'MY LIFE IS SEPARATED'

An Examination Of The Challenges And Barriers To Parenting For Indigenous Fathers In Prison

Susan Dennison*, Holly Smallbone, Anna Stewart,
Kate Freiberg and Rosie Teague

Paternal imprisonment creates a significant risk for the intergenerational transmission of offending. However, there is little research on the mechanisms underpinning this risk, including how paternal imprisonment interrupts parenting and father–child relationships. Culturally relevant research is also essential in the context of high imprisonment rates of Indigenous Australian men. We conducted interviews with 41 Indigenous Australian fathers from two prisons in North Queensland to examine their identities as fathers in prison and the barriers associated with maintaining relationships with their children. Findings are discussed in relation to contact and distance; intergenerational absence of fathers; paternal involvement through play, care and culture; and diminished opportunities for men's parental and cultural generativity. We consider the implications of the findings for children's well-being.

Keywords: paternal imprisonment, indigenous fathers, developmental systems, parental generativity, children's well-being

Good fathering, it seems, really does matter. It matters over a long time, over a lifetime, and even over generations

(Snarey 1993: 356)

In light of mounting evidence that imprisonment of parents can have profound intergenerational consequences, Sampson (2011) called for the consequences of imprisonment to be examined more thoroughly and broadly. Nowhere could this be more urgent than in relation to imprisoned Indigenous Australian fathers, their children and communities. According to the recent publication of the *Report Card: The wellbeing of Australian children* (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth 2013), Indigenous Australian children are significantly more likely than non-Indigenous Australian children to experience out of home care, youth detention, and adult prison, be in a jobless family, and are more likely to suicide. The imprisonment of a father adds to the accumulation of disadvantage and risk for Indigenous children. Furthermore, the intergenerational transmission of parenting skills and culture may be severely disrupted by the removal of Indigenous fathers through imprisonment.

An era of mass incarceration in the United States (Clear 2008; Wakefield and Wildeman 2011) is responsible for approximately 1 in 43 children having a parent in

*Susan Dennison, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Griffith University, Mt Gravatt Campus, Mt Gravatt, QLD 4111, Australia; Susan.Dennison@griffith.edu.au; Holly Smallbone, Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance, Griffith University, QLD, Australia; Anna Stewart, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Griffith University, QLD, Australia; Kate Freiberg, Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance, Griffith University, QLD, Australia; Rosie Teague, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Griffith University, QLD, Australia

prison in 2007 (Maruschak *et al.* 2010). Furthermore, African-American children disproportionately experience parental imprisonment, with one in four young adults estimated to have experienced the imprisonment of their father over the course of their childhood (Wakefield and Wildeman, 2014). Australian estimates are less staggering overall, but not when we consider the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children's experience of paternal imprisonment. In Queensland, Indigenous children were nine times more likely than non-Indigenous children to experience paternal imprisonment in one year (4.4 per cent of Indigenous children) and four times more likely to experience the imprisonment of their father by age 17 (16.3 per cent of Indigenous children; Dennison *et al.* 2013). These findings are consistent with a study conducted in New South Wales (Australia) a decade ago (Quilty 2003; Quilty *et al.* 2004).

The high rates of Indigenous children's experience with parental imprisonment are associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander's over-representation in the court system (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012a) and in correctional facilities. According to the 2011 Census, Indigenous people comprise 2.5 per cent of the Australian population and 3.6 per cent of the population in Queensland (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012b). Of Indigenous Australians, 90 per cent are of Aboriginal origin, 6 per cent of Torres Strait Islander origin and 4 per cent identify as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012b). Despite accounting for a small percentage of the population, Indigenous people comprise approximately 26 per cent of the Australian prison population and 30 per cent of the Queensland prison population. This equates to an imprisonment rate 14 times higher than the rate for non-Indigenous prisoners (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011). Indigenous prisoners are also more likely to have prior adult imprisonment (74 per cent) than non-Indigenous prisoners (48 per cent; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011). Recent research in Queensland identified that by the age of 25, 25 per cent of all Indigenous men have been imprisoned. This compares with 5 per cent of non-Indigenous men (Stewart *et al.* 2011). Indigenous children are therefore proportionally more likely than non-Indigenous children to experience the imprisonment of a parent as well as repeat parental imprisonment along with, at least for males, a greater risk of being imprisoned themselves.

To date, no Australian research has examined the effect of the imprisonment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island fathers on their children or communities. Problems in opportunities for contact between imprisoned fathers and their children may be heightened for Indigenous families, given the vast distances between families and prisons. In Far North Queensland, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise more than 50 per cent of the population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013). Many communities in the Cape York region of North Queensland are populated almost entirely by Indigenous Australians and are up to 1,050 km from Cairns and up to 1,300 km from Townsville, where the two closest prisons are located. With a ratio of approximately one Indigenous child to one Indigenous adult (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012c), the high rate of imprisonment of Indigenous men leaves a dearth of adult men in some of these rural and remote communities. As Weatherburn (2014) notes, these high imprisonment rates help create the ideal conditions for ongoing disparity in offending and imprisonment across generations, partly through economic and family-level effects that reduce children's well-being and heighten their risk for offending.

