or perceptions to others. All of these symbolic interactionist aims align with the way life history narratives and narrative inquiry are situated to understand the meaning that fathers and other actors make out of the lives they live.

Symbolic interactionism views human behavior as possible through created

and shared meanings for symbols (White & Klein, 2008). Symbols mean anything conceptual or tangible which can be attached or attributed with deeper meaning. An important symbol that aids human interactions was language. Language creates shared meaning and understanding based on the sounds or graphics that are used. For example, in this culture, we typically use “father” to represent a person of male gender who was responsible for the biological or other significant contribution to an individual’s existence in life. Although not everyone shares the same “father,” the word is a symbol which conjures up meaning for people to relate their own experiences. This approach describes human behavior as meaningful only in the subjective meaning which an actor ascribes to it.

From symbolic interactionism, four relevant concepts to agency are status, roles, norms, and identity (White & Klein, 2008). In short, status describes a position or location that a person occupy within a societal context, such as father, employee, and partner. Standing alone, these descriptors are neutral and only provide a relationship for an individual to represent membership in a group relative to the rest of society. Each status comes with a set of social expectations to form a specific role. In other words, a man’s status as a husband simply describes his committed relationship to his spouse,. His status is given meaning through the integration of social expectations for who a husband is and how he behaves in a given society. Norms are the expectations associated with each role in a given culture. For example, a norm for a mother in traditional Western Families typically includes care taking work inside the home. In contrast, a norm associated with the father’s role in a similar culture would be to work outside the home to earn a monetary wage

for the family. Whereas culture is comprised of the shared symbols and meanings a group of people who have a collectively agreed to, either formally or informally. In contrast, identity is formed out of an individual's personal meaning assigned to his or her role.

Two concepts in this theory relevant to incarcerated fathers are role confusion and role strain. Role confusion occurs when social expectations or norms overlap and are indistinct or unclear. This can lead to diffuse boundaries in each role. White and Klein (2008) discuss the proposition that the more roles a person occupies, the less clarity there will be for each role. A low income, incarcerated father might experience role confusion due to multiple roles as a prisoner, a father, a former partner to his first child's mother, and a current spouse to his other children's mother. Role confusion over being a father could occur when there are overlapping expectations for him to be a father to different children or where there are mixed messages from the mothers about the level of involvement welcomed.

Role strain occurs when an individual is unable to meet the social expectations of a given role. A proposition within symbolic interactionism is that individuals are more likely to leave a role as she/he experiences and perceives more role strain (White & Klein, 2008). Incarcerated fathers are a population at risk for role strain as they have many economic, relational, cognitive and other barriers to meeting social expectations of what it means to be a father who provides. The following sections provide more detail regarding these barriers. Thus, these incarcerated fathers may not provide at all financially, nor be involved in their children's lives, for lack of ability to maintain their roles. The symbolic interactionist framework of creation,

interpretation, and use of symbols to represent oneself and interact in relationships is similar to social cognitive theory as a way that people develop awareness and process information to build or manage relationships.

1.4 Research Questions

Given the lack of literature on men's experiences in prison as fathers and their ability to take control and make change in their lives, the following questions are addressed in the present study:

1. How do low income fathers understand role expectations to be fathers (and partners)?
2. How does the high risk context of incarceration shape the process of fathers' restorying their past?
3. How do fathers utilize a new sense of agency, to create plans for future involvement as fathers?

Chapter 2

Methods

2.1 Overview of Qualitative Research Method

The present study is a secondary data analysis of interview transcripts from Roy's "Life After Incarceration" dataset (Life After Incarceration, 2004; Agboli, 2006; McDowell, 2007). The present study uses qualitative research methods combined with a narrative approach to understand how low income incarcerated fathers make sense of and use human agency. Qualitative research methods are commonly seen in field research involving naturalistic inquiry in non-experimental settings (Daly, 2007). In contrast to quantitative research, which best addresses the scope of a construct, qualitative methods best capture depth of a construct. The advantages of qualitative methods include exploration and discovery of a phenomenon, concept, or construct that is not well understood.

At the same time, qualitative methods provide opportunities to gain in-depth insight into the meaning, context and process surrounding the concept of study (Daly, 2007). Meaning would include how participants in a study perceive and make sense out of the construct of interest. Understanding of context allows researchers to account for the broader systems such as family, community, ethnic group, class, gender, etc. that relate to the construct of interest. Process refers to the ways in which a construct develops or deteriorates; this often answers the

questions beginning with “how.”

For the present study, qualitative methods help to understand the process of how human agency emerges, is maintained or used. It clarifies how men, in the context of being fathers who are incarcerated make sense of being active agents in an environment in which they have limited control over their lives.

2.2 Narrative Approach

A narrative approach (Patton, 2002) to engaging in descriptive research typically uses the constructionist metaphor of story-telling to understand how people make sense of their experiences and perceptions. Researchers utilizing a narrative approach invite participants to tell their personal stories of how they make sense of their life experiences. The narrative approach accounts for how the actors in a given context see, interpret and act on the world around themselves through selective attention and memory. Through the filter of storytelling accounts, human emotions, beliefs and values through time are made explicit (East, Jackson, Peter, & O'Brien, 2010). This addition of research participants' personal perceptions may be otherwise lost in a purely observational approach to field study of human lives. Although subjective, a narrative approach to research on humans is well equipped to understand human behavior as it matches subjective human choices with a subjective human lens.

2.3 Sample

Low-income fathers from Indiana and Illinois in the current study reflected many of the same experiences as the broader population of low-income fathers in the United States. There was a wide range in fathers' ages, from the teens into the forties (Roy & Lucas, 2006). Most of these fathers do not share a residence with their biological children (Roy & Lucas, 2006). However, they tended to live with their present partner's children (Eggebeen, 2002). They held unsteady or low-paying jobs with inconsistent incomes (Roy, 2006). Most fathers were recruited for study during their involvement in a fatherhood training program at their work release site. Although some of the men who attend these programs were mandated by court order for child support, most of the fathers attend voluntarily (Roy & Dyson, 2010). More of the fathers had previous criminal records than those who did not (Roy & Lucas, 2006). Also, more fathers earned at least a high school diploma or equivalent than fathers who had completed less than a high school education (Roy & Lucas, 2006).

The participants included 40 men who were incarcerated and participated in a prison work-release program in northern Indiana. Most participants were incarcerated for drug-related charges. The work-release facility was a minimum-security setting. Participants were allowed to leave the facility and were required to work at jobs in the community. They were required to return to the facility immediately following work. The participants' families resided up to a few hundred miles radius of the work-release facility. At the time of the interview between 2002 and 2004, their ages varied from 17 to 54 years, with the average age being 33.3 years. Of the

40 men, the ethnic distribution was 28 men who were European American (70%), 10 African Americans (25%), 1 Asian (2.5%), and 1 Native American (2.5%). This distribution was consistent with the population of the surrounding geographic area which was predominantly European American. Nineteen of the participants (47.5%) were either single or dating , 11 (27.5%) were divorced, 8 (20%) were married, and 2 (5%) were cohabiting with their partners. Most participants had from 1 to 7 biological and/or step-children in their household, with an average between 2 to 3 children each. Three participants did not have any biological children of their own at the time of study but acted as father figures to children of family members. The participants had been incarcerated for an average of 2.7 years, with the range from 1 to 6 years. Seven of the men (17.5%) were a part of the military at some point in their lives. Substance abuse was reported by 28 of the men (70%). Nearly half of the men (19 of them) completed some college education, with 11 of them (27.5%) completing 2 or more years. Because the sample of participants was recruited from a prison program, all of the men were non-residential fathers at the time of study. Most men's household income put them within the 150 – 200% range of the poverty line.

2.4 Data Collection

This study was a secondary data analysis of transcripts from previously completed interviews. This study received IRB approval for non-human subjects because the dataset was comprised of only written transcripts which were retired and

all identifying information was already removed regarding the original research participants.

The original study which gathered this dataset was conducted by principal investigator, Dr. Kevin Roy and two graduate students of his research team. They built relationships with the men in this study by leading a series of life skills training curriculum over the course of 11 weeks, as part of the prison work-release program. They met every Wednesday night in a classroom in the work-release facility. The research team recruited participants by announcing that they were interested in interviewing incarcerated men to learn about their life histories, relationships and transitions and that anyone who was willing to volunteer two hours of their time to talk about his experiences could speak with a research team member at the end of the weekly training. Due to the policies of the work-release program, participants in the study were not financially compensated. All study participation was voluntary, as attendance in the life skills training class was also voluntary. One-on-one interviews were then conducted over an eighteen-month period using a semi-structured interview protocol. Interviewers reviewed informed consent procedures with each participant at the beginning of the interview. Interviewers reiterated that all participation was voluntary and participants could terminate the interview at any time that they wished without negative consequences to the participants. After consent was given to continue and permission was obtained from the participant, the interview was recorded using audio recorders, stored in a locked drawer in the principal investigator's office, and then transcribed manually. Pseudonyms were given to participants and used in the transcription and analysis process to protect participants'

identities.

2.5 Data Analysis

The interviews were analyzed using principles and techniques of grounded theory (Daly, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). There were three waves of coding that I used to analyze the interviews: open, axial, and selective coding.

The first step was open coding. The purpose of open coding was to note patterns of occurring concepts, name them, hence establishing boundaries for the texts. To do this, I used McAdams' (2001) agency themes of self mastery, status/victory, achievement/responsibility, and empowerment as sensitizing concepts to pick out passages of the interviews that fit with each. For example, I would look for the theme of self mastery in response to the question "What did it mean to you when you became a father?" Self mastery would be evident in the way a significant event of his child's birth awakened him to a revelatory state of his existence, thus improving himself. Other questions of interest that I paid specific attention to included, "Did you work an arrangement for your involvement with seeing the children?" This would help to gauge the extent of control that participants had over their current involvement as a father. If a passage is insightful in a way that did not fit into the existing four dimensions of McAdams' agency, this was an opportunity to expand on existing constructs surrounding agency. Therefore, during this phase of coding, I was also searching for emergent codes to create. The open coding process yielded quotes for the four original themes of agency as well as 16 emergent codes. Together,

the quotes totaled 337 single-spaced pages of material for further analysis.

In the second phase of analysis, I used axial coding to compare and contrast the different quotes both within and between each code. I re-read the quotes, compiled each code, annotated and analyzed whether or where they belonged. This helped to distinguish related concepts from each other and pull out similarities that turned into concepts for a new code or theme. Axial coding helped to distinguish the finer processes underlying what looked like the same code on the surface. I refined the definition of each emergent theme so that each would be distinct from the others.

Third, selective coding was used to pull related quotes together within a code to give a more cohesive account about these men's stories. In order to do this, I excerpted quotes which I anticipated would illustrate the story of how agency emerged, developed, was used, or was thwarted throughout these participants' lives as fathers. I wrote memos for each of the most prominent quotes that fit under each code. Altogether, I gathered 161 memos across 20 codes. Each participant's entry under a given code was only counted once. I took into account the context of their other roles including sons, partners, and prisoners. To assist the organization and analysis of the text transcripts, I used the Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing (QSR NUD*IST 6). This computer software was designed specifically to manage large amounts of qualitative information, analysis and theory construction.

In this analysis, I addressed how incarcerated fathers made sense of agency, what people and circumstances impacted their sense of agency, and how they used their agency. First, I looked at how incarcerated fathers made sense of and make

use of their agency in the context of their family relationships. By nature of their incarceration, I anticipated these men's sense of agency would be considerably limited in comparison to the general population. Thus, next I looked at the challenges which limit them and give these fathers a unique perspective to agency. Last, I studied how these fathers used different forms of agency to perceive and take action through the challenges in their lives.

In order to study incarcerated fathers' agency, I examined transcripts of life history interviews of 40 men. I coded various forms of agency, beginning with the four sensitizing concepts of self mastery, status/victory, achievement/responsibility, and empowerment (McAdams, 2001). First, I looked for the theme of self mastery in the ways in which fathers improved themselves through insights after an important event or gained locus of control. Second, I looked for the theme of status/victory in ways that fathers gained prestigious recognition in comparison to peers. Third, I looked for achievement/responsibility in the ways that fathers felt proud of an obstacle they overcame, or demonstrated initiatives in their family roles. Fourth, I looked for the theme of empowerment in the ways fathers were built up or made better through their association with a person, group, or something larger than themselves.

Then, I added codes to sensitize my analysis to the antithesis of each of the beginning four. For example, out of self mastery, I formed a new antithesis code, "non-mastery." This new code encompassed the absence of control, insight, goals or plans. Also, for this code, participants might discuss confusion, uncertainty of direction, and lack of plans in life, or feeling out of control. Out of status/victory,

I formed the code “non- status/victory.” I anticipated this code to describe participants feelings that compared to peers.

Also, I added codes as different themes of agency emerged which were common to multiple participants’ narratives. I chose codes that would illuminate my understanding of their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors related to agency. Additional codes that emerged included people who influenced participants, positive or negative outlook, guiding philosophies of life, adaptability and persistence, ability to anticipate and solve problems.

Some common responses that I coded addressed: what mens’ reactions were when they first received the news that they were going to be a father; what was most important to them in being a father, who they would rely on in times of need; who would rely on them; what they perceived as the biggest challenges upon leaving the work-release program; and what their goals were for their future, five years after the interview.

2.6 Data Quality

Interviewers used a semi-structured interview protocol. They asked fathers a similar set of open-ended questions. The sample size of the study was 40 men. Three of the men were not biological fathers but played a fathering role to a member of his household, such as his cousin, niece and nephew. Being recruited from the same prison work-release program, the sample of men were appropriate for this study’s focus on low-income incarcerated fathers. Although not a nationally representative

sample of incarcerated fathers, there are multiple responders with variation in their ethnic, educational, relational, and criminal backgrounds to provide a diverse array of perspectives on human agency for this study.

In order to ensure that I was not solely reflecting personal interpretations of the data, I made my own preconceived notions explicit in addition to stating theoretical conceptualizations. I consulted, on a regular basis during the analysis, with mentors and colleagues who were familiar with the dataset and those who were familiar with similar low income populations, qualitative methods, and concepts of agency. I checked whether the themes I gathered in my perceptions fit their understanding of the LAI interview transcripts and what others studied regarding incarcerated fathers.

