

## CONSTRUCTING AND MAINTAINING FAMILY IN THE CONTEXT OF IMPRISONMENT

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*For many families affected by imprisonment, the prison can become a central and damaging force in their lives. Yet, to fully understand the impact of imprisonment upon families, there is a need for greater critical engagement with the concept of the family, and how this is defined and operationalized. Utilizing Finch's theory of family practices, this article will argue that the family relationships affected by imprisonment are not only highly individual, but also actively constructed through embodied displays of care and commitment. However, we must guard against privileging family displays that fit most comfortably within a white, middle-class framework, and ensure that the voices of all families affected by imprisonment are heard in the growing conversations about their needs.*

Key words: families affected by imprisonment, family practices

### *Introduction*

Despite ground-breaking research by Pauline Morris in the 1960s which found that families affected by imprisonment can often experience profound hardships (Morris 1965), as little as ten years ago these families were described as the 'hidden' or 'collateral' victims of the criminal justice process by the few researchers working to better understand their experiences (Light and Campbell 2006). This is now beginning to change, and there is a growing body of research demonstrating that this form of punishment may not only be extremely distressing, but may also impact upon housing, finances and childcare arrangements of the family (Light and Campbell 2006; Codd 2008; Arditti 2012). Such disruptions to family life come with considerable financial and emotional costs, which are often borne by families already experiencing poverty and social marginalization (Murray 2007; Halsey and Deegan 2015). For families who choose to support the person in custody these burdens are exacerbated, as imprisonment poses considerable barriers to maintaining contact such as geographic distance, poor and expensive public transport and restrictive visiting times (Loucks 2004; Comfort 2008).

Importantly, this literature highlights the profound social disadvantages that stem from the imprisonment of a family member, casting doubt over the argument often made by policymakers that these families can or should act as a resource to promote desistance. For example, Halsey and Deegan suggest that the lives of women who support a family member in custody closely resemble those of women who are themselves incarcerated, as both often struggle with poverty, trauma and precarity (Halsey and Deegan 2015). These arguments are supported by the work of Wakefield and Wildeman (2014), who explore how having an incarcerated father impacts upon children born within the same period as the 'prison boom'. They argue that not only has the rise in

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mass incarceration led to more children being affected parental incarceration, but this is disproportionately experienced by black children. Thus, the imprisonment of a child's father does not only increase the risk of poor outcomes such as behavioural problems, infant mortality and homelessness. Rather, and more concerning, the prison also serves as structuring institution that increases racial and social inequality on a large, aggregate scale (Wakefield and Wildeman 2014).

It is clear, then, that our current use of imprisonment has a profound and damaging impact upon already marginalized families and communities at a societal level. However, careful and detailed qualitative studies have also demonstrated that the decision to 'stand by her man' can come with considerable personal costs to the women who take on this highly gendered supporting role (Condry 2007; Comfort 2008). Rachel Condry's ethnographic study of the experiences of the families of serious offenders demonstrates how for these women, be they wives, partners or mothers, supporting the person in custody can become their 'primary occupation', as they devote their time to visiting, letter writing, shopping for the prisoner (Condry 2007: 55). Further, the demands of supporting a family member convicted of a serious offence are not only practical, they are also intensely emotional. These women become entangled in what Condry conceptualizes as the 'web of shame'; feeling that for reasons relating to either causation or contamination they were also blamed, shamed and stigmatized by the offence (Condry 2007).

Interacting with the prison itself can also give rise to complex and difficult emotions within families. Women who support a partner or husband in custody go to great lengths to simultaneously mitigate against the deprivations of the prison environment, and also manage their partner's behaviour within it, through the provision of visits, letters, packages and photographs (Comfort 2008). These tangible manifestations of support allow women to feel connected to their partner, while he becomes a 'docile body' more likely to progress through his sentence without incident. However, this often requires the woman to forfeit her own privacy and well-being as she becomes subject to a process secondary prisonization, or a weakened version of the power and control exerted by the prison (Comfort 2008). Yet, the prison also offers women a resource to manage the sometimes violent, abusive or drug-addicted men in their lives, allowing them to achieve some level of stability, safety and control, as their partner becomes more dependent on their support and consequently more attentive and emotionally responsive. These conflicting effects create feelings of ambivalence towards the prison amongst the women upon whom secondary prisonization is imposed (Comfort 2008).

The centrality of the prison to the family lives of the women who participated in Comfort and Condry's research clearly demonstrates the need for detailed understanding of the impact of imprisonment on families and relationships if the true effects of this particular form of punishment are to be properly understood. However, one of the challenges of researching family lives, in any setting, is that they are fluid, complex and highly individual. Family life has changed rapidly in recent years: the numbers of couples cohabiting continues to rise; more children are born to unmarried parents; marriage is declining in popularity but open to more couples with the legalization of same-sex marriage; a growing number of adults live in single person households; while others may live in 'blended' families bringing together children from new and previous relationships (Weeks *et al.* 2001; Williams 2004; Finch 2007; May 2011). Therefore, it is now no longer possible, if indeed it ever was, to speak of a single model of 'the family'.