Drawing on data in the United States, Clear (2008) argues that incarceration, particularly among minority groups, is concentrated in communities of disadvantage. Men from these communities cycle through prison at concerning rates, having a marked effect on their social networks, social relationships and future prospects (Clear 2008; Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999). Imprisonment rates for men in these communities not only change household compositions and restructure kin relations (Braman 2004), but also contribute to the destabilization of community capacity to provide informal social control and prevent delinquency (Rose and Clear 1998; Clear 2008). In the United States, the consequences of mass incarceration for children contribute to large-scale and potentially long-term racial disparities and the perpetuation of intergenerational inequality (Wakefield and Wildeman 2014). In their study of the impact of mass imprisonment on inequality in America, Wakefield and Wildeman (2014) found that mass imprisonment increased black–white inequalities in children's total behaviour problems by between 5 and 10 per cent. Gaps in racial disparities in internalizing and externalizing problems, infant mortality and child homelessness would all be substantially smaller had mass imprisonment not taken place. The authors suggest the way in which parental imprisonment operates in America promotes intergenerational social inequality with the consequences for racial disparity being even greater for the children of imprisoned fathers than for the adult men themselves.

Some research suggests that the loss of a parent to prison might benefit some children (e.g., Giordano 2010; Wildeman 2010). However, in their analysis of the Fragile Families data, Wakefield and Wildeman (2014) argue that most children are harmed by paternal imprisonment. A number of studies have identified a range of long-term negative outcomes for children of prisoners, including poverty and social exclusion (Walker and McCarthy 2005; Foster and Hagan 2007) and antisocial and delinquent behaviour (Murray and Farrington 2005; 2008). Critically though, such negative behavioural outcomes of children's experience of their father's incarceration have not been found in Sweden (Murray *et al.* 2007) or the Netherlands (Besemer *et al.* 2011), possibly due to the differences in social welfare, family-friendly policies and opportunities for contact between imprisoned parents and their children (Murray *et al.* 2007; Besemer *et al.* 2011).

Given recent international findings concerning the risks associated with paternal imprisonment for offspring offending and the vast over-representation of Indigenous Australian men in prison, it is important that we identify the long-term consequences of parental imprisonment for Indigenous Australian children. It is equally important that we understand the processes by which these outcomes occur. One potential change mechanism, which has been overlooked until relatively recently, is the way imprisonment affects father–child relationships. Research in the United Kingdom shows that children's positive adjustment is directly related to the maintenance of the father–child relationship during the imprisonment period (Lösel *et al.* 2012). Opportunities to maintain positive relationships may be critical to the well-being of the child as well as the rehabilitation of the father (e.g., Visher and Courtney 2007). In the current study, we conducted interviews with imprisoned Indigenous Australian fathers to examine their identities as fathers, the barriers they face maintaining relationships with their children and engaging in aspects of fathering that are important to them personally and within their culture.

Developmental systems and life course theories of fathering

To understand father–child relationships and their importance to child well-being, it is necessary to consider the developmental systems of both father and child. Each individual is influenced by their relationship with the other, as well as their relationships with the mother, other family members and wider social and cultural systems (Parke 2002; see also Bronfenbrenner 1986; Ford and Lerner 1992; Lerner and Castellino 2002). Father involvement includes how *accessible* the father is to the child in terms of presence and availability, their *engagement* with the child through direct interactions and their degree of *responsibility* for the child through tasks involving education, healthcare, supervision and monitoring (Lamb et al. 1985; 1987). Although existing research potentially lacks cultural relevance to the Indigenous Australian context, international evidence is reasonably consistent in showing that although fathers engage less frequently in caregiving or responsibility tasks than do mothers, they spend a greater percentage of time engaged in play activities with their children (Parke 2002). Such play interactions contribute to the secure attachment of children and help to develop emotional regulation and social skilfulness (Pleck 2007; Wilson and Prior 2011). These unique contributions are often overlooked by measures that focus solely on time spent on childcare activities (Snarey 1993).

Opportunities for parental involvement, including the critical dimensions of play, are limited by the father's interaction with the prison system (Dennison and Smallbone in press). The length of the sentence and the repeat imprisonment of the father may also affect the maintenance of relationships through declining contact (e.g., Holt and Miller 1972; Maruschak *et al.* 2010). Using interviews with 64 Australian fathers in three prisons in South East Queensland, Smallbone (2012) found that fathers were more likely to report problems in maintaining their relationship with their child if they had infrequent visits, infrequent phone calls or a problematic relationship with the caregiver of their child. Other studies have also demonstrated that parent–child contact may be irregular or non-existent where the relationship between the imprisoned parent and the caregiver is strained or dissolved (Healy *et al.* 2001; Edin *et al.* 2004; Poehlmann *et al.* 2008; Schlafer and Poehlmann 2010).