In qualitative research, there are not straightforward tested measures to be used, but the researcher becomes a measure. Following the concepts of qualitative research methods that are most similar to verifying validity in measures, I acknowledged my own motivations for interest in this population, biases, and perspectives I brought.

2.7 Reflexivity

Being trained as a Couple and Family Therapist, my clinical background situated me as an empowerment resource in the realm of helping professionals. My first thoughts about studying human agency arose out of a belief in solution-focused therapy (Nichols & Schwartz, 2008), a strength-based therapeutic approach. I did

not tend to believe that people in need are inherently deficient and need handouts of advice or other means which foster dependency on the helping professional. Instead, my experience shaped me to believe that the best way to help someone is to empower him/her by strengthening the immediate resources within and occurring around the person on a regular basis. It is as the adage goes, “Give a man a fish and you will feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you will feed him for a lifetime” (Author unknown).

As a young woman without experience of being a parent or incarcerated, I hoped to use my unknowing perspective as leverage for curiosity in order to gain understanding about incarcerated fathers’ experiences. My clinical training and experience serving a predominantly low income community population in Prince Georges County, Maryland, aided in my understanding and empathy with the present study participants stories. Also, as a person of Chinese descent growing up in the United States, I used my ethnic minority status within the larger dominant group to identify with the potentially marginalized experiences of others.

Because the present study is a secondary analysis of Dr. Roy’s previous interviews, I did not have direct contact with any of the research participants. However, my related experience stems from working as a member of his research team. Over the course of a year of field research, I became more familiar with some men with similar experiences growing up in low income communities, being incarcerated, and being fathers. My role in the team included the process of preparing interview protocol, engaging in field research, facilitating discussions on life skills or health topics, interviewing the young men about turning points in their lives which impacted their

transition to adulthood and coding previous interviews of low income fathers.

My field research experience was an exciting and rewarding experience to know more about these young men. Some I saw some who were at the brink of making significant life changes to his deviant past, described by (Roy & Maruna, 2007) as “knifing off.” Some young men, I witnessed from their narratives, as impressively gifted in literary, athletic, musical, leadership, relational or insight abilities. Some had tremendous hope, humble attitudes, desires to make sense of or improve themselves, and sense of agency in their lives.

I was honored to be allowed the opportunity to curiously probe into the experiences of some young men who have endured many life challenges at an early age. I developed an admiration for their strengths and resilience in light of encountered setbacks. Thus, I was excited to learn and write about the lives of the 40 men in this present study with similar life stories.

Chapter 3

Findings

In this findings section, I discuss how the incarcerated fathers shared normative life goals which apply to their agency, unique challenges to their agency in a high risk context, and make use of their agency. I use quotes from the interviews with the fathers to demonstrate and highlight the tendencies and variations in their perspectives.

McAdams' (2001) four sensitizing concepts of agency were applied in the coding of the 40 interview transcripts. Two of the concepts regarding agency were more relevant and more common to these participants' experiences than the other two. Themes of status/victory and empowerment were less prominent in the narratives of the men interviewed. The lack of these themes may be due to the fact that these men form a unique group of fathers in that they are incarcerated and held low income jobs, and generally grew up in low income communities where there is a lack of educational and organized involvement opportunities. Thus, the theme of status/victory was not as relevant because they have fewer opportunities to be formally recognized for their successes or triumphs in comparison to others. Also, empowerment may be not as evident in the way (McAdams, 2001) defined it as there are not many social institutions which these men associate with that could enlarge or enhance their sense of self. The other two themes of self mastery

and achievement/responsibility are discussed as applicable to address each of the research questions throughout the subsequent sections of the findings.

3.1 Relevant Agentic Themes for Incarcerated Fathers

Though McAdams (2001) described and tested the correlations (McAdams, 1985) between his original four themes of agency, the themes do not identify the processes which shapes agency. Agentic themes can be expanded to include themes that are relevant to agency formation and maintenance for people such as incarcerated fathers who are limited in their choices. Seven emergent themes that I found useful to characterize fathers' experiences with agency in this study were empowering people, positive outlook, flexibility/perseverance, anticipatory plans, self reflexivity, opportunistic events and choice. I describe each of these emergent themes below. The quotes that were coded under each of these themes were grouped with others during the third and selective coding phase of analysis in order to present a more cohesive story about incarcerated fathers' agency.

3.1.1 Empowering People

Empowering people describes those who acted in favor of participants gaining control of their lives. This could be seen as encouraging remarks, offers for practical help to accomplish the participants' goals, support for participants' positive thinking etc. Positive outlook describes participants' positive or optimistic outlook on a difficult situation. This is differentiated from achievement and responsibility theme

because it is not necessarily an action or behavior but is seen as a thought or idea the participant references. Evidence of humorous attitudes, excluding sarcasm or self deprecation, is included here.

3.1.2 Flexibility & Perseverance

Flexibility & perseverance refers to instances when a participant's narrative shows that he can adaptively maneuver around or through perceived obstacles. He or she persists until he obtains his goals. For the present study, this included times fathers found ways to see his children despite regulations against doing so or times he persisted in employment, despite unfavorable conditions or trying new jobs and skills when one did not work out.

3.1.3 Anticipatory Plans

Anticipatory plans categorizes agency that is expressed through thoughtfulness of anticipated problems or barriers and/or plans made to address these barriers. Also, this includes acknowledgement of what participant knows he needs to do in order to overcome a challenge or limit.

3.1.4 Self Reflectiveness

Self reflectiveness refers to scripts of participant being realistic and self aware of his/her authentic state of being, including consciously aware and verbalized past mistakes. Perhaps s/ he not in complete control of items in life in the form of active

application of awareness yet. However, participant has insight into current state of his situation, without making excuses or light of it. S/ he accepts responsibility for his/her own actions and consequences and owns up to it in the process of making sense of and rewriting story of the past. Perhaps with reflective awareness of reality in terms of the participant's role, thoughts and actions which influence his/her outcomes to that point, there is some restoration of control or agency.

3.1.5 Opportunistic Events

Opportunistic events describe opportunities that just “appeared,” without the participants' conscious volition, outside of his immediate control. This theme can be seen through both positive and negative valence. Sometimes, opportunistic events turned out to help participant build a sense of agency and gives him a natural turning point for the better in life. This could include a welcomed, though unexpected pregnancy that helped him connect or reconnect to supportive others. It could also be a job opening that he happened to stumble upon by being the right person at the right place at the right time. Or it could even be told in the form of an arrest warrant expiring on an occasion he would otherwise have been arrested. Other times, these opportunistic events occur without the participant's conscious effort, but make his life more difficult. Descriptions include missing a court hearing because his car broke down or losing his job because the company moved out of state or closed down.

3.1.6 Poor Choices

Poor choices are also a theme surrounding the story of agency development and maintenance in participants who are limited in their choices. There would be descriptors in his or her life narrative, which the participant made a choice that influenced/ impacted his or her life. The choice may carry neutral or negative valence. This does not fit under self-mastery theme because the choice did not necessarily lead to improvement or enhancement of self.

3.1.7 Confidence/ Insight in Life Philosophy

Confidence/ Insight in life philosophy occurs in narratives when a participant has developed and lived out a generalizable philosophy about life that s/ he is confident in. It may be demonstrated through his motivators behind his parenting practice. This theme does not fit with self mastery because it is not merely gained insight nor solely used for self improvement. It may not be evident in narrative how participant developed this idea based on any one event. But the philosophy is prosocial, leads toward functioning [etc].

Also, while attempting to understand agency for those like incarcerated fathers, who are underprivileged or limited in their array of choices, it would be a blatant error [negligence, bias, or blindness] not to recognize the agency-opposing themes which shape the lense through which many fathers' stories were told. Four of these themes are antithetical to McAdams' (2001) four agency themes. They are non-mastery, non-achievement/ responsibility, non-status, and disempowerment.

Other antithetical agency themes are structural, internal and relational barriers.

In the next section, I examine three dimensions. First, I look at how normative life goals apply to these father's sense of agency. Next I study how agency plays out in the context of high risk environments in which fathers' lives are embedded. Third, I examine how fathers make use of their agency in their life stories as they retell their life history in narrative form.

3.2 Normative Life Goals to Apply to Agency

A feature of human agency is the ability to take control of situations to create desired outcomes. In order to understand what it is these men wish to control, I looked at their goals, and ideals surrounding their roles as fathers and as partners.

3.2.1 Goals as a Father

Many of the men discussed multiple ways they wished to provide for their children. Danny, 33, was a father of three children, ages 11, 9, and 1. Danny grew up primarily living with his mother. He and his mother moved around after his father raped his mother and they divorced. He was arrested multiple times for DUIs, smoking pot, and once for battery. His stated his ideals for being a father as,

Someone that wouldn't do what I've done in the past-put themselves before the children, put their feelings before their children's. The best way of being a father to me is to be there for them no matter what. It's like now you know when they cry, I want to be there. When they wake

up, I want to be there. When they go to sleep, I want to be there. If they have questions I want to be able to answer them. If I can't answer them I would at least take the questions to someone else where I might be able to get an answer. If they need help with homework I want to be there for them, emotionally, period. I want to spend time with them. I want to go do things with them. I want to be able to hold them. Tell them what a good job they've done. Let them have some kind of stability in their life with one of the parents. To be a good father to me is just be there for them regardless. Put them before myself.

This showed Danny's awareness of the significance of being a father by prioritizing his children. This evidenced his desire for daily involvement in his children's lives being present in different and even mundane areas of their lives. He wanted to comfort his children if they cried. He wanted to start each day with them. When they had questions about schoolwork, he wanted to answer them. Danny saw being a father as being a source of comfort, information, academic support, encouragement, and dependability for his children. Fathers' desires to be involved in these everyday activities showed how fathers saw opportunities to provide for their children's everyday emotional and intellectual needs.

Another common goal these fathers spoke of was to provide for their children's financial needs. Keith, 25, was a father to two young children, ages 3 and 2. Keith grew up with his grandmother while his parents were both incarcerated. He dropped out of high school. He explained that what he could provide was less than what his

children needed and less than what he would like to provide financially.

I mean I try to do what I can now, but in all reality, that's not really enough. If I was still with the individuals I had the children with. I couldn't use the excuse that I couldn't buy for them because I have this to do, because it's something that I'm not trying to get use to. If I had \$5 and it's a choice of me going to the movies or something for my child, of course I have to give it to my child. You know how much it hurts. You know it's something you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy. You couldn't ask for [financial lack] to happen, so why would you put it on something that you cherish that much. I'm at a point in my life where I'd have to ask someone else for that. I don't want to have someone else. I want to be a father. I want to provide for my children. Mentally I think I'm fine. Physically I'm still young. Emotionally I have all the love in the world for them. Financially I'm broke as a joke.

Keith showed his awareness of how his lack of ability to provide negatively impacts his children. The desperation which this father felt resounded through many of the men's narratives when asked about how they would like to provide and what they see themselves providing or areas in which they would like to improve as a father.

Other fathers talked about their wishes to provide for not only their children's necessities but their material wants as well. Charlie, 21, reflected on what he wished to provide for his children in light of his experiences growing up.

I mean, when I was a young teenager I always wanted a new moped

and when I was really young I wanted one of them mobile hot wheel things, you know like that, spoil your kids, I want to be able to do that. Hopefully by that time I will have a job and money and transportation and I can afford to do little things like that to keep them happy.

Like many of the participants interviewed, Charlie hoped to spoil his children not lavishly but through small and realistic gestures. He desired to afford his children a happy childhood, playing with the trendy toys, like hot wheels, as he wished for himself. He also demonstrated his understanding of the means that it would take to provide these material items working to earn a living. He knew he would need to work a paid position in order to afford those toys to make his children happy.

3.2.2 Goals as a Partner

These men also held strong desires to be a good partner. Many wished to demonstrate their fulfillment of this role through traditional gender roles of leading and providing for his partner and family. Lombardo, 30, served in the military. He got married before he was deployed to Saudi Arabia and Germany. He was married for 4 years and divorced upon his return from deployment. He summarized the salient values as a male partner.

I think [providing] is probably about the most important thing in my eyes, because a man is suppose to lead his family. He is supposed to be the strong person of the family that holds it together. I believe in the old chivalry. You know open the door. Chivalry however you say that

damn word. Like open the door for the lady or walk on the outside of her you know or just common courtesies. That's what a guy is supposed to do. In their-in the home. I wish my wife didn't have to work, but in today's society both people have to work it is just too expensive. But a guy is supposed to do all the physical stuff. Bring home the money he pays for the groceries, pays the bills and all that. And being a father it's a lot because your kids look up to you for that kind of stuff.

Lombardo's wishes reflected many of these men's internalization of societal norms of what it means to be a man. He understood and expected men to work outside of the home. He thought it was his responsibility to provide for his partner financially, while providing her the option of working or not. He thought being a man also meant treating his partner and being a role model to his children. These men shared many goals and dreams as fathers and as partners that are familiar to the American dream.

3.2.3 Fathers' Emotional Needs

Fathers needed to love and be loved. They valued love as selfless care, companionship and moral support, especially in distressing times. Fathers often sought love from their family and partners. Brando, a 21 year-old new father, dropped out of high school and moved out from his parents' home. He explained his nostalgia for his parents after he left home. He also showed his revitalized love and respect for his parents upon their visit to him during the prison work-release.

I started respecting my mom a lot more and my dad and miss'n them and stuff like that. Then all of sudden I went in [to work-release] and I missed the hell out of them, and they came in where I was working and saw me. Total respect. You know what I'm saying. I was in there, on my mom's birthday, threw her \$200 and she threw it back in my face, you know what I'm saying. I didn't have no money. I didn't have no way to go shopping for her this time. They didn't do shopping passes like they do now, so I just gave her some money for her birthday. Here buy you something nice. She's like I don't want you money. This is not why I came to see you and that sort of thing. It made me respect her a little more, you know. Love, just love. You know here I am trying to show my love through money and you know that was a little lesson taught there. Went to college and missed the hell out of them. Love. Just distance grows the relationships tighter. For the last few years, I've just totally loved my mom and my dad.