In light of these shifts, sociologist David Morgan has argued that the boundaries of contemporary families and the meaning of these relationships cannot simply be ascribed by academic researchers or other external parties, and should instead be determined by participants themselves (Morgan 2011: 24). This is a provocative and challenging critique, and one which the emerging research into the experiences of families affected by imprisonment has so far largely failed to meet. Despite calls for researchers to look beyond the boundaries of the traditional nuclear family being made over two decades ago, much of the scholarly activity in this area continues to focus on the experiences of partners and children affected by imprisonment (Paylor and Smith 1994; for an exception, see Meek 2008). It seems, then, that there is a need to look beyond the boundaries of the traditional family to generate a more nuanced account of how family life is constructed and experienced in the context of imprisonment, and it is these issues which this article seeks to address.

The wider sociological literature is helpful here, as in contrast to the lack of critical engagement with the concept of the family by criminologists, there is a considerable body of sociological work grappling with the question of how family life might be theorized and understood at a time where all recent empirical research has highlighted the decreasing dominance of the traditional, nuclear, heteronormative family model (Finch 2007). While some have attributed these social shifts to a rise in individualization and an increased willingness to end relationships that are no longer personally satisfying (Giddens 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002); others have rejected the suggestion that we have become more selfish, less connected or less committed. Rather, they argue, it is that changes in family structures represent a shift in *who* is significant and *how* we care for them (Jamieson 1998; Roseneil 2005; Spencer and Pahl 2006; Smart 2007; Davies 2011; Mason 2011).

Perhaps one of the most influential accounts of how these more diverse family models might be understood is David Morgan's work on family practices, in which Morgan argues that families should be thought of in terms of the things that they 'do'. Thus, family practices are very much active, e.g. cooking a family meal or forgoing a social event to be home in time to put the children to bed (Morgan 1996, 2011). Such family practices are characterized by a sense of the everyday and tend to be conducted with some regularity, reproducing the relationships between actors and giving them social meaning, grounded in their history and biography (Morgan 1996, 2011). Importantly, while family practices reaffirm family relationships, Morgan's analysis is centred around a fairly narrow understanding of the family, including only relationships such as spouses, partners, parents, children and other kin (Morgan 2011). This has led to criticisms that the family practices approach perpetuates a narrow, heteronormative model of intimate relationships (Roseneil 2005).

An alternative development of Morgan's work that can perhaps more comfortably encompass a diverse range of relationships is Janet Finch's concept of family displays. Finch suggests that given the decline of the heteronormative nuclear family that can be neatly understood as simply residing in the same household, it is not enough for families to be defined by the things that they 'do' (rather than simply 'being'); but that these family practices also need to be 'displayed'. Thus, 'family practices' must not only be actively 'done', but these actions need to convey (and be recognized by others as conveying) meanings associated with family (Finch 2007). These displays might include in wide range of individuals and take a variety of forms, including group activities (such as going for a meal), physical

objects or photographs and also individual or group narratives; all of which can convey the significance of the relationships (Finch 2007). Thus, family displays are required to demonstrate ‘these are my family relationships, and they work’ (Finch 2007: 72).

These theoretical models of family practices and displays have much to offer criminologists seeking to better understand the lives, relationships and experiences of families affected by imprisonment. This emphasis on the active processes through which people establish and reinforce their family relationships by doing ‘family things’ (spending time together, sharing food, engaging in family traditions and telling family stories) sheds light on *why* seemingly everyday objects and activities, such as photographs and phone calls, are accorded such significance by men and women serving a prison sentence. Furthermore, Finch’s concept of family displays in particular allows considerable space for individuals to define the contours of their own family lives. Thus, by employing this theoretical lens, I will suggest that families affected by imprisonment utilize a range of resources such as visits, mementos and traditions to actively ‘display’ family, often in highly individual ways, and to maintain their relationships despite imprisonment.

### *The current study*

This article draws from a study of the lives and experiences of families affected by imprisonment in Scotland. This project sought to develop a more nuanced account of the lived experiences of these families by examining what it means to be a family in the context of imprisonment, how these relationships are constructed and maintained, and how those affected by the imprisonment of a family member are perceived by, and interact with, the criminal justice system.

These questions were explored through in-depth, unstructured interviews with 19 people from 14 families, recruited at the Visitors’ Centre at HMP Edinburgh. To avoid imposing any particular model of family life upon research participants, the only selection criteria was that they were visiting someone they thought of as family in the prison and that they were happy to participate in the research. The demographic characteristics of participants are summarized in Table 1, below. Importantly, although perhaps not surprisingly given the discussion above, while HMP Edinburgh holds both male and female prisoners, all the adults who participated in this phase research were women, with the exception of one man who was visiting his stepson, and only participant was visiting a female prisoner.

To better understand the family lives of prisoners who may not necessarily be currently receiving active support from their families, ten men and four women were interviewed whilst in custody and asked to describe their most important and significant relationships. The majority of the interviews were conducted at HMP Greenock, although two participants were recruited at HMP Edinburgh, and their demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 2. These latter two interviews were conducted in an attempt to capture the perspective of *both* the person in custody and the wider family; however, this was only achieved in one instance where both Susan, her aunt Erica and her son Liam were interviewed. Thus, most family members and prisoners were unknown to one another.