Men's involvement with their children can also be shaped by the quality of relationships with their own parents (Parke 2002). Fathers can model themselves after their fathers as per social learning theory (Bandura 1989), or alternatively, rework their concept of fatherhood to compensate for deficiencies in their childhood experiences (Daly 1993; Snarey 1993; Parke 2002). Their capacity to be involved with their children may also affect their potential for generativity, a term used by Erikson (1982) to denote a psychosocial stage of life involving caring for others, including subsequent generations. Snarey (1993) extended the concept to consider stages of generativity comprising birth fathers (biological generativity), childrearing fathers (parental generativity) and cultural fathers (societal generativity). In Snarey's (1993) four-decade study of 240 fathers from the original Glueck control group (e.g., Glueck and Glueck 1950), he found that participating in child rearing (being parentally generative) contributed to the development of men's societal generativity. Being societally generative includes the care and promotion of development in other adults through mentoring, leadership and support at the individual, group or community level. From the standpoint of imprisoned fathers, their opportunities to maintain contact with their children while in prison and to be

involved in parenting can have consequences for their sense of self-efficacy and identity as a parent (Dennison and Smallbone in press); for experiences of parental generativity (Halsey and Harris 2011; Dennison and Smallbone in press) and in the long term for their ability to become societally generative. Each of these opportunities, or missed opportunities, for parental involvement and generativity has consequences for children. Opportunities for Indigenous Australian men to learn to be a father and to be involved generatively across the life course requires additional consideration within an historical and contemporary context.

Indigenous Australian fathers and fathering

Indigenous Australians are not one homogenous group, but represent hundreds of different nations and different language groups on mainland Australia and across the Torres Strait Islands (Gibbs 1993). Kinship within Indigenous communities is more complex than the relationship ties of the nuclear family (Aboriginal Services Directorate 2003). Terms such as mother, father, sister and uncle can be extended to everyone in the tribe, but also carry meaning in terms of social relationships and codes of behaviour towards each other (Broome 1994). For example, uncles can perform important roles such as teaching nephews to hunt and guiding initiation into adulthood (Broome 1994). Children's development was the responsibility of both the family and community (Howard 2000).

The dislocation of Indigenous people from land, families and communities and the cultural fragmentation resulting from colonization raises questions about how 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males learn to be men and learn how to father' (Howard 2000: 1). In Canada, where government interventions also disrupted and displaced Indigenous families and communities, the sociocultural transmission of father roles and opportunities for Indigenous fathers to play a positive role in the lives of their children has been drastically interrupted (Manahan and Ball 2007; Ball 2009). In the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2002 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004), 38 per cent of respondents indicated that they and/or at least one of their relatives had been removed from their natural family. The intergenerational consequences of colonization and the institutional care of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children has given rise to problems in the transference of parenting skills. The *Bringing Them Home* report (Australian National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families 1997) highlighted this loss of parenting skills.

According to attachment theory and theories of generativity, the experience of being cared for during childhood by a father role model is critical to the development of fathering (Cassidy and Shaver 1999). Indigenous children who were raised in institutional care had no experience of being in a family and received no modelling for nurturing behaviours or parenting (Howard 2001). In a Canadian study involving conversational interviews with 80 First Nation and Métis fathers in British Columbia, Ball (2009) found that almost half of the fathers in the study had little or no contact with their first-born child. It was not until subsequent partnerships were developed that the men became involved with children who came later. They described having to learn to be affectionate as adults and to communicate emotions (Ball 2009). In the Canadian context, Ball (2009: 32) suggests, 'when Indigenous men become fathers, most are venturing into a role and set of relationships that have little personal resonance'.

In Australia, traditional ways of raising children have been disrupted by colonization, forced removals and high rates of imprisonment of Indigenous males (Howard 2000; Jia 2000). As the ratio of Indigenous children to Indigenous adults is approximately one to one (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012c), when adult males are absent in communities because of imprisonment, the consequences for the socialization and emotional development of young people, intergenerational cultural transference and economic provision for families and communities may be profoundly detrimental (Howard 2000; Edney 2002).

The current research

As a society, we should be deeply concerned about the potential influence on children of high levels of imprisonment of Indigenous fathers and the risk this poses as a process for increasing racial disparities across society. We need to consider not only the ways that high Indigenous imprisonment rates change the broader developmental system of the child, but also in terms of the changes it makes at the proximal level of the father–child relationship. This proximal relationship is the focus of the current study. Four overarching research questions guided this research: (1) How do imprisoned Indigenous men identify with, and involve themselves in, parenting? (2) What is the degree and quality of contact that Indigenous men have with their children while in prison? (3) What barriers do Indigenous fathers experience in maintaining relationships and parenting while in prison? (4) How can parenting by Indigenous fathers be supported in prison?

Methods

Participants

The sample comprised 41 Indigenous fathers serving sentences in one of two North Queensland high-security prisons between February and November 2010. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 50 years with a median of 34 years ($M = 33.54$, $SD = 7.45$). Two participants were on remand at the time of the interview and 39 participants were serving sentences. Sentence lengths ranged from 5 to 180 months ($N = 36$ due to missing data) with a median sentence length of 39 months ($M = 56.86$, $SD = 48.28$). All but three participants had served a prior sentence (92.1 per cent). The number of prior sentences ranged from 0 to 14, with a median of four prior sentences ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 3.29$). This analysis excludes one participant who had 32 prior sentences and was deemed an outlier. The total cumulative time fathers had spent in prison ranged from 0 to 236 months, with a median of 45.50 months ($M = 64.97$, $SD = 58.12$). Participants reported a total of 129 children under the age of 18. The number of children per participant ranged from one to nine ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 2.09$). Other demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

Our sample was slightly older (Median = 34 years) than the Indigenous men in the 2010 Australian prison population (Median = 30.5 years), which was likely due to the selection criteria that all men in our study were fathers. The men in our sample also had longer median sentence lengths (39 months) than the general Indigenous prison population (24 months; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010). This is possibly due to the fact that our sample was drawn from high security facilities in North Queensland.