Brando attempted to act grown-up by giving his mother a monetary birthday gift. She did not accept the gift as it was outside of his means. Thus, he was touched by her disregard for the gift but regard for his being. When he saw that his mother's motivation for visiting him was clearly not for her own gain, his love and respect for her grew. His mother declined to accept his relatively extravagant gift, which strengthened his bond with his parents. Despite being physically separated from his parents, Brando developed an emotional closeness that appeared in spite of his

incarceration. Fathers like Brando valued loving relationships they could fall back on in times of distress.

When the love was not immediately found in current relationships, fathers sought it out in new or rekindled relationships. Roland, 40, was a father to three biological children. He worked as a lab technician, treating lead in recycled batteries. He said that he returned from work one day to find his wife naked, with an unidentified car parked in front of their house. He was suspicious and angry and lashed out, “jumping on” her. Shortly after, his wife locked him with their children in the house, left for the Laundromat, and never returned. Roland was pained over his wife’s departure. At the time of the divorce hearing, he eagerly replaced his pain by falling “in love” with a different partner.

I had another woman with me when I came to court though, and that was Holly, my other kids’ mother. And she was pregnant at the time. Cause see, as soon as I lost [my wife], I needed somebody to make love. I mean I needed somebody to take the hurt that I was having, I was hurt so I had used her, I kind of used her, and this is the God honest truth I used her, I kind of used her but I was loving. I fell in love with her too.

Fathers like Roland express intrinsic need to feel loved, especially in the painful times. He turned to a former partner and mother of one of his children for his needs. At times his desperation to replace loss with love drives him to exploit a former partner for sexual intimacy. His desperate means to gain love shows that

this need is a powerful, deep seated force within him. Along with goals to provide as a father and partner, these fathers sought fulfillment to love and be loved. These fathers have very down-to-earth dreams to be a good provider, to make their children happy, to fulfill a traditional male gender role, and to reciprocate love. Among the population of fathers, these aspects of life would likely be common areas for control. The life goals behind their agency make this group of fathers similar to other fathers in the general population.

In this second section, I found that the incarcerated fathers in this study expressed many desires, hopes, and needs which could be commonly anticipated from most fathers. As fathers, their goals were to provide financial stability for their children, to fulfill their children's wish lists, and spend quality time engaged in their children's daily activities. As partners, they wanted to fulfill traditional male gender roles as the primary provider for the family. As humans, these fathers needed to love and be loved by parents and partners.

3.3 Agency in Fathers' High Risk Context

Upon a closer look, I discovered further how these fathers developed unique perspectives on their agency as shaped in their high risk context leading up to and surrounding incarceration. Because of their backgrounds growing up in high risk environments, participating in crime and drugs, these fathers offered a different perspective on agency. This perspective focuses on rewriting their histories. Also, this unique perspective incorporated the constraints or barriers to their agency which

is unique to incarcerated and low income fathers.

3.3.1 Awareness of Poor Choices

By nature of their incarceration, many would recognize that these fathers made poor choices in their lives. These poor choices led to a criminal past which overshadow the fathers' current circumstances.

Numerous participants acknowledged their current self-awareness of the poor choices they made. The interviewer asked participants to tell him about the decisions and events that led up to their incarceration. Jeff, Don, and Paul discussed their regret in the poor choices they made. Jeff, 26, remorsefully reflected on his past mistakes to drive while intoxicated.

I have poor decisions, very poor. I had an opportunity to get a ride home, but I decided to drive home because it wasn't that far. Said I'll be all right. It's not that far. I got into an accident and went to jail for an DWI, so I've made bad decisions. Very bad decisions, very bad plan making on my part.

Don, 42, recalled his poor judgment to stop in his neighborhood to use drugs on the way home from work. That led up to his arrest for possession of drugs. "I was stupid. Landed me right here. Was only two blocks from the houses but I had to stop. I got hit." When asked about what advice he would give to younger generations based on his regret of getting caught so close to home, he said,

Drop your shit first then go about your business, then go do shit in

the streets. Whether it be dirty jobs, drop your “laundry” at the house and then go about your business. It’s true, don’t go with it, ain’t nothing nice, you paid for it.

Don realized that his choice to use and sell drugs was what cost him his freedom. He regrets not staying with the plan to go straight home. He used his lesson learned to warn others to at least leave the drugs at home. Don may have learned primarily about how to escape getting caught but he saw the consequences of his choices.

Paul, 38, attributed his incarceration to his mistaken choice of companions and their influences. He believes he lost his momentum moving forward in life to the crowd mentality of getting high and getting rich.

Pretty much it was just wrong choices, hanging with the wrong people, just being out there on the alcohol, drugs, instead of staying focused. It’s kind of easy getting a [high] in little town like this. Just with a little bit of knowledge, a little bit of hustle, you can make money. Kind of get busy doing other things and not staying focused on the big picture, the big prize. That’s what happened to me. It kind of came easy, you know. Just lost that, my motivation, my drive to keep going, keep doing better, my competitive edge.

These three fathers understood their mistakes to use drive while intoxicated, use drugs, and keep company with a drug-using crowd. They saw that they paid a price of getting badly injured in a car accident, getting incarcerated, and losing motivation to work legally paid jobs.

3.3.2 Ownership of Past Mistakes

Compared to those who were merely aware of their mistakes, a smaller sample of fathers took personal ownership of their mistakes and improvement. These fathers moved a step beyond self awareness of mistakes but displayed an internalized locus of control. Fathers displayed that they expected themselves and not anyone else to do good for their families. Their words demonstrated that they were on the cusp of making positive change in lieu of previous mistakes. Jimmy, 45, was a father of 3. He made his ownership of responsibility for his family's well-being explicit. He was incarcerated for repeated D.U.I.s. Throughout his interview, he expressed his consciousness of how the wider economic context can impact what he can provide. At times, his voice echoed many complaints of economic inequality-where some people might get a raise when they had more than enough but others would work multiple jobs but not have enough to feed their children. Where fathers like Jimmy moved a step beyond, was that they did not just blame their misfortunes on external locus, out side of their control. They internalized a part of the responsibility. Jimmy stated his attitudes toward government aid programs.

I don't believe in food stamps, Medicaid, welfare, it's great for people who really need it. But that's the people they really don't want to give it to. I mean, I know a lot of people that's getting it that shouldn't be getting it, they should be out there flipping burgers if that's the only job they can get. But like I told my wife, before I ever stoop to where I'd have to actually go and ask them for help, the farmer would have

to take the cattle out of the back field here. I feed my kids. They may throw me in jail for it or whatever.

Here, Jimmy displayed his sense of pride in providing for his own on his own over simply accepting handouts. He understood that government income transfer programs could benefit those with need. He also saw that a portion of income transfer program recipients could be working. He believed that even if providing for his family meant having to work at menial service sector jobs, it was worth working. Also, if the means to provide for his children required, Jimmy would rather accept the consequences of being incarcerated than to receive government assistance. His attitudes toward government aid and work showed a balanced view between those who needed extra help and those who could take more responsibility. His personal view was consistent with his higher regard for working to feed his kids. Like Jimmy, most fathers did not readily look to government financial assistance but took personal responsibility to provide for their children. They also expected other fathers in a similar position to do the same. They looked down on those who took an easy out by evading financial responsibilities or not working to meet them.

3.3.3 Capacity for Good

Fathers who acknowledged that they possessed deviant pasts often sought witnesses to recognize they were not inherently bad people. They wanted to be seen for their ability to change for the better. Marley, 32, immigrated to the U.S. from Malaysia. He married his European-American wife while she was visiting Malaysia.

However, their relationship turned for the worse after they arrived in the U.S., and became parents. He reported that pressures built up between transitioning to parenthood, marital dissatisfaction, cultural prejudices, and employment instability. Marley regretfully recalled his actions toward his wife to the interviewer.

I've done some pretty horrible things in my life. You know. She was 8 months pregnant and I struck her. Man. That killed me for the longest time. Just the guilt. It's enough to drive you to suicide. I'm not proud of that man. Life was horrible. Didn't have not job. My job sucked. Living with my brother and my mother you know. Weather was hot and humid. You know. Economical situation sucks. You know. Living day to day. You know. The pressures of life. I just never handled it. You know. And it just pretty much disintegrated you know. You don't know how to cope with it. I didn't know how to cope with it. That was the last thing that I needed to do. She stuck with me. And when she was carrying my, Heather when she was about six months old. She was going on and on and on, and I struck her again. This time I hit her on the nose and she bled. I remember Heather crying you know for some reason I just blocked her out and we had this tugging match and I won Heather back. Man. I'm not like that man. [Interviewer], I'm not a bad person you know.

Marley sought validation that his bad behaviors were not representative of an inherent flaw in his identity. Marley showed the pressures from work, family, and

economy that surrounded him. He was honest to tell about the two situations in which he hit his wife. However, he wanted the interviewer to know that in those situations, he was not his true self.

Similarly, Lombardo repetitiously hammered the point that he believes himself capable to do what is right for his family.

I'm sure Jody can't help but see things that are positive and there's stuff that she's dealing with that's good too? Oh yeah she's got herself a good job. She's getting ready to go back to school for nursing. I don't know if she considers it a good thing, but she has me in her back corner. When I'm in the mood that I am that I know how to behave and do the right thing, which I know what to do if I put my mind to it. I'm a good guy to have around. I'll do anything for anybody and I'm going to lay off that and do anything for her and my family. I'm not too worried about everybody else right now. I want to make my family my priority.

Lombardo stated that he could do what he knows is good if he was "in the mood," or if he "put [his] mind to it." Taking a closer look, these conditional statements left room for him to also do wrong depending on his emotional or cognitive state. Thus, he implicitly acknowledged that he has not always done what he knows to be "the right thing." Nevertheless, he petitioned over and over that he has the potential to be an asset to his family. Many fathers who acknowledged their own mistakes also wanted to be acknowledged that internally, there was more to them as a whole than the sum of their mistakes. They did not want to be globally defined by their poor

choices. They sought witnesses who would recognize and believe with them that there was good inside and there was hope for them.

3.3.4 Limited Choices

These fathers clearly showed their desire to leave behind criminal pasts and build brighter futures. However, as an incarcerated group on work-release, the range of their daily activities and choices with which to change were constricted. They were confined primarily to either working or serving their prison sentence. They acknowledged that they faced a limited set of choices from which to exercise control over their family's future.

Three fathers all discussed their sense of limitations when they wanted to be more involved with their children. Marley expressed frustration over the limited time and transportation access on a visitation pass. The pass would have allowed him to see his children for two hours every two weeks. He calculated what would allow him to minimize an extra hour of allotted travel time and maximize his time spent with his children. He frantically tried to find a moped.

I've been working, see they have this stupid rule if somebody comes to pick you up then you get travel time, but if you are on your own you get half an hour travel time to and from. Two hours, technically I have three hours. Probably fifteen, probably twenty minutes tops of traveling. Now I'm running around with my head cut off looking for somebody to borrow me a moped for next week. Still going to have the

extra 45 minutes to spend with my children. O.K. I don't know who, I need a fucking moped. You know. This, I guess, it's my fault man. I can't stop badgering myself.

Lombardo experienced a time constraint due to the sheer geographical distance in transporting to his children. Despite the short visits, he considered the time-consuming travel a worthwhile price to pay so that his son understood his good faith effort.

I mean I really don't get to see him a whole lot, like I said I only have 4 hours on my passes and by the time I drive all the way out to West Point to my mom and dad's to see him, I got to turn around and come back. But it's ok at least her knows I drove out there to see him. That I do care.

The travel time alone to his son's residence would take up the majority of his allotted visitation time. This was often the case as many fathers came to the work-release facilities from a community a few hours away. With a limited visitation time of only 4 hours, fathers often found themselves scrambling for quality time to actually be with their children. Much of the time was spent en route if there was no one available or willing to bring their children closer to them. Despite the often distant travel, fathers still found the endeavor worthwhile and made their best effort to show up to see their children and let their children they cared.

Even when they were able to meet with their children, fathers still found themselves severely limited as to the range of activities and experiences they could

share in with their children. Andy was a 32-year-old father of two daughters and a son. He lamented the limited scope of activities that he could share with his children during his incarceration. Although he was able to interact with them at designated times, he was not able to enjoy the full range of activities as a father. He also projected the impacts on his children during his absence from their daily routines. Andy could imagine how his children missed his presence. He appreciated that his children's attitudes did not change toward him, despite his limited participation in their activities.

I miss being around my kids obviously, so that's where my relationship with the kids is suffering. Not being able to sleep with them or watch TV with them and stuff. Obviously and eat with them and play with them, so now whether that's affecting them- of course they haven't said anything to me to where I would notice. I can say when I get back their questions might pop up when I start doing that stuff with them again you know. "Daddy we really missed you." You know whatever. But my phone conversations with them's always short, well I shouldn't say short, but they're sweet. They haven't acted like they're honked off at me or whatever and I try not to bring it up until I can get to where I can physically get to be around them all the time again.

These incarcerated fathers displayed a unique perspective on agency. As agentic choice-makers, their incarceration generally attested to their previous poor choices. Their involvement in substance use, sales, or association with substance-users fre-

quently preceded their criminal record. Fathers' current decisions were shadowed by their deviant past. Fathers sought support to acknowledge their potential for good. These fathers attempted to improve their parenting involvement with limited access and choices to connect with their children.

The unique challenges which these fathers face can be classified into three types of barriers to their sense of agency. These barriers are contextual, internal, and relational. Incarcerated fathers face multiple types of barriers which are quickly and intensely compounded. In connection to their low income jobs, these fathers face stressors which are often basic to middle class or higher income-earners. They may face contextual barriers around them which impact their internal emotions and affect. Then their internal emotions and affect could impact their attitudes while interacting with others relationally.