Additionally, interviews with those in custody and families visiting the prison were supplemented with over 350 hours of observation at the Visitors’ Centre, interviews with Visitors’ Centre staff ( $n = 4$ ) and prison officers ( $n = 8$ ), an analysis of visiting data

TABLE 1 *Summary of participant characteristics (family members)*

Participant	Age	Sentence <sup>a</sup>	Relationship to prisoner
Tracey	30s	Remand	Partner
Chloe	18–24	Remand	Partner
Ruby	18–24	Remand	Partner
Brooke and Darcy	18–24	Remand	Partners
Sophie	18–24	Remand/short-term	Partner
Collins Family	45–55, 16, 8 and 14	Short-term	Mother, daughter, son, niece
Becky	45–55	Remand	Mother
Lynne	45–55	Short-term	Mother
Jackie	45–55	Order of Lifelong Restriction	Mother
Alisha	45–55	Order of Lifelong Restriction	Mother
Susan and Erica	45–55, 65–75	Long-term	Mother and great-aunt
Bill	45–55	Short-term protection	Stepfather
Joanne		Short-term	Mother (visiting daughter)
Leah	30s	Long-term	Partner

<sup>a</sup>In Scotland a short-term sentence is defined as under four years in custody; a long-term sentence is four years or over; whereas prisoners serving life sentences or Orders of Lifelong Restriction can only be released on the conclusion of the ‘punishment part’ of their sentence at the discretion of the parole board. These terms will be used throughout this article.

TABLE 2 *Summary of participant characteristics (prisoners)*

Participant	Age	Offence	Sentence
Simon	30	Violence	Life
Adam	32	Violence	Life
Mark	26	Violence	Life
Euan	29	Violence	Life
Ross	39	Violence	Life
Colin	58	Violence	Life
George	56	Sex offences	Recall—life
Alex	26	Sex offences	OLR
Yasmeen	40	Not recorded	13 years
Liam	32	Violence	11 years
Donna	31	Drugs	4.5 years
Lorna	Not recorded	Drugs	3 years
Ian	34	Violence	2 years
Yvonne	47	Drugs	27 months

recorded by the Centre, and an analysis of the criminal justice social work files of 13 participants.

Given the in-depth, qualitative nature of the project, the number of participants is necessarily small. No attempts were made to recruit participants that are representative of the wider prison population; and amongst the men interviewed in custody in particular there was an over-representation of individuals serving very long, life or indeterminate sentences ( $n = 9$ ). While family members were supporting a more diverse group of prisoners, it is likely that the methodological approach adopted of ‘hanging around’ the Visitors’ Centre resulted in the recruitment of a socially marginalized group of participants than other potential strategies such as making contact through supportive agencies. Indeed, only one participant was in stable employment at the time of interview, while others struggled with caring responsibilities, poor mental or physical health,

addictions or unemployment. Therefore, no wider claims to wider generalizability are made. Rather, the richness of that data generated provides the grounding for a closer conceptual analysis of how family relationships are constructed and maintained in the context of imprisonment. Indeed, as I will demonstrate below, this detailed, qualitative approach revealed a range of highly individual strategies for displaying family and maintaining relationships in the context of imprisonment.

### *'Displaying Family' in the Context of Imprisonment*

#### *Visits*

One of the primary ways through which family displays are enacted is on visits, as these provide a space for the demonstrations of care, love and commitment that family displays entail. Indeed, the mere act of coming to the prison alone can be a considerable display of commitment to the relationship as prison visiting can be have many costs for family members financially, but also in terms of their time and well-being (Mills and Codd 2008; Scharff Smith 2014). In keeping with much of the existing literature, the women who participated in the project described how they prioritized supporting their son or partner in custody, even when this was to the detriment of their own lives and interests:

Like, if he was in for any longer than three years, I couldn't...I wouldn't keep coming up because the kids' life would be here because this is where I am all the time. Like, everyone knows me here because I'm here all the time. It feels like I'm here all the time. It feels like I live here. (Sophie, visiting her partner serving a short-term sentence)

The routine and the frequency of visits may also be important here—while friends may visit occasionally, family often visit with more regularity or routine. With regard to the latter, not all participants who were serving long sentences took regular visits, as some wished to spare their family long trips to the prison, or were themselves eligible for Special Escorted Leaves, and instead took visits to mark significant family occasions. For example, some described that they did not take regular visits due to the distance of the prison from their homes and families, but would allow their families to visit around birthdays, Fathers' Day or Christmas; the latter in particular being very much seen as traditionally a family time (Lupton 1996).

Other routine elements of the visit—a hug hello and a kiss goodbye, drinking tea and sharing family news and stories—can all also be viewed as family displays and a means of maintaining family bonds. Indeed, a number of participants commented in their interviews that they missed (or their children were missing) the physical contact that had previously been part of their relationship, while physical greetings and goodbyes as that punctuate the beginnings and ends of visits peppered participants accounts:

**Simon:** But the thing was, I thought it was priceless, I was out there for two hours and she [Simon's new baby niece] never opened her eyes once – as soon as I'm going out the door and G4 start saying right that's it and I'm like nae bother I give my mum a cuddle and a kiss, and shake my brother's hand and give him a cuddle and give the wean a cuddle and kiss and then she open's her eyes and I'm like you wee wideo!! You fucking wideo – I've been here two hours...