TABLE 1   *Participant demographics*

Demographic	Category	*n*	*%*
Indigenous status	Aboriginal	34	82.9
	Torres Strait Islander	2	4.9
	Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	5	12.2
Relationship status	Married and living with spouse	3	7.3
	Steady relationship and living with partner	21	51.2
	Steady relationship but not living with partner	2	4.9
	New or casual partner	1	2.4
	No close relationship	14	34.1
Highest education level	Some university	1	2.4
	TAFE	2	4.9
	Completed Year 12	4	9.8
	Completed Year 11	6	14.6
	Completed Year 10	26	63.4
	Completed Primary School	2	4.9
Employment status	Full-time	13	31.7
	Part-time	7	17.1
	Studying	1	2.4
	Government benefits	17	41.5
	Other	3	7.3
Parental status[a]	Biological father	116	90.6
	Stepfather	12	9.4
Number of mothers[b]	Children to one mother	22	64.7
	Children to two mothers	8	23.5
	Children to three mothers	4	11.8

[a]Coded at child level.

[b]Five participants were excluded from the analysis because the number of mothers was unknown (approx. between 2 and 4 mothers). An additional participant reported that he had 16 children to 13 different mothers but he only discussed nine children, and therefore, this participant was also excluded from the analysis.

Similarly, the men in our sample had higher rates of prior imprisonment (92.1 per cent) than the general Indigenous prison population (74 per cent; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010).

Materials

The data in this study were derived from three sources: A brief questionnaire administered to all participants, a semi-structured interview with each participant and data from Queensland Corrective Services (QCS).

Brief questionnaire

A 20-item questionnaire was administered to participants before the interview. Each question was read aloud to the participant and completed by the interviewer to avoid problems with literacy. The questionnaire was used to collect demographic information about the participant and each of their children. It included questions about the participant's age, ethnicity, marital status, education and employment status immediately before imprisonment. Participants reported the number of children they had as well as each child's gender and age. The questionnaire, which took approximately 10 minutes to complete, also asked participants to report whether or not they lived with the child or had visitation with the child before their imprisonment. The Integrated

Offender Management System (IOMS) identification numbers of each participant were recorded to match questionnaires with official offender and sentence data from QCS.

Semi-structured interview

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine seven broad issues: contact and relationship with the child; relationship with the caregiver; parenting style and role modelling for child; maintaining contact with the child (i.e., visits, phone calls and letter contact) and potential problems with contact; how fathers perceived that being in prison had changed their child's life; whether men wanted parenting support while in prison and what that support might look like; and whether they anticipated living with their children or having visitation access upon release from prison. Each category included several questions expanding on each topic, depending upon the initial responses of the participant. If participants required prompting, examples were provided. Interviews varied in duration from 30 to 90 minutes; however, most took approximately one hour to complete. Permission to audio record the interviews was denied by the General Manager of each prison, so detailed notes were taken during the interviews. The interviewer then expanded on these notes within 24 hours of the interview before typing them up in their complete form.

QCS data

QCS provided demographic information as well as current and previous sentence information for each participant. All data provided by QCS were de-identified and matched to interview transcripts using IOMS identification numbers.

Interview coding

Interview responses were thematically grouped and coded. The second author completed all coding. Any difficulties experienced during coding were reconciled through discussions with the first author. Coding strategies included both deductive (theory driven) and inductive (data driven) processes (Strauss 1987; Miles and Huberman 1994). Coding followed a protocol suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), beginning with a provisional start list of a priori codes based on the conceptual framework and research questions. This was subsequently supplemented by more inductive coding based on themes that emerged from the prisoners' open-ended responses. These thematic groups will be utilized in the results section to provide a context for the quantitative analysis, drawing on quotes where appropriate. The quotes used in this article were written verbatim by the interviewer during the interview. Participants are provided with aliases to protect their identity. Once thematic coding was complete, additional coding was performed to create categorical variables for frequency and descriptive statistics.

Procedure

The study sought male Indigenous prisoners who were serving approximately the last quarter of their sentence and were the father of at least one child under 18 years or were a kinship member (including uncles) who played a significant role in raising a

child younger than 18 years. Stepfathers were also included in the study providing they were a child's stepfather for at least 12 months at the time of the interview. Prisoners serving sentences for offences that were related to their children (e.g., sexual abuse, physical abuse) were excluded from participating in the study. Cultural liaison officers at the prisons were briefed on the project by the first author and approached eligible prisoners directly. Eligible prisoners were provided with a brief overview of the study and asked to put their name down as an expression of interest if they wished to participate. The number of prisoners approached for participation but who declined was not recorded. There were no individual incentives or rewards offered for participation.