3.3.5 Contextual Barriers

Contextual barriers are the difficulties which these fathers faced in their immediate surroundings. They were often outside the fathers' personal locus of control. These included prejudice, neighborhood violence, unstable employment, and custody battles. These barriers prevented fathers from exercising the full range of control that they had on their minds. The part of Indiana in which most of these fathers resided was historically where the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist group that used violent demonstrations in the United States, were active. Also, as a region where the economy was based in industry, this area suffered one of the most

significant economic hardships with business closings and high unemployment in the wake of the September 11th attacks. As a recent immigrant, Marley seethed as he described his sense of covert racial injustice. He compared it to the overt form of racial prejudice as in Malaysia which was at least out in the open. But in the United States, he saw it as a hidden force which people did not speak of.

I can almost smell the hate in the air. You know. I can sense it. I can smell it. I can see it, and it really, really upsets me that I have to bow down and just suck it all in, and just abstain from saying my mind, what's on my mind. Because that's not me. Because I have to. I am 32. I have 2 kids who will face that eventually. They are probably facing that right now. You know?

Neighborhood violence was also a common barrier which thwarted the father's sense of control over their lives. With unemployment being high, and drug use rampant, many of the youth population were involved in gangs. Gang rivalries were common among the streets. Cutlass, 38, compares his surroundings while he was going through high school to the more peaceful conditions of his more recent community. To him, the quietness is shocking to a point of disbelief in contrast to the sounds of firearms in his previous neighborhood.

It was tough up in there man. Fighting, drugs, drinking, gang banging, crap. It was just tough. It was on 28th street. Tough man. People that come past a tough ass town that's gangbanging and shooting. . . People over here is cool right, tough and shit. I mean, you know man, you know

that thing man, people out here getting drunk. Guys out here pulling there damn guns and shit on people, you could come down to this town where it is all quiet and peaceful. It's just a totally different...its just fucking [different] yeah [it's a shock]. I never ever...I fucking came down here and I was like what. Damn its so quiet up in here...these people here. And then up there it tat, tat, tat, tat...all fucking night long.

Lack of employment opportunity was another structural barrier. As convicted offenders, these fathers had minimal chances of being hired. Some weighed their options of starving without an income or omitting their criminal record from their applications for work. It was not surprising that many chose the latter of the two options. Despite the risk of being found out and fired later on, these fathers saw working as the least they could do, even if they had to lie to do it.

Charles, 43, father of two grown children, was convicted of multiple attempts driving with a suspended license. When asked whether he had ever felt left out of the work world, he responded indignantly.

Yes, I'm a convicted felon. If you're a convicted felon some people don't even take your applications. No matter what you are. You know I'm a habitual traffic violator. I'm not an ax murderer. Applications say if you are convicted of a felony in the last 7 years what is it? If you write down that you got a felony they immediately shit-can ya. I believe. If you lie and say you ain't, as soon as they find out, that is grounds to fire you. So you're damned if you do and damned if you don't.

This lack of employment opportunity left many fathers feeling trapped between two condemning choices. Either they lied in order to gain temporary employment or they answered the check box truthfully and were denied work. Their criminal records took much control out of these fathers' hands.

Another prominent structural barrier for these fathers was the struggle for custody and visitation rights with their children. Fathers appeared in courts for custody hearings. Many of them were familiar with the court's procedures and spoke about the judges by name. Some fathers even knew enough information about the personalities of individual judges to predict their decisions and offer advice to each other about what worked or did not for a given judge. Judges frequently ruled against the fathers if there were any outstanding child support payments. At times, the lack of contact left the fathers feeling defeated and that the fight to be a good father was a helpless cause. Lombardo was previously mentioned above as he displayed a promising sense of fathering responsibility. However, as he reflected on his overall accomplishments, the disheartening reality of his lost custody crept in.

Givin' my circumstances right now, I would say I have accomplished nothing really well as a father. Don't none of my kids live with me. Don't have custody of none of my kids. So probably nothing right now... In the last year my greatest accomplishment as a dad has been to call Jake. I've talked to him, I've bought him stuff. There's not really much I can say. Ain't been too good of a father.

3.3.6 Contextual Support Factors

There were contextual and structural conditions that participants reported were helpful in making a positive change in their lives. These factors and conditions included education, extra curricular activities, discipline practiced in the military, job training, continuous employment, earning a living through legal means, and group support. All these factors were descriptive of external circumstances, outside of the fathers' microcosm, which shaped their story path.

Chris, 21, attended a school where there was much illicit and high-risk behavior. He described how the availability of extracurricular activities allowed him to choose an alternative path to deviance. Chris first described his initial school environment growing up.

I settled the most time when I was in high school for 4 years so I would say rough, very rough. A lot of gang bangers, a lot of people standing on the street selling marijuana, crack and stuff, a lot of crack houses, gun shots at night, bad fuse, busting out windows, breaking into houses. It was bad, bad neighborhood, but I've grown adapted to it all through my life so it didn't bother me too much.

When asked how he managed to separate from that environment, Chris attributed his divergence to the role models he grew up around, various roles and positions he held in school-sanctioned organizations, and higher education.

I was never raised that way for one, I never saw that from the people I looked up to so I didn't think that that was okay. I knew it was wrong

so I decided to get into sports, I was in sports since 5th grade, I ran track and football. Throughout high school I held a lot of student government positions, business club, honor society, just a lot of, newspaper stands, a lot of things to keep me busy, keep me off the streets.

I graduated of June of 1998 and a week later I went, came here to Purdue and took 13 credit hours in the summer. Yes, during summer of 98 in the Business Opportunity program. I got free credits, free dorm, free books, I went to school for free. It was great to be away from [town of origin], experiencing new things, get more friends and everything and start a college career and friends.

This revealed the process of how different aspects of Chris' context worked together to support his pro-social involvements. He grew up with people he respected, who showed him right from wrong. There were alternative activities in and around school which he could choose from. The diverse array of activities allowed him to explore his various interests and built his confidence areas in which he could excel. His extra-curricular activities occupied his time, and thus deterred him from more risky involvements. His string of school successes continued to his graduation and later pursuit of higher education, and contributed to his positive and adaptive view toward new experiences. Other fathers also reported that they gained a sense of control over their well-being through structures early on in life.

Boo, 23, told of how his relationship network helped him access employment opportunities from early on in life. Then in turn, his work helped him to earn the

money he needed.

I used to clean apartments with my grandparents, [university] apartments, the dorms or whatever. We used to clean the carpets and all that every summer. Ah hell I was like 9 or 10. You know I had little duties like carry the spray upstairs, carry the scrubbers, or the pads; got paid for it. Yeah I mean I was like major employment right there because I was young and needed money, so I did work with them. Then I got this chick, like a neighborhood sweetheart or whatever you call it, some chick I had a crush on, we got together and I started laying carpet with her father.

Like Boo, many fathers valued their work opportunities they were given. Whether it be through family members, or connections to a wider kinship network, fathers were able to draw on others' access to work as a valuable asset to establish their own employment.

3.3.7 Internal Barriers

These barriers are juxtaposed against the contextual barriers to agency. These barriers represent challenges stemming from within the person such as emotional reactions and states. Included here are mental health barriers and emotional struggles. Common conflicting emotions involved anger, shame, guilt, and hopelessness. These emotions immobilized some fathers who could not find an adaptive way to cope with their past. Fathers tended to broach these internal barriers after discussing persis-

tent contextual barriers. The contextual barriers tended to act as the backdrop or the catalyst of internal barriers. After Charles described his sense of being trapped and condemned by his criminal record, he forecasted how irate he would become with the snowball of employment barriers. He even foretold his augmented anger if employers attempted to intervene with what he alludes to as anger management counseling.

So when I get out of here and go back home I have to find work. I'm gonna be angry because I ain't goin' be able to get a job like I want to, when I want to. I'm gonna be angry because when I get a job these people gonna be takin' my money from me by sending me to some counseling I don't want to be at, don't need to be at. I'm just gonna be angry because of the whole system. I can never drive again. If they catch me drivin' again, they gave me 8 years. They suspended 2 of them, but I'm gonna be in the system for 8 years for drivin' a car. Not no wreck, not drunk.

The degree of anger built up inside of him was raging. Charles believed even professional attempts to temper the anger would only proliferate it. Some fathers like Charles also become angry with a righteously indignant belief that their offenses are not commensurate with their punishments. They believed their minor offenses should not warrant such severe consequence, such as an 8-year suspended license. Charles and fathers like him were not easily resigned to the limited and unsatisfying job pool. They refused to allow their anger built up from those unsatisfying jobs to

push them toward counseling. They generally refused such services as the sign of weakness. When employers required their attendance with the threat of dismissal, these fathers were angry over having their control taken away from them.

For a few fathers who are willing to undergo mental health treatment for anger issues, there may be promising glimpses of reduced symptoms. Lombardo was one father who chose to try the professional treatment route. An interviewer asked him whether it was difficult to make the decision to seek treatment. To that, he responded,

Up until a month ago I've just been on this medicine for probably a month. Not even that I went. Well, tomorrow is my two-week check-up with the doctor. So I've only been on it for two weeks. But up until two weeks ago, I just get so mad over the simplest little shit I want to break stuff, I want to throw stuff. I mean I still get mad but it's a different level. It's controlled.

Lombardo was willing to take medication. His case represented a minority of fathers who sought professional help to manage their anger or other affective breakdowns. He saw the difference before and after he took the medication. He believes that his medication placated some of his anger. He felt it tamed his outbursts.

Others who do not choose to seek treatment may face additional internal turmoil such as guilt or defeat from old habits and addictions that are hard to break. Some who choose not to or are not able to choose professional support are left to their own coping mechanisms. Many fathers used chemical substances

as a coping mechanism to escape from reality. However, when these fathers were incarcerated, they did not have ready access to substances. They could not rely upon their previous forms of substance-use coping while they were incarcerated. Thus, fathers were forced to soberly face the brutal blows of reality. Though difficult, this sobriety brought them a step closer to standing up to the tests of reality with their own strength. Marley, who immigrated to the United States with his ex-wife, felt the pressure from his family back in Malaysia, to improve his life quality in the United States. Marley described how he was plagued by guilt and shame from his family's disappointment in his marriage dissolution and non-advancement in the U.S.. The escalating distress over this family's attitude increased the tension within him. It became a challenge just to refrain from his impulses leading him to aggressively release the tensions on others.

But I just think- you have so much to offer you kids and yourself, but you have this stuff that keeps pulling you back. Stuff you can't get past and feel guilty for. You can learn to carry on and change things and that's more than a lot of people have gone through. And my coping mechanism has been abruptly taken away from me. My drink. My marijuana has [been] taken away from me. I have to deal with this soberly. You know and I can't... Sometimes I feel like a walking time bomb. You know. Just the other day I had this over compulsion just to elbow this guy right in the temple. You know. Just hurt him real bad. Cause he pissed me off real bad here... It feels like I'm such a

disappointment to my family man. I was supposed to be- that was suppose to be it for me- coming here [to the U.S.] and a chance to make a better life for myself. Stop being a black sheep of the family damn it. You know. Wake up. You know. School didn't work out. Okay. That's one down. I'm divorced. My family's strictly Catholic. My sisters just absolutely do not believe in divorce. So, it's like I told her I was getting divorced and she's like why [Marley] why? You can't do that.

Marley described his fluctuating emotional process when left by himself. He started with a pep-talk, encouraging himself that he possessed valuables to offer his children. But soon, he turned to sulk with self pity over his “coping mechanism” of alcohol and drugs which were “abruptly taken away” from him. He slipped into momentary helplessness in feeling he “can't” deal with his life soberly. From there, he seethed with the ticking tension within, where he compared himself to a “walking time bomb.” Marley leaked out some of the tension in his description of his fantasy of violence. No sooner, he was struck down with remorse over lost opportunities to improve himself in the new country, and shame over his ended marriage and broken religious values. This small excerpt from Marley's thoughts illustrated the complexities and destructive power of internal emotional barriers. These barriers can work against the fathers, slowly stripping them of their sense of agency to convince them of a defeated state.

3.3.8 Internal Strengths

At the same time, fathers also exhibited internal sources of strength. Mainly, these could be seen in their positive outlook amidst situations that otherwise would not look in their favor. Fathers would see their challenges through matter-of-fact lenses. Yet they appraised the situation in the most favorable light as if to maximize their sense of control or influence over the challenge. Ronald, described his attitude toward his children's mothers when they threatened to take away his custody.

I ain't really worried about [a complicated custody battle] as long as I get them. As long as I get my kids. I'll be fine with both of them at the same time. That ain't no problem. I'm gonna have drama with both of them till my kids are 18, period. They ain't going to keep my kids from me. They're gonna let me have them any time I want. If I want them seven days a week or go over there or go to their house, that's the way it's going to be. They're not going to be controlling like that.

Even though his children's mothers posed a threat to Ronald's involvement with his children, he knew there would be complications in dealing with them and was willing to accept that for as long as his children were minors. He was not disconcerted by the obstacles but was focused intently on keeping his time with his children and exercising his will in the process.

There were other relationships and circumstances that demonstrated fathers' positive outlook. Derek, 33, talked about his experience in a work release program where he worked within a closely knit community. He did not complain about his

work nor the negative attitudes of community members toward him. Instead, he saw the program for its value as an opportunity to shorten his sentence and made the most out of the situation.

The deal was they give you 3 days good time for every one day I did, so one month counted as 3 months. Well I did that for $3\frac{1}{2}$ months and I busted my ass even though you didn't get paid. I just was something to do, make the days go faster, so I busted my ass and this girl Nora kinda mentioned my name to this guy, Eugene Tucker, who was like my second dad.

This guy was cool as hell I worked for him for a year at the work camp. And he wound up picking me. His crews- all crews were 10 man crews and you just see the deal with the camp was they had really good food at first. That was like the lure to make you come there, the good time and the food. Towards the end, they didn't have good food and he winded up hand picking me for his little 5 man crew as the carpentry crew and we went all over that northern part of the state.

We rebuilt a school, we did churches, we rebuilt probably 8, 9 churches from probably head to toe. I mean went in gutted the inside of them and made them look just like they did before historically. We had little old ladies that like "Oh we have convicts in our town, oh my God." And then by the time we left, they were feeding us big turkey dinners on pewter plates with candles. They loved us. They were like our grandparents

these 70 and 80 year old ladies. They fell in love with us.