<sup>14</sup>'Wideo' is a Scottish colloquialism for someone who is being 'wide', meaning cheeky or provocative.

**C: ...and you wait until I'm away! (laughing)**

**Simon:** But she's gorgeous, absolutely gorgeous you know what I mean. (Simon, 30, life sentence)

The importance of these embodied physical displays was also highlighted by family members visiting the prison and were particularly missed by those who were currently restricted to 'closed' visits as Brooke, who was visiting her partner being held on remand, explains; 'open visits would be much better because at least you get a cuddle and ken it cheers you up'. The emphasis placed on physical affection by participants should not be surprising as one of the vehicles for doing family practices is with our bodies (e.g. holding hands) and even when these practices or displays are not physical, we inhabit our bodies while we do them (e.g. physically entering the prison for a visit with all the accompanying sounds, smells and searches). Further, we feel physical, embodied responses to the words, actions and communication from others (Gabb 2008). Therefore, the everyday nature of embodied physical actions must not, Morgan has argued, lead us to discount them as 'a modish addition to spice up what might otherwise seem routine accounts' (Morgan 2011: 92). Rather, we must recognize embodied exchanges of affection as central to family practices and displays.

Similarly, the importance of everyday family activities—such as the sharing of food and drinks—should not be underestimated. Food can be understood as central to displaying family, as eating together and sharing a meal are closely connected to dominant social narratives of what families 'do' and form a central part of family life in societies across the globe (Lupton 1996; Gabb 2008; McIntosh *et al.* 2011). As Gabb has observed, as the dominant emotion associated with food is love, cooking and sharing food has a strong symbolic function in sustaining relationships as it can be seen as an 'emotional currency' that can be utilized to nourish others (or themselves), or may withheld to demonstrate tension in the relationship (Gabb 2011). Given the emotional symbolism associated with food and love, it has perhaps unsurprising that over the course of the fieldwork, which involved numerous hours volunteering in the visiting room 'tea bar' and at the 'children's visits' facilitated by Visitors' Centre staff, I can rarely recall (if ever) visitors who have not bought food or drink, even when the visit is only half an hour long.

Food is not only associated with emotions, it is also strongly linked to memory, and in particular memories of the childhood home, and therefore can evoke warm memories and feelings of comfort (Lupton 1996; Smith 2002). This increases its importance as a mechanism for displaying family as it then becomes not only a vehicle for nurturing and loving another person, but it also brings alive family memories and stories which in turn can be seen as family practices and displays in their own right (Morgan 2011). As Ugelvik observes, in the context of imprisonment, being able to consume the food that would be eaten at home can allow the person to 'figuratively climb the prison wall' by not only serving as a tangible reminder of home, but also as a connection family on the outside (Ugelvik 2011; see also Comfort 2008 here).

These arguments are reflected in the account given by Yasmeen, a woman interviewed in custody who takes advantage of more informal 'children's visits' to spend time with her nephew. A few weeks prior to the interview the session had been structured around the celebration of Eid, and Yasmeen had been able to eat a meal with her family to mark an event that was religiously and culturally significant to them. Yasmeen notes that this had been important to her, not only because it was an opportunity to

spend time with her family, but also because they were able to recreate something they would traditionally do at home:

**Yasmeen:** The Eid celebration was really appreciated, it is just really good that the prison are supporting different religions and making an effort, it is amazing how much you appreciate that. It was great to be able to have more of my family there and be able to do something we would do at home. (Yasmeen, 40, long-term sentence)

Yasmeen's account resonates with Earle and Phillips' argument that facilities to cook their own food were highly valued by the men in HMP Maidstone, not only because cooking and eating form part of the fabric of everyday life, but also because food provides a connection to memories of home and also a vehicle for expressing different cultural and ethnic identities (Earle and Phillips 2012). Indeed, given the strong connections between the food we eat and our own identity and sense of self, it is perhaps unsurprising that Yasmeen particularly enjoyed the Eid meal and that the inability to access culturally relevant foods has been found to be a particularly painful aspect of imprisonment (Godderis 2006).

However, these accounts also illustrate that some facilities allow greater scope for family displays than others. For example, the children's visits that Yasmeen attends are facilitated in HMP Edinburgh by a team of staff from the Visitors' Centre in partnership with the prison, and do not require prisoners to remain seated (as is the case with 'normal' visits), allowing them instead to get up and play with their children or participate in the structured activities organized for each session, such as arts and crafts, chocolate making or visits from outside organizations like the local city farm. Parents spoke highly of these visits and similar initiatives provided by the Scottish Prison Service that allow them to spend time with their children in a more relaxed environment, doing activities that can be understood as 'family things', with one describing these as 'invaluable' in maintaining the bond with his children.