Before commencing interviews, participants were provided with an information sheet and consent from that was read aloud to circumvent literacy problems. Two non-Indigenous interviewers, one female and one male, conducted the interviews. Both interviewers had extensive experience interviewing prisoners, including Indigenous males. Interviews were conducted with the interviewer and the participant in a private room in the correctional centre, with no other persons present. The study received approval from Griffith University's Human Research Ethics Committee (CCJ/23/08/HREC).

Results and discussion

Descriptive statistics from questionnaire data: children with imprisoned fathers

The group of fathers in this study reported being a parent to a total of 129 children under the age of 18 years. Just over half (53.3 per cent) of the children were male. Children's ages ranged from 1 month to 17 years, with a median of 9 years ($M = 8.63$, $SD = 5.29$). Participants identified 70.5 per cent of children as being of Aboriginal descent, 3.1 per cent of children as being of Torres Strait Islander descent, 24.8 per cent children as being of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent and two children as being of neither Aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander descent. More than two thirds (68.1 per cent) of children had experienced a previous episode of paternal incarceration. The number of times a child had experienced a previous episode of paternal incarceration ranged from 0 to 10, with a median of one prior episode ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 2.60$). Including the current episode up until the interview date, the cumulative time children had experience with a father in prison ranged from 1 to 172 months, with a median of 28 months ($M = 44.35$, $SD = 41.04$).

In 75 per cent of cases, children were being cared for by their biological mother. Other caregivers included the child's grandparents (11.7 per cent), their stepmother (3.1 per cent), other relatives (4.7 per cent), and the Department of Child Safety (5.5 per cent). Just under half (44.9 per cent) of the children had been living with their father before his incarceration. The remaining participants reported having joint visitation rights with 23.6 per cent of the children, limited visitation rights with 14.2 per cent of children and no visitation rights with 11.0 per cent of children. An additional 6.3 per cent of children had been born during their father's imprisonment.

Themes arising from qualitative analysis of interview data

How do imprisoned indigenous men identify with, and involve themselves in, parenting?
Prior to their imprisonment: Consistent with previous international research (Parke 2002), responses suggest that fathers were more commonly involved in recreational activities

with their children than in caregiving and responsibility tasks. Although approximately half of the children were living with their father before his imprisonment, less than a quarter of men reported being involved in the day-to-day care of their children, such as changing nappies, assisting at bath time or taking children to school. However, two thirds (65 per cent) of men reported being involved in disciplining their children and most men (80 per cent) reported playing with their children or doing activities such as taking them fishing, although these activities did not necessarily occur on a regular basis. Some men had only sporadic contact with their children before imprisonment. Although many men expressed wanting to be a good father and to assist their children to grow up and have a better life than their own, they did not really know what to do as fathers.

Almost half of the men (42 per cent) grew up without their own father present and a quarter of men (26 per cent) described experiencing harsh or abusive parenting. Therefore, opportunities to learn about being a father were limited, a finding consistent with research on Indigenous fathers (Hammond *et al.* 2004; Ball 2009). Some men described actively trying not to parent like their own father and although they reported appreciating the role of their mothers, aunts and grandmothers in raising them, they did not necessarily take cues from their female caregiver when they became fathers. David indicated that he had been brought up with a father who used harsh parenting techniques and stated that he has made a special effort not to follow the same parenting style with his own children: 'If what happened to me and brothers and cousins… put it this way, you can only improve, if you improve on what you experience… father brought us up the way he was brought up, thank god we have laws to stop that'. He said that he does not drink or swear in front of his children and that he never raises his voice or gets physical with them.

During their imprisonment: Many men found it difficult to be involved as a father from prison, which seemed to be related to both the nuances of the prison system and their interpersonal and parental skills as a father. Even so, 41 per cent of fathers reported that they participated in parenting with at least one of their children during their imprisonment. This primarily involved participating in discipline and contributing to decision-making in relation to the child. For example, Brett reported that he, his son's mother, and his sister all discuss issues relating to his son together on speakerphone. Additionally, he speaks to his son and asks him 'not to be bad'. More than half (62 per cent) of the participants discussed keeping up to date with their children's lives. This included discussing their child's well-being, school progress or other activities with either the child or caregiver.

Despite the moderate involvement of these fathers, their reports of parental involvement both before and during imprisonment were lower than what might be expected on the basis of previous research with imprisoned fathers in South East Queensland (Dennison and Smallbone in press). This may be a consequence of lack of opportunities to develop a father script, higher levels of disadvantage and family disruption and the greater distance between families and prison in North Queensland.

Participants' responses to interview questions provided evidence of generative behaviour or attitudes. The majority of men saw themselves as role models in their children's lives who bore responsibility for transferring cultural knowledge and encouraging them to work hard and make better decisions than they had. These fathers reported that they had either been engaged with their children on a cultural level before their

imprisonment (60 per cent) or that they intended to be after their release (20 per cent). The cultural practices they mentioned included passing on traditional education and knowledge to their children and teaching them how to respect community Elders, as well as teaching them corroboree and dance, painting, hunting, fishing and other traditional food practices. Tom described taking his children hunting and collecting bush tucker, and teaching them how to 'dot paint' and make artefacts. He also taught them the sacred sites of the land and would spend time telling them dreamtime stories. Similarly, Alan said that he passed on to his children traditional knowledge and skills about hunting and respecting Elders that he learned from his own father.

