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Children of Prisoners: Exploring the Impact of Families' Re-appraisal of the Role and Status of the Imprisoned Parent on Children's Coping Strategies

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Abstract

Qualitative data from a larger study on the impact of parental imprisonment in four countries found that children of prisoners face fundamentally similar psychological and social challenges. The ways that children cope, however, are influenced by the interpretative frame adopted by the adults around them, and by how issues of parental imprisonment are talked about in their families. This article argues that families have to re-appraise their view of the imprisoned parent and then decide on their policy for how to deal with this publicly. Their approach may be based on openness and honesty or may emphasise privacy and secrecy, or a combination of these. Children are likely to be influenced by their parents'/carers views, although these may cause conflict for them. Where parents/carers retain a positive view of the imprisoned parent, children are likely to benefit; where parents/carers feel issues of shame and stigma acutely, this is likely to be transmitted to their children. This is important for social workers and practitioners involved in supporting prisoners' families and for parenting programmes.

Key words

Children of prisoners, family, stigma, resilience, Europe

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Introduction

The European COPING[1] Research Project (2009-2012) was designed to explore the impact of parental imprisonment on children and young people in Germany, Romania, Sweden and the United Kingdom. This multi-strand project included a survey of children and care-givers, in-depth interviews with children and young people, parents/carers and imprisoned parents, consultations with stakeholders including service providers, schools, social workers and prison staff, and service mapping across the four countries. A series of other articles address these different dimensions of the study (see for example, Christmann et al 2012, Robertson et al 2012, Steinhoff and Berman, 2012) and others are in preparation.

This article draws on qualitative data (in-depth interviews with children and parents from 135 families) and aims to explore the inter-relationship between parents' perceptions and attitudes towards the imprisonment and children's coping strategies.

[1] Children of Prisoners, Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health. The Coping partnership comprised a University and Non-Governmental Association (NGO) in each of the four countries, assisted by Eurochips, supporting children of prisoners across Europe, and the Quaker United Nations (Human Rights) Organisation (QUNO).

Six case examples are used to illustrate the challenges children face. The article breaks new ground in two significant ways: firstly, in demonstrating that children's resilience is constructed partly through communication and dialogue and secondly, in examining how children's ability to cope with adverse events is influenced by the interpretative frame adopted by those around them (in the case of imprisonment, the process of families re-appraising the role and status of the imprisoned parent); and how these processes can either help children or cause them conflict. A key finding is that families have to develop a policy to deal with the imprisonment with the outside world. The case examples illustrate the significance of family re-appraisal processes and communication styles, and their relationship to children's resilience. It is important that these family processes are understood by agencies seeking to help children impacted by parental imprisonment.

The Impact of Parental Imprisonment

Prison populations have been rising rapidly in most European Union member states and this invariably means more children will experience the unique challenges that parental imprisonment causes to family life and wellbeing. Research has shown that parental imprisonment is a strong risk factor for mental health problems in children. Many children of prisoners are more likely than their peers to experience significant disadvantages and to come from families with multiple and complex needs, including experiencing social exclusion, family financial difficulties, family discord, stigma, isolation and victimisation, and poor educational attainment (Smith et al 2004; Scharff-Smith & Gampell 2011; Glover 2009; Ayre et al 2006; Murray 2007; Boswell 2002; King 2002; Murray et al 2009). These adverse effects can be profound

and long lasting on the child (Cunningham & Baker, 2003). Describing the mechanisms through which parental imprisonment affects child development has proved to be more challenging, despite this being crucial for designing programs to ameliorate the negative effects. Attempts to disentangle the influence of parental imprisonment from the myriad of other risk factors, including those existing prior to the imprisonment, and to which many children of imprisoned parents are exposed, has proved difficult. Many of the studies that have been carried out tend to be small-scale and there is little research that focuses upon children's experiences *per se*, with many studies being reliant upon care-giver accounts (Farrington & Murray 2005). This is the context in which the COPING Project (2010-2013) was initiated.

The Study

COPING utilised a mixed methods research design (involving both concurrent and sequential methods) to investigate the implications for mental health, well being and resilience of children of imprisoned parents in four countries: Germany, Romania, Sweden and the UK. A comprehensive ethics protocol involving permissions and approvals from the EU, the Ethics Committees of the participant research institutions, government bodies and participating agencies was applied rigorously across all four countries. The first stage of the study was a survey utilising the Goodman Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) which was carried out among 737 children aged 7-17 years (54% boys and 46% girls) recruited through organisations working with prisoners' families. Interview schedules to explore children's constructs, meanings and understandings about the impact of having a parent in prison were designed, based on consultation with key agencies working with this population in the four

countries. These were translated into German, Romanian and Swedish. A smaller group of children, all of them having a parent in prison, purposively selected for

representativeness across the range of SDQ scores[2], were invited, initially by telephone contact with their parents, to participate . Interviewees comprised 161 children, 123 non-imprisoned parents/carers, and 65 imprisoned parents/carers, across the four countries, as described in *Table 1* below

Sample

More boys than girls were interviewed. Their mean age across all four countries was 11.4 years, with a spread of children between 7 and 17. Most children were living with their biological mother (128, 79%); 19 (11.5%) lived with grandparents; and 5 (3%) with their biological father. Most children had their biological father in prison (111, 69%); 24 (15%) had their biological mother in prison. In all four countries most imprisoned parents/carers had been sentenced (138, 86%). Parents in Romania received the longest sentences, (on average 87.14 months), followed by Sweden (57.65 months), Germany (40.56 months) and the UK (31.18 months). Most children were in contact with their imprisoned parent/carer either by visits (78%), telephone (76.5%) or letter (76%). More detailed descriptive statistics are available (Jones &Wainaina-Wozna, 2013, p206).