Similarly, as many participants were serving a life sentence at the time of the interview, as they progress through their sentence they can become eligible for Special Escorted Leaves, which are visits of a couple of hours to a family member or a place of interest in the community, but escorted by security personnel. These were generally preferred by participants to regular visits, and I would suggest that it is not simply the chance to leave the prison that is appreciated by these participants. Rather, it is the opportunity to do what Adam refers to as 'normal' family things:

**C: So if you could, would you go home more?**

**Adam:** I would sit on the train every day for hours for just for two hours in house.

**C: Is it worth it, the round-trip, for just a few hours at home?**

**Adam:** Definitely, definitely a because it's just normality. Believe it or not, normality is good enough for me like sitting in the house and taking the dog for a walk, I used to but now I have no sort of delusions of grandeur. I don't want to be a big drug dealer and have a big flash motor and have a big huge house. (Adam, 32, life sentence)

This desire to do 'normal family things' was also expressed by family members. For example, Sophie, a young mother of two small children who was visiting her partner in custody, explained that she felt that being able to spend a whole day alone with her partner would help to maintain their relationship and help her to cope with the increased caring burden and financial pressures his imprisonment had imposed upon her:

**Sophie:** I wish I could go in a jail for a day. You know, like with him. Be with him for a day or two. Sit and watch telly together or something. Be in the cell with him and just.... Not even with the kids, just me and him. Just so he can.... So then I've got somebody, have like a little good old chat with. Then I'm feeling.... Because even if like, when I was feeling down about, anything, it doesn't matter what it was. It can be the stupidest thing in the world I'd tell him. And he would be like, 'Can you give me advice?' But he'd come to me and he'd tell me like.... It just made feel better. (Sophie, visiting her partner serving a short-term sentence)

Importantly, Sophie's account reveals that her desire to spend a day with her partner does not only stem from simply missing him. Rather, Sophie misses the things that she used to do with him such as spending time together without the children (something that is no longer possible because Sophie cannot afford childcare and must bring them whenever she visits the prison), watching television and simply being able to have a proper conversation. Her account illustrates not only the active nature of family displays and practices, but also the barriers imprisonment imposes to the continuation of 'normal' family life. Indeed, while visits may allow families to spend time together, a lack of privacy, the short duration of visits and the strains of imprisonment can function together to prevent the open communication Sophie desires (see [McDermott and King 1992](#); [Schinkel 2014](#) and [Jardine, forthcoming](#) here).

### *Objects, mementos and memories*

Such barriers to continuing family life in the context of imprisonment give rise to a need for creative strategies for displaying family. The emphasis that participants placed on the unremarkable, everyday elements of family life powerfully demonstrates how the actions and activities we come to regard as family displays or practices are grounded in our own (relational) history and biography ([Morgan 2011](#)). Indeed, Morgan argues that the individual and collective family memories that provide the backdrop for family practices are given form through photographs, stories, 'in-jokes', celebrations and more mundane everyday events ([Morgan 2011](#): 118). Thus, family relationships do not come to end simply because the opportunity for family practices or displays is limited by geographical distance (or indeed a prison sentence), as they are grounded in memory and tradition.

An appreciation of this helps us to see the inventive strategies employed by participants to display family despite imprisonment. For example, one way of being able to display family while physically distant is through the photograph and mementoes, as [Almack](#) argues these 'can convey and reinforce meanings about the relationships between the displayer and those featured in the photographs' ([Almack 2011](#): 113). This can be very much the case for people serving a prison sentence as Liam, who is co-parenting his two young sons with his ex-partner, described his family photographs and pictures his children had drawn as 'your prized possessions', explaining that it could cause considerable resentment amongst prisoners if these were ever damaged during cell searches:

**Liam:** But yeah a lot of things that people do, like the pictures from their kids, it is memories, it is things that you hold sentimental, it is things that remind you of home and I think that is the majority of things. That is sort of why a lot of issues and bitterness can arise with prisoners when security

come in and rip down all the pictures because they can go home and see their kids at any point, and we can't. there are some guys whose families live through in the west or up north and they only get to see their kids once every two months so to come in and rip their pictures down, to be honest I think it is quite low.....But yeah a lot of things in here it is your home comforts, your home comforts to remind you of things or make you feel normal and make you have your sense of normality. (Liam, 32, long-term sentence)

This fear that pictures drawn by his children would be damaged was so real for Liam that despite never having had his cell searched to date he kept these in a folder so that were this situation ever to arise security could go through these 'one by one'.

Importantly, it was not only families in the community who demonstrated their ongoing care and commitment through gifts and objects. While not all participants exchanged letters, one young woman described how her partner often sent 'soppy' letters telling her how much he missed her; while Valentine's Day prompted much discussion amongst young women visiting the prison as to who had received a card and who had not. Just as for the women who participated in [Comfort's \(2008\)](#) research, these tangible manifestations of love and care from beyond the prison walls were highly prized; something that was reflected in the way in which participants such as Brooke spoke about gifts from their partners, as she proudly told me how her fiancé had bought her a 'best mum in the world' key ring from the canteen for mother's day.<sup>2</sup> Similar sentiments were expressed by Susan and Erica, who were visiting Susan's son Liam, who is Erica's great-nephew, when they were interviewed. Both women described how much they valued Christmas gifts made by Liam not only because they were received in his absence, but because of the time, effort and care that they represent:

**Susan:** My son has made a vases a couple of vases, it is like a paper vase and it has flowers on it, I can't really explain it but I have photographs I could show you but he made one for me the first Christmas he was in....

**CJ:** See like you have been talking about things he makes for you and you were talking about sending photos for him – is all that kind of stuff quite important, being able to have something that he has made or share something that you have done?