Most fathers still considered themselves to be a role model to their children (68 per cent) or intended to be after their release (15 per cent). Fathers' perceptions of what being a role model meant varied, but frequently included abstaining from drugs and alcohol, not engaging in criminal activity, working and teaching cultural practices. James, whose son was born during his imprisonment, discussed how he believed he could be a role model upon release, despite lacking a role model in his own father:

I'll teach him right from wrong, tell him to be his own person and run his own race. I'm not gonna wrap him up in cotton wool 'cause he needs to know what's appropriate for himself… he needs to have a good mindset of the world and know that it's not all doom and gloom. [I missed out on a lot] of cultural things that dads and sons should do together 'cause he (his own father) wasn't around… but I knew my mum loved me and she did her best… [I want to pass down] the Aboriginal culture but only if my son wants to…

For the two men in the study who participated in parenting programs while in prison, their acquisition of new parenting skills and confidence in approaching fatherhood created opportunities for the men to be involved in their children's lives from prison and to support their partner in parenting. David (discussed earlier) said that before his imprisonment, he did not take notice of his partner's parenting style but this changed after completing the parenting program. It helped him realize that his partner was already using the parenting techniques and strategies that he was learning:

We respect each other. We don't undermine each other, we support… 110% support regardless… never looked at it till Triple P [the parenting program]. No-one perfect parent, I'm learning to acknowledge them, I praise them. Never used to.

What is the degree and quality of contact that indigenous men have with their children while in prison?
The quality of men's relationships with their children while imprisoned is related to the opportunities that they have for contact with their children. Less than a quarter of men (22 per cent) had received a visit from any of their children in the past year. When visits were received, they tended to be one-off or sporadic. Two thirds of fathers (66 per cent) in the current study made phone calls to at least one of their children, whereas approximately a quarter of men mentioned writing to their children. For some fathers, the phone calls were regular, but for others, they were intermittent. Some men wanted to talk to their children but were unsure where their children were living. Almost a quarter of men (24 per cent) noted that although they did not have direct contact with their children or the caregiver, they received updates about their children from other

relatives in prison or from relatives or friends attending visits. Therefore, extended community networks and kinship ties were beneficial to some imprisoned fathers.

Almost two thirds of men (63 per cent) indicated that they had problems maintaining a relationship with at least one of their children, whereas approximately half of the fathers (46 per cent) reported having no contact with at least one child. Four themes emerged that illustrated the pattern of relationships since the beginning of the participants' incarceration period. Relationships either remained negative (17.1 per cent), remained positive (31.7 per cent), changed in positive ways (4.9 per cent) or changed in negative ways (46.3 per cent). These patterns seem to be related to the degree and quality of contact participants had with their children during their imprisonment. Men reported losing a feeling of closeness to their children if they were not able to talk to them regularly or see them during visits. They also talked about the importance of being able to cuddle them and show them affection during a visit. Without the physical closeness, men felt that they were not able to convey how much they loved and cared for their children.

One father of eight children to multiple mothers discussed the challenges of maintaining relationships with his children during his imprisonment. Bill had only received visits from the daughter of his current partner. He maintained contact through phone calls and letters with his other children, but raised concerns about the effectiveness of these forms of communication. He said that being in prison has had a negative impact on his relationships with his children because of communication problems: 'Trying to talk on phone or letter, trying to write adult words and have them understand big words… [They are] too young, not listening… not having their full attention'. Bill said that he likes to write to his children ('makes me feel close') and that he personally addresses each of his children's issues when he writes. He also mentioned problems associated with restrictions on physical contact: 'Children need to be given love and affection, to deny them that is inhumane… lose the intimate relationship with child in prison'.

Some men were able to share their feelings and support their children through writing letters, but for other men, their poor literacy was a barrier to this form of contact. It was evident among men who did not receive visits and who did not have regular phone or letter contact with children, that their imprisonment created a greater distance between them and their children. Potential consequences of reduced contact include the limited opportunities for the fathers to think and behave in parentally generative ways and children's loss of opportunities for emotional attachment and cultural transference. Tom (discussed earlier), a father of three teenage boys to two different mothers, had not received any visits from his sons because they lived too far away. He described the emotional experience of having a videoconference with one of his sons and other members of his family in the previous year.

[We] had video-link last year, was good, we all started to cry. Was so happy for weeks and weeks after then everything just gone… I still got them in my heart… We all had tears. Happy, then time to go… they were very sad… I tried to look happy, but inside… [I've] lost everything… [I am] missing out on my sons and they are missing out on me.