Derek chose to put in his best behavior in the situation he was handed. Initially, community members held preconceived notions against him and others in the work release program. By the time he completed his work there, Derek won the hearts of those community members. He told this account of the community relations' progression with such humor that it was evident he harbored no resentment against those who may have met him with prejudice. Though these fathers were challenged with biases from various sources, from custody assignments to wider injustices, they were able to meet the challenges with their internal strengths.

3.3.9 Relational Barriers to Agency

Family members such as parents and partners often posed unhelpful challenges to these fathers' sense of agency. Many of them could not provide support to fathers because they had their own challenges to deal with. Some of the fathers were surrounded by family members who did not fair any better than they did. Some fathers had parents who were both incarcerated. Keith, 41, was fortunate enough to grow up under his grandmother's care after his parents were both incarcerated for substance abuse. He was close to his grandmother. He grieved the loss at her death. His separation from his beloved guardian led to him to reflect on regrets and review his relationships with other family members as well.

I had the guidance and refused to take it. I was still searching. I still had too many questions that weren't answered. And knowing the

love that she had for me it still wasn't the love that I was looking for. There's no way in living hell that I would say that that woman did not love me with all of her heart. It doesn't compare. Now almost 25 years old, I still don't talk to my mother. My dad's back in prison. My younger brother's in prison now for 40 years. I don't know. It seems like any comfort I have leaves, so I have to find comfort in myself. Now I just feel like I walk around with a big huge heart. I have no one to give it to. I have no one that understands what I go through. Then it hurts to try to tell people. You feel like you're just alone. Have the biggest family in this town. It's been in the newspapers and everything, but for me to say that I can pick up the phone and call anybody when I need to talk to someone, I can't do that. It's like it's a big competition, and now that that one anchor that everyone had is gone, it's like the whole foundation's fallen.

After listing possible sources of relational support and comfort, Keith quickly exhausted his choices of immediate family members. His mother was emotionally cut off from him. His father and brother were both in prison. He reluctantly concluded that the only person he could rely on for comfort was himself. However, he still felt the sting of emptiness, especially in light of having a large-family reputation.

When asked how his relationship with his mother progressed, Keith explained his deeper repugnance at seeing her after his grandmother passed.

It sounds bad, but I had more animosity seeing my mother hold my

child than anything. It took me a while to understand it, but it all stemmed from, if you can hold this baby with this much love, why was it so hard for you to hold me? Why was it so hard to you to take the same patience and time? Same things that you brought into this world.' And then I stopped talking to my mother again because of that. Still all these questions in my head and no answers, and no one was trying to answer them.

Upon seeing his mother so lovingly holding her infant grandchild, Keith was reminded of her absence in his childhood. His mother gave him up to his grandmother's care while she passed in and out of the prison system. He felt deprived of the affection he saw her capable of. His welled-up resentment and unanswered questions became a blockade for further restoration of their relationship. Keith, like many other fathers made the attempt at bridging gaps in his relational network. However, his attempt was blocked by unresolved internal emotional processes.

These relational barriers detract from the sense of extended family cohesiveness. Fathers in Keith's situation felt that if he needed to, he could not call upon a safety network of caring people. Instead, Keith and others like him found that there was more unresolved confusion and bitter animosity that accompanied his attempt at closeness. Fortunately, this widespread degree of family disconnect was a rarer form of relational barriers. More commonly, relational cutoffs occurred between romantic partners.

Non-residential partners or former partners more commonly became barriers to fathers' agency. Inconsistent and unpredictable child access arrangements contributed to the difficulty for fathers to stay consistently involved. Even though many fathers attempted to stay actively involved in their children's lives, many met the challenges of non-residential fathering. They became discouraged after repeated experiences with unpredictable visitation arrangements. Joe, 41, married his first wife when she became pregnant with their eldest son. Joe and his wife divorced after he found her cheating on him. Although somewhat extreme, Joe's ex-wife's behaviors were an illustrative example of how challenging their children's mothers could be to deal with.

It was terrible. She would take him to see doctors like a hypochondriac- had him seeing a psychologist, going to the doctor several times a month; had him on child laxatives. When he would come visit with me, he would inevitably poop his pants and one or two times. It seemed to get more and more aggravating. And that didn't help our relationship any. And then she would call and say 'I got to come and pick him up early or can you have him back here or take him over there,' 'I've got plans for him, but you are going to have to take him.' It was just one thing right after another. It was not a good time for Ryan and not a good time for me.

She wouldn't hardly give me any time with him and when I had him she wanted to interfere with the time that we were together. It would seem to change monthly. Sometimes I would get him on the weekends

that I'm suppose to get him and occasionally I would see him once in the middle or on a Wednesday or a Thursday or something. A special time I would ask for him. But it was never consistent. She would have reasons or times to change or something would come up. I would be luck to see him 4 days or 5 days out of the month. So it wasn't very consistent at all.

Other partners presented barriers as they managed the finances to the dissatisfaction of the fathers. Fathers often aspired to live out traditional gender roles of male bread-winner, female housewife. They entrusted their partners to spend their pay checks. During times they were incarcerated, many fathers gave a significant portion of their funds, for their current partner's care and pleasure. This typically signified his trust and security in their relationship or his hopes for its continuation. Until they broke up, Danny entrusted his partner with spending their finances while he worked. Finances became a common source of conflict after he felt that too much of it was disappearing. He concluded she was not trustworthy.

I was working 12-hour shifts 6, 7 days a week. I ended up not having nothing for someone who was bringing home \$600 a week. I never had no money to buy me any lunch while I was at work. I ask her 'where's all the money?' 'Well, I'm taking care of the bills just don't you worry about it.' Well we really didn't have no bills. So every time I'd mention where all then money went it started a big old argument. I just quit letting her pick up my check and I picked it up myself. I got tired of

not ever having nothing. There was never no trust. Excuse the phrase but you can't turn a whore into a housewife. I guess at that time that's what I was trying to do. She lost her virginity on a bet. So I should have known then.

Other fathers shared a similar suspicion of their former partners. This distrust created a relational barrier that would sabotage his consistency of child support responsibilities. Marley explained his decision to discontinue his court-ordered child support payments.

I paid for a while and then I quit. Just about every year I'd send some money and then I'd quit or I'd go to jail, and I wouldn't be able to. It's like at the end. I knew what was going on in her personal life with her boyfriend. A lot of the money was being spent on either bonding him out of jail, for beating her up, or their little parties. I wasn't about to finance parties for them, so I totally quit paying, period. When she called to tell me the girls needed something I'd go out and buy it. I'd take it to them. I cut off the money.

Marley acknowledged that some inconsistency in his child support payments were due to his incarceration. Both incarceration and child support were legally imposed on him but incarceration led to lack of work, which led to lack of income, and precluded his payment of child support. Although being incarcerated pulled him off-course from his financial responsibilities as a father, it did not keep him off-course. He perceived that his child support paid for illegitimate expenses such as his child's

mother's boyfriend's bond, supplying the fuel (drugs or alcohol) for the boyfriend's violence, covering him with the resulting medical expenses, and the entertainment for the adults. Marley assured the interviewer that he would supply the items to meet his daughter's needs- just not the intermediary means that could be ill-used. This perception that child support money was wasted on inappropriate adult expenses became a common reason that fathers cited for withholding child support payments. As a result of not paying, some fathers were incarcerated. However, as previously mentioned, when they were previously incarcerated at a non work-release facility, they did not have an income. In that case, fathers often had no means to make child support payments. This cycle between unpaid child support and incarceration is common and a self perpetuating problem.

Typical relational barriers included but were not limited to disconnect with parents, siblings, and partners or conflict with former partners. The unresolved conflicts in these relationships led to consequences such as emotional cut-off from a family support network, loneliness, financial instability, unpaid child support, and/or further incarceration. Coupled with perceived structural and internal barriers, relational barriers could result in barriers that persistently and continuously emerge to frustrate men's efforts to be good fathers.

3.3.10 Relational Supports

Family relationships were a source of support for many fathers who had close connections to their family members. Some family members served as role models

from which fathers could gather desire and direction for change. Others served as added momentum for the men, especially valued family members who reinforced their will for self improvement. Trent, 25, took the effort to describe how his first partner, and mother of his first child affirmed his desire for work and skill improvement.

Robyn thinks it's a good thing that I want to [join the military] because it will better myself and education, work experience and being at like a technical job. I want to serve my country also and they just don't want me to be away from the kids is the big thing. I don't want to be away from them, but if it's going to better myself then yeah I'll do it. Because they both know that if I want to do something I'm going to do it no matter what.

Trent made clear his strong will to join the military that seemingly none could dissuade. Though he presented as assured of himself, he still pointed out the person who affirmed and agreed with his goals. At the time of interview, Trent was married and had other children with his current wife. Yet still, the woman who he seemed to draw support for his goal was his first and former partner, who was the mother of his first child. In a life history interview where he was free to tell his story in any way that suited him, he could have easily left out the detail that it was his former partner who agreed with his self-improvement goals. The effort that it took to note her input suggested that her impact on him was more far-reaching than just a voice from his past. For fathers who had multiple partners by the time of interview, it was

common for them to give voice to their partners' impact on them, whether positive or negative in valence and regardless of whether that partner was from a former or current relationship.

Ronald, 24 also gave a positive account of his partner's influence on him. She is his third partner and they had one infant daughter together at the time of the interview. Ronald talked about the contrast of his current partner's positive impact as opposed to his former partner's lack, the mother of his eight-year old son.

This girl I'm with now, she's got her shit together, going to school, church every week. Got me doing good, gonna make me keep doing good when I get out. I think she is a better person for me. She's into my kids, so that's a good thing.

Although many fathers mentioned their former partners or children's mothers as a source of drama and custody trouble, some partners, like Ronald's current partner were a source of support and strength for their self betterment. For fathers like Ronald who viewed their partners as a positive influence, they spoke of their partners as a force that propelled him to be a better version of himself. Such partners even gave fathers hope that he could maintain his positive changes after incarceration, upon his re-integration process. It was clear that partner relationships, whether previous or current, had the potential to impact fathers.

This third section described the contextual, internal, and relational barriers and supportive factors which impact incarcerated fathers. Contextual barriers included racial prejudice, unstable employment or unemployment, child custody

challenges. Contextual support factors included education, alternative activities, military discipline, employment, and access to employment. Internal barriers included anger, unbridled dysfunctional coping mechanisms, and hopelessness. Internal strengths commonly took the form of a positive outlook on contextual and relational challenges. Relational barriers occurred in fathers' relationships with their families of origin, their former partners and current partners. Although fathers were entangled in complicated relationships with partners, some also found reinforcement to better themselves through their relationships with their partners.

In this third section, I discussed ways that the incarcerated fathers of this study offered a unique perspective on agency. They made poor choices and accounted for a criminal past in their present self concepts. They needed witnesses to share hope in their self-improvement capacity, and they faced compounded barriers which limited their set of choices. As incarcerated individuals, these fathers were already absent for large portions of their children's development and family life. Their limited set of choices added to the challenges that thwarted fathers' efforts to be agentic and reintegrate into family life. In the forth section of the findings present how these incarcerated fathers used their agency, with an emphasis on agentic choices that led to improved functioning.

3.4 Incarcerated Fathers' Use of Agency

In the first section of the findings, I described how the fathers in this study possessed both normative perspectives and and perspectives on personal agency in

light of their high risk contexts. In the second section, I discussed typical barriers to their agency. This section tells of their use of agency in their narratives. First, use of agency can be seen through fathers' efforts to compensate for past mistakes. Second, fathers used agency when they anticipated and made plans to address challenges upon their return home from work-release. Third, they also proved to be extremely adaptable in difficult circumstances, making the best out of what they had. Fourth, I describe the accomplishments fathers attained through their use of agency. Finally, I reflect on how fathers took initiatives to break dysfunctional patterns in their families.

3.4.1 Compensating for Past Mistakes

These fathers developed a consciousness of their past mistakes and some tried to right the wrongs. They acknowledged that their personal choices to get high, get drunk, get rich off of drugs, or keep the company of those who did led to their incarceration. This personal sense of control shows that many fathers took responsibility for their current circumstance. By taking responsibility, they acknowledge they have made mistakes in their past. Thus, their past mistakes must be accounted for in their current and future choices. Lombardo, 30, confessed that in his past, he used to be more concerned about drinking than making child support payments. He explained how he compensated for his inconsistencies to provide child support payments for his 2 biological children.

I was way, way, way, way behind because up to a year ago I had my

head up my ass and I just wasn't doin' stuff like a person should, so I got way behind. I was looking at jail time for that when I got in trouble for this, so like I said just kickin' some old habits and getting' in here was a good thing. Do you have arrearages still? Yeah. I don't know for how long. Are you paying them? Yeah. I have raised my- the payment on the arrears I raised that on my own through my company. I have my child support taken out of my check before I even get it which makes it nice. But the court ordered me to pay \$15 back and I had them raise it to 25 a week just because I can.

Although he was not mandated to, Lombardo asked to increase his child support payments by two-thirds. In this situation, the courts had control over his finances by ordering him to pay. But by volunteering to surpass the court's expectations, he asserted his own choice. Thus, he regained some control and in the last sentence of his quote, one can sense his pride over the fact that he was the agent capable of setting his own payment amount. His agency was regained by making the court accept his will.

3.4.2 Anticipating and Addressing Post-Incarceration Challenges

In the study, interviewers asked fathers what they expected to be the biggest challenges after they left the work-release program. Fathers' responses varied by the level of control they felt they could exercise. A small portion expressed self-defeated attitudes that they knew [all hell would break loose] no matter what they

did. Others were more [uncertain], not knowing what to expect upon their return. Still others showed keen perception of areas of personal challenge and discussed plans to address those challenges.

Marley, who immigrated to the U.S. from Malaysia, anticipated a range of difficulties with his environment, relationships, and old habits. He saw his release from work-release as “starting over.” To him, all of the new beginning was a big challenge.