**Erica:** oh aye definitely oh aye

**Susan:** I mean he is 31, 32 in a couple of months time and that is the most important Christmas present that I have ever had.

**Erica:** because he was thinking about her

**Susan:** because he made it, he made it himself. Every year since he has been an adult he has given his sister the money and said you go and get the present so there wasn't a lot of thought went into it if you like. Whereas with that it was the fact that he actually took the time, and I know how many hours it took him to make it, and that is important. That is very very important. Well it is to me, it is to me.

**Erica:** I was awful emotional because I hadn't expected it and it was beautiful, and it let you ken he was thinking about you too.

Opportunities to demonstrate the love and care they felt for their families was also hugely important to participants who were serving a prison sentence. Lorna, a mother in her late 20s who was interviewed in custody, described how due to her addiction, offending and imprisonment she currently had little contact with her family.

<sup>2</sup>This was particularly meaningful to Brooke as their baby daughter had died earlier that year.

Without the support of someone outside the prison she had struggled to send her daughter a birthday or Christmas present, and anticipating difficulties with this, Lorna had made an advent calendar for her daughter, with individual pockets to mark each day leading up to Christmas, one of which is her daughter's birthday. However, without someone to able to purchase the sweets and birthday gift she had planned for each pocket, Lorna felt that 'did not mean the same or feel the same' as being able to send the advent calendar the way she had planned.

Lorna's story poignantly demonstrates the meanings associated with seemingly ordinary family objects such as birthday cards and Christmas gifts, and the role that these can play in helping men and women in custody in maintaining family relationships and displays. However, her distress at not being able to send her daughter a birthday or Christmas present illustrates more than just the importance of gift giving as a vehicle for family practices and displays: it also highlights the (overlapping) role of traditions and rituals in marking out and sustaining family relationships. As Lorna goes on to explain, every year her family exchanged presents in a particular way, but she can no longer take part in this family convention which while she is in custody and without the support of her family. This is difficult for Lorna for a number of reasons: she feels that her daughter is missing out on a Christmas present from her mum, but it is also a painful reminder that she is separated from her family.

There is a second, related point to be made here. Objects such as photographs, drawings and gifts do not only serve as a vehicle for family practices and displays and their importance to participants does not just derive from the fact that such objects are a concrete demonstration of the love and care that suffuse family relationships (although this is significant). Objects themselves can provide great comfort, providing a means of curating and storing memories that can be drawn on in times of difficulty or loss (Miller 2008). Objects not only evoke memories but also materially ground them in a form that cannot disappear, and in this way provide 'reliable foundations for constructing the past' (Hurdley 2013: 96). The relevance of this argument to prisoners, and in particular long-term prisoners, is striking. However, manifestations of this can also be seen in the accounts of family members, as Leah explains how she has used her husband's deodorant as a source of comfort:

**Leah:** But the first time my son went up, nearly the whole visit room was in tears. He was only three and at the end of the visit when they are all being taken back to the hall he was saying 'bye daddy, I love you, I love you' and you could hear in his voice how he felt, and honestly I was crying and lots of the other visitors were crying, it was so sad. One day when he was first inside I had sprayed his deodorant because I was missing him and my three year old came in saying 'I can smell daddy, I can smell daddy'. (Leah, visiting her husband serving a long-term sentence)

This construction of family or personal objects as tools for not only supporting family practices but also materializing memories facilitates a deeper understanding of why, e.g., Liam's children's drawings are his 'prized possessions'. They are a means for materializing the connection between him and his children. Importantly, however, these family objects do not just serve as foundations for summoning the past; both memories and family relationships are inalienable from identity, and inextricably bound up in our own view of our selves (Carsten 2007). This becomes particularly salient in the context of imprisonment, a punishment that left many participants feeling worthless or hopeless. Indeed, Lorna felt that these feelings could be particularly strong for women

who have children, as there is a social expectation that women should be the main caregivers within a family:

**Lorna:** the folk that are sentencing women, especially women, they are sentencing the weans as well. They weans have got to live for however long without the mummies – or without their daddies, I don't mean any different – but a wean needs its mother more than it needs its father. It needs it just as much, but I just think it's more socially accepted for a dad not to be about, than it is for a mum not to be about. You are the worst person to have ever walked the earth to abandon your wean like that. And it makes you feel less of a person, it does, and over the last few years my confidence is away to fuck. (Lorna, late 20s, short-term sentence)

The connections between memories, family practices and displays and identity alerts us to a final point to be made about family memories in the context of imprisonment. While it is important that families affected by imprisonment can continue traditions (e.g. giving gifts) and exchange mementos, they should also be given opportunities to create new family memories that will sustain relationships in the future. Such a shared (or co-created) body of memories can allow those who are physically absent to be incorporated into family life (Morgan 1996; see also Finch and Mason 2000 here). Morgan makes this argument with regard to physical distance or death, but it is equally applicable to families who are separated by imprisonment. Providing the opportunity for families to spend time together that is relaxed, enjoyable and ultimately fun will not only help to maintain relationships in the short-term: these experiences become the memories that constitute a shared family history, and perhaps also the form part of the 'in-jokes', traditions and family stories which as noted above, Morgan sees as key to constituting family practices.