For men who did receive visits, they tended to be unhappy about the quality of those visits. When the fathers were asked what would be the best way to have visits, the most common response (29 per cent) was that there should be more children's resources

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(e.g., games, toys, books and playgrounds) made available to allow fathers to play and interact with their children. These responses accord with the finding in this study, and the literature more generally (Parke 2002), that the most common form of father involvement is men playing with their children. James said although the prison had a play area 'they locked it up and knocked it on the head (i.e., the children were not able to use it)'. He also said that there were no books or toys to play with. When James was asked what he did with his son during visits he said, 'Nothing… there's nothing to do. [I use] a toilet roll to play catch or footy with him… he just wants to be amused… I don't care what the screws say I just want my boy to be happy… we just muck around.' James also said that they used to be able to have photos taken during visits but that this was no longer an option. Other suggestions for visits included more frequent and/or longer visiting periods (12.2 per cent), having family days with barbecues (12.2 per cent), having visits outside in the open (22.0 per cent), eating food together (14.6 per cent) and having more privacy (12.2 per cent).

What barriers do indigenous fathers experience in maintaining relationships and parenting while in prison?
The major barriers to men maintaining a relationship with their children is the distance that families need to travel to visit, the expense of travel and accommodation to conduct a visit and the expense of long-distance phone calls. Unlike previous research where the relationship between the father and the caregiver of the children was found to be an important factor in fathers maintaining contact with their children (Smallbone 2012), in the current study, the relationship with the caregiver did not seem to be a barrier to contact. Although 66 per cent of participants reported having problems with at least one of the mothers of their children, only four participants cited problems with the caregiver as a reason for having no visits or limited visits. Rather, contact was very much related to men's prior relationship with their children. If they were close to their children before imprisonment, they were more likely to maintain contact with their children during imprisonment. It is unclear why the role of the caregiver was less pronounced in this study. Possible reasons include differences in shame and social stigma in relation to imprisonment in Indigenous communities and the role of extended family and kinship ties in maintaining contact with children. Importantly, problems in contact caused by caregivers may have been usurped by problems due to distance.

An important finding in this study was that the quality and quantity of contact was related to distance and financial disadvantage. Many families lived too far from the prison to make regular visits and men reported having to budget to be able to afford long-distance phone calls to their children. Only 22 per cent of participants received visits from their children and only five men had a videoconference with their families. It was noted that videoconference facilities were either not available in their communities or were too expensive for their families to afford. Although the majority of men (66 per cent) had some phone contact with their children, only ten fathers (30 per cent) reported not having any problems with phone contact. As with visits, many fathers (39 per cent) cited the high costs as the main problem with maintaining regular phone contact. Samuel stated that high costs and time restrictions prevent him from having quality contact with his children: '[Phone calls] shouldn't be $1.00 in 1 ½ minute… chews too

much money'. He stated that maintaining contact was difficult with the wage they are paid in prison: 'When I'm here I budget and stretch what I have, that's my rule'. Samuel said that he does not want his wife to have the stress of putting money into his trust account and that she has enough to do with 'mothering'.

More than two thirds of men did not want their children to visit them in prison because of the anticipated emotional trauma of the visit for their children, both in terms of the separation at the end of the visit and the intimidating environment, and concerns about normalizing the prison environment. Roy said that he did not want his daughter to 'see me like that… see, my life is separated'. He did not want her to see him get emotional. Michael, who also had not had any visits from his four children during his imprisonment, reported that he was concerned about the trauma associated with visiting their father in prison: 'I can't stand the thought of bringing them here… you wouldn't want them to see how we live here'. He was concerned particularly about the visible security (e.g., razor wire) and that his son would be impressed ("[he] would say 'wow… is deadly'") but that his daughter would be frightened.

Dan, who had spent almost the entirety of his two teenagers' lives in prison, expressed concerns about disrupting their lives with regular contact during his imprisonment. He only received visits approximately once per year ('The kids want to [visit] but I don't want them to') but spoke to them a couple of times per week:

[I] only ask how they're goin'… I won't ask them how they feel about me in here… don't want to burden them. Just want them to go to school with a healthy mind, not with a ton of bricks on their head… not a nice thing for them to think about.

More than half (56 per cent) of the participants reported that they believed their incarceration had a negative impact on their children's lives and 15 per cent were unsure, mainly due to lack of contact. Fathers reported various problems that their children were facing as a consequence of their imprisonment. These included experiencing shame, being bullied, behavioural problems, substance use, emotional difficulties, academic problems and growing up without a father figure. For example, Shane raised concerns about the impact his imprisonment was having on his daughter's education, her being bullied and their relationship. Shane had been in prison for approximately ten years and, although they had regular phone contact, his daughter had only sporadically visited in the previous couple of years. Shane believed that prison had made them strangers. He stated that it is like the children are in prison themselves, and said that the longer the stretch in prison, the greater the loss of contact.

Mark raised concerns about his children's behavioural problems, alcohol use and being bullied. Although Mark was only serving a short sentence, he had also served four prior sentences. Mark had not received any visits from his children during his two-month sentence but did maintain regular contact over the phone. He said that one of his children is an alcoholic and another is 'ready to go to juvie (juvenile detention)'. Another one of his children has a good job but drinks a lot. He said, 'Right now everything is mixed up… kids all separated, they all wanna come my way'. He said that two of his children do not go to school because they get bullied, whereas another one is a bully at school: 'Everyone [has] gone haywire since I been inside… missus only talks, won't smack them but I cop it over the phone'.