The only thing I have is clothes. I don't have my house that I used to have. I don't have anything, but that is probably a good thing. I don't need to go back to my old ways. I want to be with my wife. Me and her have talked about it, it's gonna be hard, It's gonna be weird. Because we were split up for a while and all that behind us now we're trying to, it's like we're startin' over. So I figure, we're startin' completely over. We'll have to get an apartment. It's gonna be rough getting used to freedom again. That's going to be the biggest challenge. And keeping the respect of my parents and my family that I got for me now. I got a lot of bright moments. I can't go back to drinkin'. I can't go back to drugs. I got to stay on my medication. That's one big thing. So lots of stuff. Lots of challenges. Yeah everythings a challenge right now. Well you take it a step at a time. That's all I can do.

Although Marley began explaining what he saw in his new beginning as limitations, he quickly reframed the limitation in a positive light. Even though he briefly

lamented the lack of his old house, he recognized that his previous environment might induce old habits he wanted to rid himself of. He focused instead on his desires, which was a closer relationship with his wife in a fresh new setting. In optimistic remembrance of his life's positive times and the respect he wished to maintain, Marley declared his conviction that he was going to resist alcohol and drugs. His plan to do this was to consistently take his medication. His strategy was to break down the size of the challenge and take it "one step at a time." This strategy of breaking down a tough challenge gave fathers a taste of what they could reasonably handle.

Other fathers anticipated that a substantial challenge upon release would be whether and with what means they would pay child support. Many fathers became stuck on the notion that their payments were being spent on inappropriate adult uses. Thus, some did not pay child support. However, some fathers were able to mentally overcome this barrier. Jake, 32, was a father of two children and was separated from his children's mother. He voiced his attitude toward paying child support.

I think it's very important even though I have a very bad track record of child support I do think that it's very important. I also think that a guy that pays child support shouldn't worry about where the money goes because it's her money to do whatever and if she wants to waste it spend it on Joe that's there business because they do take care of the kids on a 24 hours basis. I know that's a big part. I'm on work release

and there's a lot of guys that come in there that's, what's here most of all is what well "she's not using it on the kids I'm not paying." Well she's used her money on the kids. So [child support money] is pretty much her money to spend however. That's a big problem with guys, how the moneys being spent.

Jake was not blind to the reason why some fathers in work-release refused to pay child support. He knew that the money coming from his pocket might be spent on his children's mother for her personal use. However, he understood that her money was already being spent on the children. So in the long run, their expenses would be balanced. Fathers like Jake were able to make sense of theirs' and others' challenges in a wider context. They saw more than just their own perspectives. They could situate their challenges in an understanding that partner, parents, siblings, cousins and other family members around them had limits in their choices as well. This more balanced consideration of theirs' and others' choices allowed fathers to move beyond the common victim mentality that what was unfair was only done to them.

3.4.3 Adaptability and Persistence

Fathers who were able to overcome their challenges often showed adaptable qualities. They were flexible in what means they would use to meet their desires or needs. Work and school were two spheres where the themes of adapting and persisting occurred. Many fathers took on jobs and learned new skills to adapt to work requirements. Fathers often worked many different jobs until they found one

where they could continue or excel. Once they set their minds on a task, these fathers were persistent in finding a way to carry out their will. They could even adapt their persuasion to work around authority or policies.

Rusty, 36, recounted his extensive work history, beginning with his first job at the early age of 8. He tells about the variety of setbacks on his jobs and the next job he would attempt.

I actually had my first job when I was about 8. You know where the Cooler Keg is. It's a little bar and it has a restaurant in it and every weekend I come up there and I trimmed all the grass and picked up all the trash around the Cooler Keg and I had my choice they'd either give me \$5 or I could have a big tenderloin and breaded mushrooms and a coke. After my parents got divorced we lived over on Alabama street for a while that's not on there. (Yeah there's a couple of moves in here.) Bunch of them. The guy who owned the houses on either side of us and the one back behind us. He paid me \$17 a week to mow his 3 houses lawns for him and I actually took that \$17 a week and opened up a savings account with it I was about 10 or 11 something like that. Then after that I was put into the children's homes for a while. No I worked for the Journal and Courier for a while before that. I had a paper route with the journal and courier. That didn't last too long I wasn't a very good paper deliverer. I was too easily distracted that early in the morning. I would miss houses. I did hit and miss construction jobs. Some fast food

restaurants, I worked for McDonald's for awhile and Taco Bell. Then in 98 I met Steve and I started learning how to lay carpet and I don't know I've loved doing it. It's a very fulfilling form of work to me. It's hard. I've done destroyed one of my knees in the process of doing it, but I enjoy it. Hopefully it's something I can teach my kids how to do and pass down to them because I'm building a business out of it. I've got over \$15,000 worth of tools already. It's going to be a life for me and my family.

Although Rusty's first job at the bar and restaurant was not the one which he fell in love with, he found another in neighborhood lawn care. Although there were work continuity setbacks from moving, and his parents divorcing, he continued to work. It was not his third job working for news delivery, nor his fourth job working in fast food chains that kept him in work either. But he persisted in working and finally landed a job that he enjoyed. He learned new skills that he even hoped to pass down to his children. This ethic of persistent work and search for enjoyment in work was a common theme.

This persistence in obtaining what satisfies him also shows up in Rusty's school career. He was bored in high school and skipped classes. However, he became more serious about moving through school when it came to taking tests. Rusty described how he convinced school authorities to allow him to take his GED exams on short notice.

So when I found out I was going to prison and I found out I could get

this time cap because at that time they offered a 3 month time cap for getting your GED. I went up to Mary Alice up at the jail. I said, "Look I want to get my GED." She said "Ok you need to take these courses and study books." I said, "No I don't." She says, "Yes you do, we have to test you." I said "Well when do you give your next test?" She says "In 2 weeks." I said "well you got 2 weeks to test me because I want to take that test when it comes up again." She says "But you can't do that." I said "Look I can either take here with you and you all can get the credit and the funding from the state for me taking the test with you or I can just say screw you and I can wait until I get to prison." I said "And then the schools at the prison can get that funding and everything." She says "We'll put you down for the test." Yep, they got credit and I got my GED. I was only like a 15% below getting an honor roll GED and that's without doing any studying and that's being out of school for all those years. See that's been a lot of my problem is I get bored too easy and I try to find things to occupy my time.

Rusty was able to see the common interests that the school had with him. If he took the GED at his school and passed, his school would get the credit and ultimate benefit from achievement-based incentives for government funding. He used this reasoning to emphasize what the school had to gain by allowing him to take the GED at the next date. Rusty adapted his wishes and framed it in a manner aligned with the school's goals to gain funding. Despite being told he could not take the test

in two short weeks, he persisted in his persuasive efforts until he obtained permission to take the test. Instead of working against the school system, he worked adaptively with it. He successfully convinced the test administrator at the school who registered him for the exam. His adaptability and persistence helped him obtain his GED certification prior to beginning his prison sentence.

Rusty was a paragon for using agency through adaptive and persistent means from an early school age. I read many fathers' narratives like his, where from an early age, they pursued desires to learn, understand the world, and search for a satisfying well-matched job. Fathers tirelessly persisted through work and did not hesitate to switch jobs if one was unsatisfying. They told of variety and fairly continuous work histories. Fathers in this study typically worked a variety of manual labor jobs or service-sector jobs with low income and none to minimal other benefits. Manual labor work mentioned included manufacturing assembly lines, iron mills, construction, carpentry, and waste management. Service sector jobs included work at lower end department stores, news stands, telemarketing, fast food chains, or night clubs. A few stayed home to provide childcare while sharing expenses with his partner or a friend. Also, a few fathers worked in the entertainment industry at some point as disc jockeys. Fathers who had a continuous work history while not incarcerated were characterized by their flexible and adaptable choices of work.

Adaptability and persistence were also seen in the family context. Many fathers who felt limited by their short visitation passes found alternative means to seeing their children. If they had the social support to do so, fathers called upon the favors from parents or partners to bring their children to them. Although not

legal nor illegal, fathers squeezed in extra time during their work days to see their children if someone would bring them by. They arranged run-ins with their children at public work spaces such as the department store where a father stocked merchandise or at the fast-food restaurant where he worked. Often when they had multiple non-residential children with different mothers, the children resided at different locations. This required even more adaptability for fathers to see all of them. Lombardo was separated from his first son because he served abroad in the military during his son's earlier developmental years. He and his son's mother then divorced upon his return. He also had two other step children from his second marriage. Lombardo's goal was to reconnect with his son. He took adaptable and creative routes to fit in small pockets of time as he could. He talked about how he spent his time during his bi-weekly 4-hour pass.

Yeah if James is at my mom and dads, I try to schedule my passing when they are going to have him and I try to schedule when Jordan is going to have Caleb and we can always go see Alison so Jordan having her is really no problem. I try to get them all together so I go pick up Jordan and Caleb, run by grab Alison on the way out to West Point and stop at mom and dad's to see Jake. But usually when we're earlier, I'll hop on the 4-wheeler. I used to jump on there and have him ride behind me and hold onto me. Now I let James drive. It's generally just hang out. But they all hang out together. Yeah they all get along good. They just play games and stuff. It's hard to do anything really significant in

what 2 hours that I end up having by the time everything got together before I had to leave. But we will sit down and have dinner or something. Then it's rush around and play a little bit, have fun.

It was important for Lombardo that he could gather all his children together during visitation times. Lombardo arranged his departure timing from the work-release facility so that it coincided with the most convenient locations to see and pick up his kids en route. He even used transportation time as an eventful time spent with his son, James. This tradition fit James developmentally as well. When his son was younger, Lombardo drove with his son close behind. Now that his son is grown up, he allows his son to take on the driving. He made riding the 4-wheeler time that he and James could hang out. That way, by the time they arrived at home, the little remaining time they did have could be spent on a shared meal and some more fun. He realized that his time with his children was short, but he made the most out of it. While incarcerated and on work release, fathers who persisted to be involved with their children found adaptive ways around their limited freedoms.

3.4.4 Accomplishments

McAdams' (2001) coding manual said that it was not enough to code for status and victory simply if participants had reached a personal goal. They needed to be recognized by peers and others for obtaining a coveted status. I adapted the status/victory code to include times when fathers perceived that they had earned a higher status or better accomplished an endeavor in comparison to their peer-reference

group of low income and/ or incarcerated fathers or in comparison to their previous generation of family members. In the findings on their accomplishments, I also incorporated times when fathers felt proud of how they overcame difficult obstacles.

Though they were limited in the scope and level of recognition afforded to them, fathers nonetheless boasted about accomplishments they were proud of. Cutlass, 38, was a father of adolescent twin boys. He identified one partner, who is his son's mother. When asked to reflect on his accomplishments as a father, he paraded his pride over resistance against all kinds of drugs.

Ahh...{laughs} Coming out of Gary, coming past the damn the projects and coming out of that damn town of Gary. And dope and drugs. I don't fucking puff on drugs, that is the very top thing. I don't smoke period. And no drugs and I am very proud. Aye...I am very damn proud about that. I don't puff on shit. No drugs, no cocaine, no shit. I drinks though, but drugs and shit, no. I am very damn proud of that. I am just happy to be and proud to be a damn good parent. I will take care of them damn kids too. That's it. Fucking drugs is gone from me. I don't even touch drugs. I am very damn proud of that...that is my top thing...that goddamn dope and shit. I don't smoke herb, no shit. I just drink and I am trying to quit that.

In his response to a question specific to his accomplishments as a father, Cutlass did not mention more than two sentences about his children. Instead, he marveled in his drug-free status, counting his abstinence from each type of drug which comes

to mind. Generally, pride for overcoming an obstacle can be anticipated to be proportionate with the level of perceived challenge. With such pride at his overcoming of drug use, one can only imagine the high level of pressures he felt to be involved with drugs and the challenge it was to stand up to those pressures. For fathers like Cutlass, his pride shows that one of the greatest challenges and joys to fatherhood is overcoming the temptation for drug use.

Other fathers prided themselves in their accomplishments at work. Derek, 37, was chosen to be part of a 5-man crew to rebuild community facilities. A man who managed the program, who Derek saw as a second father chose him out of a 10-man crew. He had taken note of Derek's hard work chopping lumber without being paid for it. Derek worked with other incarcerated men on community restoration projects. He described the change in elderly women's attitudes toward the group during their few weeks of work.

He wined up hand picking me for his little 5 man crew as the carpentry crew and we went all over that northern part of the state. We rebuilt a school, we did churches, we rebuilt probably 8, 9 churches from probably head to toe. I mean went in gutted the inside of them and made them look just like they did before historically. We had little old ladies that like "Oh we have convicts in our town, oh my God!" And then by the time we left they were feeding us big turkey dinners on pewter plates with candles. They loved us; they were like our grandparents- these 70 and 80 year old ladies. They fell in love with us.

Derek was proud to be one of a selected group of individuals to be chosen for the community restoration job. According to Derek, he and the group of “convicts” were initially met with anxiety-ridden attitudes. They worked on multiple structures which seemed to be valued historically. By the end of the work camp, he narrates that he won his way into the hearts of skeptical community members. Derek showed that he was able to use his work skills to not only be chosen for an honorable reputation, but also win initially un-seeming relationships.

Rusty also earned recognition for his workplace accomplishments. He was hired at Burger King for less than three weeks when he was offered an assistant management position. After a week’s worth of computer training, he rotated to work multiple positions in the business. He obtained “pins” which represented his successful mastery of each position. He gauged his knowledge and skill set as greater than to most of the people working leadership positions.

I knew more about the business than half the regular managers did. I got my drive through pin, which I don’t know if you ever worked fast food before, but different positions you can earn pins to show that you’ve mastered that position and usually it takes 3 to 6 months to earn one. I had my drive through pin in less than a month and that’s one of the hardest ones to get. Especially since at Burger King, the one that I worked at it’s just not one position. When you work the drive thru there you’re running 3 positions at once. Yeah that kept me occupied that kept me on my toe and I enjoyed that. It kept me thinking, that’s

what I like.

Rusty was most proud of his drive through position pin as it was the most difficult to achieve of all the positions. When working the drive-through shift, he enjoyed the rewards of the relatively stimulating work environment as he managed to handle multiple positions' tasks.