Physical objects such as photographs also have a role to play here. Indeed, photographs have been argued to be not only a means of capturing the past in a concrete form, but also a tool for visualizing and displaying how we hope our families will look like in the future:

House decorations, including photographic images, are not, however, simply oriented to the past and to the fixing of memory. The photographs of kin displayed in the homes I visited whilst interviewing adult adoptees about their experiences of meeting birth kin, rather than evoking previous lives, seemed to express the desire of these interviewees to demonstrate materially their immersion in their present and future families. The mixing of elements of old and new furnishings, heirlooms, and objects may thus express the creative and regenerative aspects of memory work, rearranging the past and setting out a vista for the future. (Carsten 2007: 18)

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that amongst Liam's treasured photographs are pictures of himself with his sons, taken by the Visitors' Centre staff at the structured children's visits. These pictures reaffirm his continued presence in his sons' lives, his ongoing role in their future and his identity as a 'good' dad.

### *Unconventional displays*

We have seen, then, that embodied physical contact, mementos, traditions and memories may all also be used to sustain relationships. Indeed, none of these tools for family display or materializing memory have a *discreet* role to play in family life. Each is

interconnected and overlapping, and each has the potential to influence how we look back on our family history in the future. However, much of the analysis presented above has drawn on tools for family display that are widely culturally recognized as associated with the family; such as photographs, meals, celebrations and traditions. The question of what we recognize as family displays has been raised by Heaphy, who argues that displays that are closest to the experiences and values of white, middle-class families are more likely to be validated as successful family displays (Heaphy 2011). Gabb develops a similar argument, suggesting that the more conventional family displays are, the easier they may be for others to read (Gabb 2011).

Thus, groups who deviate from this white, middle-class norm and employ unconventional family practices or displays may struggle to have their actions recognized as displays of ongoing care and commitment between family members. Interestingly, Gabb gives the example of tattooing here: while I did not systematically ask participants about this but noticed that some, such as Lorna, had visible tattoos of their children's names. This not only illustrates the embodied nature of display, but also serves as a further example of the connections to be made between the tangible or embodied tools for family display and the materiality of memory. Miller has argued that tattoos also serve as a tool for anchoring memories in the way discussed above, an argument he makes in his discussion of one particular participant, Charlotte:

One advantage of bodily decorations is that she can look down at them any time and be reminded of who she is and what she has done. As she puts it, 'you can't just run home and get a photo'. She also wants to control the precise way the tattoo is created in order to facilitate the connection with one particular moment or decision in a relationship.....Ultimately she sees this laying down of memory as a resource she will be able to call on when times become difficult. (Miller 2008: 89)

As I did not explore the meaning they attribute to their tattoos with participants this argument is made somewhat tentatively, primarily to illustrate the need to be open to different forms of family display. Indeed, we should be alert to unconventional family displays, not least because the white, middle-class model of the family is often privileged in the literature (Gabb 2011; Heaphy 2011), but also because one of the difficulties of researching families is inevitably everybody's understanding of what a family looks like is grounded in their own experience of family life. Yet, participants in both the prison and the community gave specific, and often unexpected, examples of what they missed—be it the chaos of a busy house or arguing with their (now adult) child. A particularly striking example of the diversity of family practices was given by a regular visitor to Edinburgh Prison who often brought her children to visit their grandfather (her father), who I spoke to often, but she did not take part in a formal interview. However, when in passing she began to talk about things her father missed, I asked for her permission to note down what she had said, as it clearly demonstrates the individual nature of family practices:

My dad says that he really misses having a cup of tea and a fag with my mum because that is what we did every morning, because my mum and dad didn't do big things together – like they went on holiday but they didn't go out drinking or anything so it was just a little thing that was part of their routine. Or going out for a meal or eating together, that was something that my family did a lot so things like the Italian night<sup>3</sup> that meant the world to us. And it is not even just for the family, it could make

<sup>3</sup>One of the recent children's visits had been an Italian themed night where families could share a meal together.

my dad feel better too; like my dad always says I'd love it if they had a garden for tea and a fag with your mum, and these are just little things but they mean the world to us. (Fieldnote 1 October 2014)

For this family, then, it is not just the more visible family practices, such as eating a meal together, that are meaningful, it is also the cigarette with the cup of tea. While perhaps less obvious than a family meal or photograph 'a cup of tea and fag' shares a number of common features with the family practices and displays discussed above: it is grounded in tradition and routine, it was integral to family life before imprisonment, and it is sorely missed now that it can no longer be enjoyed. Similarly, other participants described how shopping for handing in DVD box sets can be an important tool not only for demonstrating care towards the person in custody, but also for maintaining closeness. Watching the same television programmes can not only offer a break from the monotony of prison life and serve as a topic of conversation on visits, but can also provide prisoners with feeling of connection with their families by watching the same programmes and 'seeing what they see' (Jewkes 2002; see also Comfort 2008 here).