How can parenting by indigenous fathers be supported in prison?

Only two participants had attended a parenting program during their imprisonment and both participants stated that they found the program useful. Half of the men interviewed (51 per cent) expressed the desire to participate in a parenting program while in prison and 39 per cent of men reported that they would also like to be offered a post-release program to support them in their reintegration back into the family, to assist their communication with caregivers and help them develop and maintain strong relationships with their children. There was an acknowledgement by fathers that they lacked some skills they felt were essential to being an involved father, such as showing emotions and communicating with their children. They also wanted to be able to communicate with the caregivers in more effective ways and have better adult relationships. Factors such as higher quality family relationships and communication and fathers' participation in family-oriented programs before release have been found to predict outcomes such as children's positive development, higher quality father–child relationships and better adjustment upon their father's release from prison (Lösel *et al.* 2012). Importantly, in the current study, the men felt there was a role for male Elders, both within and outside the prison, to share their experience as fathers and to assist young men to become better fathers and role models for their children. It was very important to the men that the program is run by men who understood their history, culture and challenges and be able to teach basic parenting skills as well as respecting spiritual and cultural traditions.

Limitations of the current study

There are several limitations associated with reliance on fathers' self-reports. Fathers did not always provide information on their relationship, or contact with, each of their children. Sometimes, it was because they had no concerns about these children, but it is also possible that they had no contact with many of these children before, or during, imprisonment. As a result, interviews were coded at the father-level rather than at the child-level. We have attempted to be cautious in our conclusions given that we have missing data in relation to some children. Furthermore, the participants' perceptions of the impact of their imprisonment on their children are often based on little or no contact with the children themselves, therefore results should be interpreted with caution.

In addition, the views and experiences of these fathers may not be representative of other Indigenous fathers in prison. Although the study was open to biological fathers, stepfathers and other kinship relatives, participants were predominantly biological fathers. This may be a consequence of the difficulties that many Indigenous men in prison experience in identifying as a father and engaging in this role. Maintaining kinship ties with children may be all the more difficult for men with extended family relationships with the child. Notwithstanding that fact and the varied accounts of fatherhood that we recorded, there was consistency across the group in the struggles they reported maintaining relationships with their children and the personal and prison system barriers they experienced. There is no reason to believe that these experiences were unique to this particular group of participants.

Conclusions

This study gave a voice to Indigenous Australian fathers in prison in North Queensland. It was evident that for some men, imprisonment placed a significant

barrier between them and their children, whereas for other men, their relationships with their children were sporadic before imprisonment and therefore their absence in the lives of their children may have been less pronounced. However, each father revealed a complex story: their lives shaped by their own childhood experiences of family life, by antisocial behaviour, broken relationships, unemployment, poor education, alcohol and drug abuse, as well as strengths in kinship ties, culture and spirituality. Some men are determined to have a positive influence in their children's lives and are taking opportunities to better themselves and build their parenting skills. But these opportunities are currently very limited within the correctional system. Other men are disconnected and content to stay that way. Some men struggle with the notion of fatherhood but are keen to be involved in their children's lives. However, in the absence of learning what it means to be an involved father, they remain unsure how to communicate effectively and connect with their children.

Although caution must be exercised in facilitating father–child relationships so that children's best interests and wishes are acknowledged and protected, most men who choose to be involved in their children's lives will have contact with their children when they leave prison. The quality of this contact with their children depends on the opportunities provided to Indigenous men to develop their skills as fathers either through the correctional system or after release from prison. Theoretically and practically, opportunities for rewarding parental involvement are critical for men's development as generative fathers and for their development as cultural fathers to subsequent generations of young adults, especially young men (Snarey 1993). Their children's own scripts for future parenting will also be influenced by positive paternal involvement (Bandura 1989; Parke 2002).

There is a clear opportunity to provide parenting programs in prisons and a strong desire was expressed by half of the men interviewed to participate in such programs. There is also a need to improve the quality and quantity of contact that Indigenous men have with their families while in prison. Utilizing technologies such as Skype might allow for more frequent and higher quality contact between fathers and their children and overcome barriers of distance and cost. Prior research has demonstrated that if contact with children is not available during imprisonment, adjustment upon release becomes difficult for fathers and their children (Lösel *et al.* 2012) and has ripple effects on communities. Generations of Indigenous people have already been affected by forced removals and separation from parents, resulting in significant racial disparities in children's well-being. Research in the United States has demonstrated that rising imprisonment rates increases racial inequalities in American children over the long term (Wakefield and Wildeman 2014). With Indigenous men vastly over-represented in Australian prisons, we need to seriously consider the long-term consequences this has for widening, rather than closing, the gap in inequality for Indigenous Australian children. It is imperative that we take steps to negate the potential effect of paternal imprisonment on Indigenous children at the macro-level (i.e., reducing imprisonment rates) and the micro-level (i.e., programs within prison and in the community that support families). In this article, we have demonstrated that obvious opportunities exist, and should be harnessed, to assist imprisoned fathers to further develop their parenting skills and engage in positive ways with their children, who are the next generation of parents.

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