Following their proudest accomplishments, these fathers did not collect an accompanying monetary award. They were not invited to give an acceptance speech at an elegant banquet. Nor were their images contracted for marketing campaigns. What they held in highest esteem, may even have slipped unnoticed by most of society. Many would dismiss his feats of drug-abstinence as "to be expected." Some might scoff at fathers' earned status at fast-food restaurants as juvenile or menial jobs and thus not noteworthy. Nonetheless, fathers were proud of their accomplishments when they overcame a perceived challenge. Without a challenge, they might not consider the event as significant. These fathers shared a sense of pride for overcoming on varying levels of challenge. They did not degrade their accomplishments. If anything, they exaggerated their elevated standing in comparison to others. These fathers did what they could to achieve and valued their accomplishments commensurate with the perceived difficulty in overcoming.

3.4.5 Breaking Patterns of Poor Choices

Fathers attempted to break patterns as they became aware of pitfalls. For many fathers, the time that they spent incarcerated was a reflective time. Many

realized how important their children and families were to them. With this realization, the objects of their deviant acts seemed to shift while incarcerated. Prior to incarceration, fathers may have conspired with the underground economy on how to use or sell illicit substances. As shown above, during their incarceration, many fathers plotted with their families on how to beat the court system to spend more time with their children.

Ben, 41, was one of the more reserved participants in the interviews. He was very reluctant and revealed limited insights about his former marriage and past mistakes with his children. He was more eager to speak about his present changes than the past.

Yea you do a lot of screwing up when you're doing, living that lifestyle [doing drugs and alcohol]. It's not the evil element that was running my life before. It's not running my life anymore and that's changed everything. And when you're around drugs and people are breaking the law and selling drugs it's just not the way you should live. So is it more sort of maybe, you know how some people sort of developmentally they get to a point where they say, you know what, this is just not working for me anymore? It took me to go to prison. You don't have your freedom, your family. You're being told what to do by some people that would never tell you what to do in the real world. You eat what they [tell you to]. Yea, but I needed to do that. Really I can say I'm not bitter about it.

Ben found prison to be a catalyst for his life change. He recalled his previous lifestyle chasing after drugs. He said that for some people, they just developmentally aged out of their drug habits when they realized it was not working for them. But for himself, he saw prison as what changed him. He lost control over his agency in prison, where choices were taken away and decisions on even what to eat were already made for him. Ben ended up appreciating that time when he lost his freedom and family. He viewed his prison experience as necessary for his change. Like Ben, it took many fathers losing their freedom to realize their priorities in their family relationships looking forward to regained freedom.

Fathers also broke negative patterns when they attempted to revisit and correct patterns of wrongs done to them. They also looked forward and spouted personal philosophies that illustrated their understandings. They hoped to pass down many of their understandings to their children. Some tried to limit the types of social groups their children associated with. Others held their children to higher standards than they were able to meet in hopes that their children would live up to the pedestal's position. Still others educated their children on potential risks to be cautious of.

Chad grew up in a mixed family. He reported that while growing up, his mother's boyfriend used to give him "a big dose of discipline" every now and again when he was drunk. His mother's boyfriend used switchblades, razor straps, and belts on him and his older brother. He recalled the first time he stood up against the pattern of being beaten.

About the age of 16 I quit taking it. That's when I met my first girlfriend I guess my first love and mom told me to get off the phone and said "I will in a minute." And he said "You will now you little bastard." I was like "Oh." So he jumped up, I remember him coming in there in his fruit of the looms and was getting ready and I fought back and he ended up going to the hospital because I hurt his back. I got tired of him beating me up and bloodying my nose. I just wasn't going to take it no more and after that, he quit beating on me. I guess I was big enough to defend myself then.

Chad was a long-time victim to his mother's boyfriend's rage while intoxicated with alcohol. In this instance, Chad saw his own strength to fight back for the first time. He had hurt his mom's boyfriend instead of getting hurt. Later on, Chad's mother became ill. He attributes this event as the catalyst for his self pity and use of alcohol to cope. Chad later on came to disdain alcohol and drugs. He attempted to impart the warning to his son against involvement with substances.

I've already talked to Dylan about drugs. I told him that there's a chance that he could have the gene to be addicted to alcohol and drugs. I told him to stay away from them. And I want to be there to make sure that he don't get messed up with them. And by God, I will be. They can't keep me here forever. I try to be a model participant. A lot of these kids in here try to push buttons and stuff and I just blow them off. That's where I know I've grown up.

Despite Chad's own abusive experiences with an alcoholic father figure growing up, he, himself still drank. In order to break this pattern, he warned his son to stay away from alcohol and other drugs. In his warning directed at his son, he revealed his realistic perspective of the patterned problem. He acknowledged that genetic influences could be at work in his son and hard to resist alcohol. He strived to improve himself and set a positive example for others who had less understanding. For these efforts, Chad considered himself more mature.

Like Chad, fathers used their awareness of their own or others' dysfunctional choices as examples to prevent repeated mistakes in their children. Their awareness stemmed from making some mistaken choices of drug and alcohol abuse, dysfunctional crowds, within the limited set available to them. They often educated and guided future generations past potential pitfalls through lessons that taught, "don't do what I did, do what I say." Fathers did not hide their deviant pasts from their children. They used learned experiences to own understandings and prevent them from repeating the same mistakes they made. This way, they used their power, though limited by past mistakes, to break dysfunctional patterns from repeating in future generations. In this study, fathers used their agency to when possible, they compensate for their past lack of provision for their children. Fathers anticipated potential challenges upon returning from incarceration such as relational divide, old addictions, making child support payments, and employment discrimination. They used their agency to make plans to address those challenges through marriage counseling, accountability meetings, abstinence from potential drug-related hang-ups, and educational or skill development. Fathers displayed their agency through

adapting to a variety of work requirements and persisting in search of alternative work when their current job was not satisfying. Fathers gained pride for their accomplishments overcoming old drug habits, mastering service and manual work tasks, and spending time with and providing for their children. In order to break patterns of dysfunctional behaviors and mistakes in their families, fathers applied their emergent strengths and self awareness. They saw prison as the context and catalyst for change; they thwarted abusive patterns and warned their children of how not to repeat familiar pitfalls.

3.5 Summary of Findings

In these findings, I discovered these incarcerated fathers' perspectives on agency and how they made use of their agency. I found the men shared normative agentic desires as fathers and partners. I found their unique perspective on agency as seen in a high risk context. I saw three types of barriers which hindered them from exercising agency: contextual, internal and relational. Fathers used their agency to compensate for previous wrongs. While incarcerated, they anticipated post-incarceration challenges and considered how they would address those challenges. Fathers used adaptive actions and attitudes to meet the challenges and demands of structural barriers such as high employment turnover and child support payments which went to entertainment for adults. Although different from status-defined achievements in comparison to a general population of fathers, these incarcerated fathers nonetheless displayed pride for their accomplishments in overcoming habitual barriers, and

self-mastery of their work. Fathers also used their agency to break dysfunctional patterns by standing up to wrongs done to them. Looking forward, they took corrective measures to deflect their children from a deviant path similar to their past. These incarcerated fathers shared many common desires as a father, partner, and person. They were unique because their mistakes bore legal consequences and thus their control and choices were limited. In the face of multiple levels of adversity, they were still able to use their choices and control for positive gains.

Chapter 4

Discussion

The analysis of life history interviews of incarcerated fathers revealed fathers had normative aspirations about being a father and partner. Unlike portrayals of absent fathers, they did not share some kind of moral deficiency or apathy regarding their responsibilities toward their children and partners. However, there was a gap in what they could attain given their circumstances growing up and limits after incarceration.

Most of them grew up in high risk environments where violence, drugs, underemployment, poor quality and low education, early sexual activity, and multiple partners was a common backdrop to their life story. From an early age, some fathers bore the financial and emotional load of supporting their mother, younger siblings, and new family. Many lacked the role modeling to be a father and did not receive support from sources such as their father or a consistent, caring partner. In a few rare cases, the men had traces of memories of their father as a positive role model in the military or being there for them as a child. If they were lucky through life, they had an older brother, cousin, grandparent, or a friend's father who they saw fathering or who connected them to work opportunities. For the others who were not as fortunate, there was no one they recalled to show them the way to handle family responsibilities and they taught themselves as fathers through trial and error.

From trials came stressors, barriers and errors. They made mistakes in their lives engaging in high risk activities, which ample opportunity surrounded them. They were caught and convicted for behaviors such as drunk driving, substance use and distribution. They were not proud of many choices and struggled with marginalization, anger, regret, and even defeat. Fathers were mainly present at the birth of their children but due to partner or former partner's gatekeeping, emotional influences and limited time and resources, it became difficult to stay regularly involved in all of their children's lives.

Despite the bleak outlook given their contextual setbacks, internal struggles, and relational conflicts, fathers used their personal agency which allowed them to challenge life barriers such as their history of incarceration. Many of them gave their best efforts when fulfilling normative expectations were out of their reach. When they could not afford the full child support payments, and did not see reason to send their earnings to the government, they sent financial support directly to the mothers of their children, or bought items their children needed. They saved and took work-release leaves to make oftentimes, long journeys to visit their children, drawing on an extended network of social resources just to arrange transportation to and fro. Fathers took on a variety of different jobs to make ends meet. They worked in positions that were high in physical demand, low in wages, and had few opportunities to be recognized for their work. Even so, they felt a sense of achievement when they were awarded pins, were selected to be among an elite' group of workers for a special project, or gained acceptance by skeptical members of a community they lived in. Many of them cited their prison experience as a time to think, and a catalyst for

them to re-evaluate their priorities and shed light on what was really important for them when they regained their freedom. They made plans to break out of their old habits and crowds, get back into their children's lives, to work, rebuild their families, and even reconnect broken relationships.

The study showed that all of McAdams' (2001) themes of agency were evidenced in the narratives of incarcerated fathers. Like Maruna's (2001) findings on those who were on track to desist from criminal activity, many fathers in this study used the "language of agency" (Maruna, 2001, p. 77) in their normative expectations of goals and dreams. They wanted to master their roles as fathers and partners by providing financially, being present and involved emotionally and physically. They spoke of achievement and responsibility in their agency as they overcame barriers in their environment, within themselves, and their relationships. Also, they took on care-taking responsibilities towards those in their families of origin when there was not another male figure to do so. They taught themselves to be fathers when there was no one else around them that they could look up to. Although different from the symbols of status one might commonly think of such as diplomas, titles or material possessions, fathers in this study still prided themselves in rewards and recognition for their hard work and skill acquisition.

Also, like the participants of the Liverpool Desistance Study, fathers experienced renewed "cycles of poverty and stigma" (Maruna, 2001). These barriers to fulfilling their normative expectations for their roles as fathers and partners pervaded multiple levels of life, including and not limited to context, internal/ emotional processes, and relationships. They were not an imagined set of excuses that

fathers could use to exonerate themselves from a blemished past. Those barriers were sometimes actors on their own against the fathers' desires for good, and other times joined forces together to disempower.

On the other hand, many of those people who occupied the roles from which they acted against fathers were the ones who possessed the ability to build them up. Akin to Reeves' (2006) and Sevigny and Loutzenhiser's (2009) findings, fathers' former and current partners were one such group. Many partners used their influence to keep fathers out of their children's lives, out of personal grievances or other instrumental reasons. Fathers appreciated their influence when it came to support the positive, can-do thoughts and plans they had for change. The potential for partners and mothers of children to participate in fathers lives in affirming ways would be a paramount resource to tap into.

Reeves (2006) found that the transition to parenthood was often a circumstantial catalyst for new fathers to restore their relationships with their own fathers. The new family addition served as a convenient reason fathers would need support from their father and a new opportunity to connect. In contrast, this study found that there were prominent stories of others in the new fathers' lives who offered advice, or modeling such as an older sibling or male figure other than his father. This important relational support from fathers' peer and social network of other fathers was also found in a previous study on internet-based support (Hudson et al., 2003). Some partner's fathers were also able to offer practical aid, such as referring the father to employment. Fathers did not necessarily report this happened at the transition to fatherhood, which leaves room for added support during that critical transitional

phase.

4.1 Theoretical Implications

Figure 4.1 is a visual representation of fathers' agency process. The four shapes is a model of the agency process for low income incarcerated fathers in this study. These include the four original McAdams' (2001) themes of agency, four themes which are the antithesis of McAdams' (2001) original themes, seven emergent themes, as well as three types of barriers to agency. The group on the right of the model shows McAdams' four original themes: self mastery, status/ victory, achievement/ responsibility and empowerment. The two most prominent themes from this group of themes seen among fathers are bolded; they are self mastery and achievement/ responsibility. Self mastery is akin to Bandura's dimension of intentionality. They share a sense that there is a strategic goal and action plan to accomplish for the purpose of self-betterment.

The group on the left of the model contains the four themes which are the antithesis of McAdams' four original themes. The two groups in the middle represent themes that move fathers either toward agency or away from agency. The direction of the movement is indicated by the pointed side of the shape.

The upper-middle group contains the six emergent codes of self reflectiveness, anticipatory plans, confidence/ insight, flexibility/ perseverance, empowering people, and opportunistic events. These six themes all move fathers toward the agency that McAdams described.

Model of the Agency Process



Figure 4.1: Agency process for low income incarcerated fathers

Bandura (2001) also named self reflectiveness in the dimensions of agency that he discussed. Similarly, two other themes emerged in the fathers' narratives which coincided with two other dimensions of agency that Bandura described. Anticipatory plans was similar to forethought as a motivational force and means to achieve future desired outcomes. The emergent theme of flexibility/ perseverance is similar to the self reactiveness dimension that allow individuals to re-evaluate and adapt their choices in the face of unexpected influences in order to continue pursuing their goals.

In contrast, the lower-middle group contains four themes of poor choices, internal barriers, relational barriers, and contextual barriers. These four themes are posited to move fathers away from being agentic and toward themes antithetical to agency.