Television can also be a means of continuing often highly personal family traditions. Liam, a father of two young sons who was serving a long-term sentence, noted that one of the things he found difficult about the weekend was that the prison regime did not allow him to phone his sons late enough to discuss the outcome of the day's sports. While recounting his frustrations, he told me that when his nephew was younger Liam had helped him to set up a fantasy football league, and that his nephew was now doing the same for Liam's oldest son:

**Liam:** what really frustrates me as well is like at the weekend, I always try and phone the kids at eight o'clock before they go to bed but at the weekend we get locked up at half four and it is usually about six o'clock, seven o'clock at night that I feel like this is when I should be speaking to them and I feel like I have got so much I want to tell them, and my oldest has got to the age now where he is a really really keen enthusiast in football and he's started up a fantasy football team online that I used to do with my nephew....my nephew's dad is an alcoholic and he is off the scene so he doesn't have any male influence in his life other than me, so things that me and him used to do my oldest has now grown up and is wanting to do the same things. So I am lucky that my nephew is doing the fantasy football and that with my son. (Liam, 32, long-term sentence)

Here, we can see Liam's nephew passing on the tradition of playing fantasy football to his oldest son in Liam's absence; providing a poignant illustration of the argument made above that memories of the past (Liam's nephew's memory of this) can create connections between people in the present (Morgan 1996; Finch and Mason 2000). Liam's son and his nephew are not only spending time together creating their fantasy football league, they are also jointly remembering Liam and making him and continued presence in their lives. This poignantly illustrates not only the creativity employed by families affected by imprisonment to maintain their relationships, but also how this form of punishment seeps into the most everyday and seemingly unremarkable elements of family life.

### *Concluding Discussion*

Over the course of this project participants gave full and rich accounts of their families and relationships which were often, despite their current circumstances, warm,

heartfelt and at times humorous. However, for many this was also a difficult and sensitive topic to discuss; bringing to the fore feelings of separation, sadness and regret. Thus, their stories cannot be thought of as static, unchanging or fitting into neat categories delineated by ties of blood or marriage. Rather, their relationships are actively constructed and maintained, illustrating the conceptual utility of families displays as a means of better understanding how and why families draw on resources such as visits, memories, traditions and objects to continue their family lives *despite* imprisonment. Given the diversity of participants' accounts, there is a need for all criminologists with an interest in the family to be clear about how this concept is defined and operationalized, and how this connects to the lived experiences of their participants. Indeed, by explicitly or implicitly grounding our scholarship in nuclear models of the family, it is likely that we are underestimating the true extent of the often damaging impact of imprisonment upon families. For example, while such nuclear models recognize the experiences of Liam's children, they exclude or soften the voices of his mother, great-aunt, sister, nephew and ex-partner.

Importantly, this theoretical lens also brings into focus the importance of recognizing and respecting more seemingly 'unconventional' tools for family display, such as tattoos, cigarettes, football, films and DVDs. Failure to do so privileges family displays that are easily reconcilable with dominant cultural narratives surrounding the family; potentially reproducing classed, raced and gendered models of family life. This is not only profoundly painful for those such as Lorna, who felt unable to meet social ideals of motherhood from within the prison, but also creates unequal opportunities to construct and continue family life despite imprisonment. As prison populations continue to be drawn from already marginalized groups, it is imperative that the voices of these families are heard amongst the growing discussions surrounding families affected by imprisonment amongst both academics and policymakers.

Yet, it is not only family displays which fall outside middle-class ideals and frames of reference which risk misrecognition, but also the efforts required to sustain them. Imprisonment does not only undermine relationships through physical separation, but it also reshapes and curtails the family practices and displays which constitute and perpetuate these relationships. Family relationships do not simply persist, and if they are to continue, those outside the prison must dedicate considerable time, effort, expense, imagination and emotional labour in maintaining their relationships, whether or not they have these resources to spare. Thus, while initiatives to improve the quality of family contact are welcome, it must also be recognized that their success often depends on a substantial contribution from families themselves. Given that the prison population continues to be disproportionately drawn from marginalized communities, positioning these families as both a source of support throughout imprisonment and as a resource to aid resettlement, from within a social context of austerity, cuts in services and widening inequalities, seems at best misguided. Indeed, it is essential that appropriate supports are made accessible to families to, as far as possible, limit the deleterious effects of imprisonment.

Finally, applying the concept of family displays to the experiences of families affected by imprisonment also raises more challenging questions about the purpose and effect of this particular form of punishment. An appreciation of the active nature of family relationships requires that families can no longer be seen as 'collateral' or 'unintended' victims of the criminal justice process. The erosion of reciprocal family practices, which

are at the very core of family relationships, is an inherent and very much deliberate part of the restrictions on liberty imposed by a prison sentence. Thus, an atomistic view of punishing only the individual offender cannot be sustained; as it is inevitable that the family lives, resources and relationships of those closest to him or her will also be restricted, unbalanced and curtailed. Recognizing this requires deeper reflection as to how, and in what circumstances, this severe and forced interruption to family life can be legitimately imposed. Failure to engage with these questions, and to hear the voices and perspectives of the families who are affected by imprisonment, risks limiting our understanding of not only the full effects of this form of punishment, but also the implications for justice and fairness for families, many of whom feel ‘we do the sentence too’.

#### *Funding*

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant number 1054574).

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful for the insightful comments of Rachel Condry, Lesley McAra, Anna Souhami and Richard Sparks, which have strengthened the arguments presented here.

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