4.2 Practical Implications

There are many opportunities for clinical and community programs to take action to build and maintain men's and fathers' agency narratives. Clinicians can consider work with different client units. First, there is traditionally the individual, or the father. Then, there are significant family members in fathers' lives who could either join him for therapy/ counseling sessions or have individual sessions to work on their part in affecting the system. These people include current and former partners, as well as fathers' parents, grandparents, and in particular, fathers' fathers. Also, expanding the network of potential helpers to fathers could include other men who

are fathers in their network or community of peers. Looking a little wider yet, there are respected or vocal community members or those in positions of authority that can be involved in making a difference in fathers' sense of agency.

Extending the narrative perspective in research to practical application, I can see the benefits in using the narrative therapy (Nichols & Schwartz, 2008) modality to bolster men's sense of agency in their life course stories. The premise of Narrative therapy is to cognitively and retrospectively re-construct in the process of storytelling problem-saturated stories in people's lives. Narrative therapists call this technique "re-authoring." It shares the same view as Narrative theory that people tell a "personal myth" (McAdams, 1985) of their life, called their "self story" (Nichols & Schwartz, 2008, p. 390). The trajectory of this personal story depends on the points in their life that they choose to highlight.

4.2.1 Empowering Fathers as Individuals

Therapists and other helping professionals using this model can help fathers to tell their story, not only as fathers but as men and even looking back to when they were boys. Clinicians can ask deconstructive questions surrounding what constitutes men's role in families and how fathers gained their understanding of that role. Also, clinicians can ask whether or where in their story they made the transition from child to a man and the circumstances surrounding control or lack of control upon becoming a father. Alternative stories can be explored and expanded upon regarding how they would have liked to be initiated into adulthood or fatherhood. What did

they expect to be normative and how could or would they provide that for their children, given their present circumstances?

Special attention should be paid to fathers' relationships with their biological fathers or other father figures in their lives. Also, specific attention should be given to how, as role models, their biological or "social fathers" interacted with their mothers. Clinicians should be empathic and also challenge fathers on their role assumptions if limited by the dominant cultural discourse of men as the provider/breadwinner role. Clinicians can exercise their co-authorship privileges in this model of therapy to help fathers expand their recognition of themselves as nurturers, teachers, and advocates for their children's well-being. Therapists can help to empower fathers' narrative of agency by using a language of choice and help to identify places where the father made choices or could make choices that would likely impact his self-story plotline.

4.2.2 Empowering Partners to Empower Fathers

Partners have a tremendous potential for impact in fathers lives. The choice is whether they use their influence to build up fathers' sense of agency, or to strip it away. Averett, Gennetian, and Peters (1999) found that for mothers who held less traditional gender role attitudes, fathers were more likely to provide childcare. Clinicians working with mothers individually can guide them to tell the story of how their gender role attitudes were shaped. Clinicians can support scenes where fathers had control over practicing the gender roles they desired. The purpose is to

understand what partners believe about and expect from men's and women's roles in family. Through understanding, clinicians can then either reinforce or challenge the discourses that have been protagonistic or antagonistic to the story these women desire for their lives. If her self story is not the same as the one she would like to tell, then clinicians can help her explore alternative narratives and identify scenes and witnesses throughout her life which thicken the alternative plot.

Also, clinicians can help partners by using the narrative therapy technique of Externalizing in order to name problems which propel their problem-saturated story (Nichols & Schwartz, 2008). With the client's permission, clinicians and clients together can choose a suitable name to personify the internal or emotional state that is perpetuating or part of the problem cycle. This will encourage mothers to look at a problem as separate from themselves and from fathers, because despite potentially unmet personal needs as partners, they can still learn to act as a co-parenting team to best meet their children's needs. This way, partners can use the externalizing technique to create distance between their identity and the problems. Examples of externalization technique to name personified problems are such as "The Anger" in order to gain perspective and mobility against behaviors characterized by angry outbursts. Then, clinicians can help mothers to identify personified protagonists in her self story such as Understanding, Forgiveness and Empathy which can be mobilized to fight against The Anger. Mothers can make plans that help thicken their alternative, non-problem saturated story. Plans can be developed by using anger as informative of required action or response to a situation threatening the integrity and structural boundaries. Other settings which clinicians should be aware

of developing mothers' alternative story, is in her work and childrearing. Clinicians working with fathers' partners can also help them to think about what they want out of their life as an individual, and how they can thicken that script in their work. Together, Averett et al. (1999), Brayfield (1995), Casper and O'Connell (1998), and Presser (1995) found that fathers were more likely to exhibit responsibility for childcare when mothers' employment increased or were engaging in some form of employment, independent of type of work arrangements. Clinicians can encourage mothers to think about the role they want(ed) to see fathers fill at the transition to parenthood and thereafter. Price and Williams (1990) found that fathers who were unmarried to their children's mothers typically stayed in her life through the child's infancy into the child's toddler years. Mothers who desire father's continued involvement might be encouraged to story their role as mothers and partners in ways that encourage fathers' sense of agency in their father involvement and choices for their children's lives. If their relationship with their child's father already ended with no desire to continue, a narrative technique would possibly involve restorying the couple relationship and injuries. This should be done in a way that allows fresh understanding or meaning gained toward closure as partners and former partners to be teammates at parenting.

4.2.3 Strengthening the Couple Relationship

This is work can be done preventatively before couples have children or even decide on long term relationship commitments. Practitioners working with the cou-

ple as a unit before children can guide them to tell the story of how they wish to become parents, and what supporting actors or witnesses they would like to have in place before they become parents. They should also identify which actors exist within the realm of choice and/or mastery and support a more consistent story of agency over their lives. Also, which antagonists would they have to fight from stories of their own childhood to become the kinds of parents they want to be. Antagonists deep enough to externalize and stand against would likely be inanimate emotions, injuries. They may bear names with pronouns such as “the Loneliness” or “the Abandonment,” “the Betrayal,” or “the Critical Voice.” Therapists working with the narrative model should also take care to build a network of witnesses for couples undergoing changes and to aid them to tell the story of how they can allow agency into their stories. People to consider inducting into the personal stories of change can include parents, siblings, close cousins, and friends, neighbors, employers, colleagues, pastors, probation officers, judges, and any others who are invested or share an interest in helping fathers be more agentic and help themselves. These witnesses may also be couples who the fathers and mothers look up to as models but do not have much contact with already regularly.

4.2.4 Activating Peer Support for Fathers’ Agency

Fathers may be a source of social support for other fathers or new fathers (Hudson et al., 2003). These supportive fathers may be peers or those well experienced through generations as fathers and grandfathers, and even great-grandfathers

if they became fathers at younger ages. Perhaps practitioners can work with fathers in pairs as an alternative client unit to the more traditional individual, couple, or group unit. Father pairs would be self-selected pairs of men who have regular contact prior to, outside of and beyond the clinical setting. Perhaps through these natural peer bonds, fathers may restory their lives with a naturally occurring witness along the way. This may aid empathic responses that encourage times of agency or non-agency too if fathers can pair up with someone who has grown up around similar community and contextual influences and challenges. Therapists may also team up as co-therapy pairs. They may use the Narrative Therapy technique of letter writing or certificates to more permanently and officially commemorate fathers' therapeutic work and note their progress.

4.2.5 Activating Community Support for Fathers' Agency

Community members and organizations can also serve as an influence to support fathers' agency development. This support is important as fathers reconnect and engage with the communities around them during work release, temporary family visitation passes, or after their sentence as they reintegrate more permanently into mainstream life. Retired or unemployed elders is one group of community members who are commonly known for their availability and good will toward community service and exercise their voices politically. Community workers and leaders could mobilize and connect elders as mentors and beneficiaries to fathers who are open to social support and looking for opportunities to compensate for their previ-

ous mistakes. Older community members could serve as a listening ear to fathers story of change beyond the clinical setting. They could also mentor fathers with their own stories of how to take control of life's challenges and to overcome. Fathers who lacked father figures may benefit from elder males who may take on a social father role in their lives as mentors and encouragers. Fathers who seek opportunities to regain community members' trust and status as a full member may see the connection with elderly as an opportunity to partner with respected and vocal groups. In allying together, hopefully both parties will also be bridging the gap of understanding between generations, and perhaps alleviate even some proponents of racial and classist prejudice and social injustice left over from historical influences. In the best case scenario, community elders may even benefit from a mutually giving relationship that helps them reconnect with youth culture with more empathy and less cause to fear or criticize those who have made mistakes.

4.3 Implications for Policy and Research

Policies governing paternity establishment and child support should operate under the assumption that fathers are interested rather than disinterested in involvement with their children. The main barrier to overcome is to move beyond the limiting role expectation of fathers as merely financial providers. Instead, policies should encourage fathers as cognitive and emotional support for their children's development. Technology such as webcams and digital photos and email can also be explored as a bridge to help fathers maintain father-child relationships while they

are physically separated from their children. As fathers show they are able to take on responsibilities they missed formerly, they should not be punished for what they have not yet attained but given increasing levels of control. In the case of paying some child support as opposed to none or less, fathers should be rewarded with increasing influence and control over how those payments are used for their children. There should be built in and clear conditions for fathers to gain joint custody of their children to give them hope instead of condemning them to paying more fees to unseen sources without the benefit of more influence and involvement opportunities as fathers.

Policies should consider fathers as men, who need to be affirmed and empowered through connections to family members, authority figures, and groups that enlarge his sense of identity. Also, policies must tackle the need for knowledge and role modeling on how to become and stay involved fathers and partners using their limited resources. Policy makers should include professionals who can bridge disciplinary gaps to work together with legal system workers, educators, researchers, pastors, clinicians, and family members when making plans for intervention.

Funding for policies should target both preventative practices as well as interventions. The system should be built to support contexts that limit problem formation from the start instead of catching men through the system only after they have already become fathers. After they already made legally punitive mistakes. After limiting their choices, then punishing them for making non-sanctioned choices out of their limited choices. And after they suffer weakened sense of control over life outcomes, connections to their partners, children, and community. Preventative

efforts should be targeted at stronger, mutually affirming and empowering partner bonds, more conscious childbearing decisions with clarity on parenting responsibilities, and reconnecting weakened or lost family supports.

Policies should be created to better mobilize and utilize community human resources to aid incarcerated and socially excluded fathers' reintegration process (Maruna, 2001, p.119). Policies can provide funding for community programs and members that effectively reintegrate and include fathers, who are marginalized and excluded from regular family life during incarceration. There should be regular and normative community recognition practices to encourage fathers who have made strides toward reintegration. These recognition practices may be represented through government sealed certificates which witnesses to fathers' progress can apply on behalf of fathers when they see fathers taking significant strides toward agentic living. Witnesses could be partners, fathers, or other family, employers, officers, or other community members. Such agency building acts could include maintaining connection with children through quality time, co-parenting, gaining employment, re-establishing family relationships, establishing paternity, gaining mentors, and serving the community, etc. Though many of these agentic actions may be taken for granted by others as not worthy of public recognition, they are the very struggles which incarcerated fathers have stumbled over when their efforts go unrecognized and unvalued by the public and society.

Policies need to be based in more representative research with program evaluation built in. Either more research needs to be tailored around specific intervention programs or research used to shape policies and programs need to be more inclusive

and representative for different groups of incarcerated, low income, or non-residential fathers.

4.4 Limitations and Future Directions

This study was a secondary narrative analysis which limited my access to the participants' life course stories as interview transcripts, missing some contextual, tonal, and emotional cues. This was a retrospective study where narratives were subject to memory recall and narratives about the past were re-told. The study participants are not from a representative nor generalizable sample. It is limited primarily to men who are white, low income, incarcerated fathers from the mid-western United States. Also, using myself as the primary "measure" in this qualitative research project, there are likely areas that, never having been a father or parent, I did not readily observe or identify with being a father or parent. However, my perspective allows me some sight from the vantage point of having been a child raised in a low income household during my early childhood years after immigrating to the U.S..

If resources were available, it would be more desirable to conduct a prospective and sequential, mixed methods study with multiple perspectives for information sources. I would take multiple waves of data for different cohorts of fathers in their childhood, when they started romantic relationships, within 3 months after the conception of their child[ren] at the birth of their child[ren], within 1 month of incarceration, 6 months or halfway through their sentence, 1 month after their

release, 6 months after their release, 12 months, 18 months, and 24 months after their release. I would want to interview both current and former partners if the mother of their children is not only his current partner. I would like to interview his children, and his parents, specifically, his father. In order to use mixed methods, I would also use quantitative analysis for coding agency for the realms in which fathers had agentic experiences. If possible, I would like to conduct a multi-cultural meta analysis of men's agency such as that in the world survey study (Welzel & Inglehart, 2010).

I would want to add questions to the interview script to illuminate fathers' development and use of agency in everyday settings instead of only turning points. I would want to know more about the internal processes they encounter such as shame, guilt, anger and how men perceive those influences on their sense of control or agency. I would also want to ask even more explicitly about who or what influences they thought was most prominent in building their sense of agency in each developmental life stage or formative scene in their narrative. I would want to investigate men's fathers' impact on their agency. I would also like to consider incarcerated fathers' sense of connection or relationship to their fathers through the lense of attachment theory. I would hope to understand what attachment role and function fathers have with their relationship to their children (Newland & Coyl, 2010).

4.5 Conclusion

For the incarcerated fathers in this study, much was out of control in their lives. Even though they aspired to fulfill many normative goals and storylines as men, fathers, and partners, they shared many levels of barriers along their journeys. Some of them tripped and slipped farther away from their goals through impediments that arose, such as incarceration and separation from their support network. Others used their scenes of backsliding as momentum for change and gain. And still many were somewhere in between moving forward and sliding backward. Along the way, there were many actors such as different parts within themselves, parents, partners, siblings, friends, community members, legal staff, economic contexts, education, cultural biases, prejudice, and policies that also co-authored their stories. Somewhere between conscious beat downs, benign neglect, and offering a helpful hand, there were a range of contributions where those actors had influence in these fathers' stories of agency. It is in analyzing these fathers' stories that we can find clues to the range of opportunities we have as researchers, clinicians, policy makers, community members, or if we are fortunately placed as family members of those who have stumbled, and can use a helping hand to reach their goals and purposes. Through the lens of agency, we can look at how far fathers have come, how to build on and empower them with the resources they have in and around them and not merely at how far they have left to go lest they lose the hope to go anywhere at all.

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