(Table 1)

[2] The intention was to recruit equal numbers of children whose SDQ scores in the wider survey were in the *normal*, *borderline* and *abnormal r*anges. None of the four countries achieved this, partly because more children in the normal range volunteered to be interviewed .In Romania and the UK the number of children in the *normal* range was approximately equal to those in the combined *borderline* and *abnormal* ranges. In Germany and Sweden numbers of children volunteering to be interviewed were lower and these were the children who were interviewed.

Data analysis

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically through the use of NVivo (current version). Findings were translated into English and cross-country comparisons undertaken to identify socio-cultural factors specific to each context as well as the most common themes impacting all children. While we briefly mention country differences, this article reports primarily on the findings that were common across the complete data set. The main themes to emerge include resilience, attachment and loss; the significance of gender (the impact of maternal or paternal imprisonment on boys and girls); stigma, information sharing and support. A deeper level of analysis of these issues was subsequently carried out with six case examples, two each from Germany, Romania and the UK. Criteria for selecting these were that children, the parent/carer and the imprisoned parent were all interviewed; and that the cases illustrated how children and parents communicated about parental imprisonment. In other respects the six cases were not typical of the wider sample; an obvious example is that five of the children were girls. Sub-themes identified in these cases were checked back for accuracy against a larger cohort of 22 UK families. The case examples are thus illustrative of themes found in this larger sample. In the following section we briefly review the literature relating to the main themes identified in our study and then move on to present our findings.

Select Literature Review

A key word search was undertaken based on four main themes derived from our analysis:

1. resilience, attachment and loss
2. the significance of gender (the impact of maternal or paternal imprisonment on boys and girls)
3. stigma
4. information sharing and support

Given the dearth of research on the impact of parental imprisonment, we have also drawn on studies about other groups of children whose experiences of loss has parallels with those of children of prisoners.

Resilience, attachment and loss

Miller (2007) defines resilience as *'a process of growing from life stressors, or recovery outcome from a traumatic experience or risk'* (p32); and also emphasised children's uniqueness in the face of adversity helped by temperament, intelligence, problem solving skills, humour and self-esteem. Masten & Obradovic (2006) observed that individual resilience is closely related to accessible support from the family environment; they recognised, however, that there are levels of risk and adversity so overwhelming that resilience cannot occur and recovery is rare or impossible. In his research on resilience amongst children of prisoners, Ungar (2005) stressed the role of children's own agency in enabling them to overcome obstacles and describing them as *'the architects of their own experience'* (p437). Rutter (2007) has described the inoculation effect of exposure to environmental hazards for children of prisoners.

Poehlmann (2005) found that attachment problems of children of imprisoned mothers, aged up to 7, were mitigated by secure caregivers. While most children showed signs of insecurity, they were able to develop secure relationships when living in a stable care-giving situation. Parke & Clarke-Stewart (2001), reviewing the effects of parental incarceration on young children, found that the key predictor of children's adjustment and resilience was the quality of the parent-child relationship, and relationships with extended family and informal social networks, enhanced by opportunities to maintain contact with the absent parent.

The concept of ambiguous loss (Boss, 2010) – loss which is unclear, traumatic, confusing and unresolved, is relevant to the experience of children of prisoners, who can experience a mixture of shock, grief and shame, not easily resolved if their families are shunned or ostracised by their communities.

Nesmith & Ruhland (2008) found that children wanted active relationships with their imprisoned fathers, even when they felt hurt, angry or fearful, and that caregivers acted as gate-keepers for the child-father relationship. Miller (2006) found that continued face to face contact between incarcerated parents and children could enhance children's wellbeing.

Gender differences

Much of the clearest gender differences amongst children of prisoners is that while children with a father in prison are likely to continue to be looked after by their mother, care arrangements for those whose mother is imprisoned will vary widely.

(See, for example, Dallaire, 2007). Less is known with certainty about differential impacts of parental imprisonment, both paternal and maternal, on boys and girls. Dallaire (2007) found in her large USA sample that adult children of incarcerated mothers were two and a half times more likely that those with incarcerated fathers to be incarcerated themselves, which may be related to attachment disruption. Evidence from the Coping study is that children miss their imprisoned fathers as much as their mothers, particularly in the UK (Jones & Wainaina-Wozna, 2013, p303). The Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development found evidence of transmission of criminal and anti-social behaviour between males across three generations, and less evidence of cross-gender transmission (both imprisoned fathers and girls, and imprisoned mothers and boys (Farrington et al., 2009)). However, Rutter's (2007) review of resilience outcomes for children of prisoners did not identify gender as a key variable. Parke & Clarke-Stewart (2001), reviewing research in the USA, concluded that evidence about differential impacts of imprisonment on boys and girls is unclear; boys appeared more likely to demonstrate externalising behaviour problems, and girls more likely to have internalising behaviour problems. Fritsch & Burkhead (1981) concluded that the absence of a father in prison correlated with child 'acting out' behaviour; while the absence of a mother in prison correlated with child 'acting in' behaviour. Gender differences in the psychosocial impact of parental imprisonment on children is an emerging theme in research and may indicate the need for gender-sensitive responses.

Stigma, information sharing and support

All the children featured in this article experienced stigma, or fear of stigma. Previous research has found that children may experience discrimination and bullying which can affect their mental health or increase anti-social behaviour (Boswell and Wedge, 2002; Sack, 1977; Sack et al, 1976). This stigma can be 'sticky', spreading and adhering to family members (Braman, 2004, p.173) or lead to peer hostility and rejection (Boswell, 2002). In order to deal with the stigma attaching to parental imprisonment, children frequently lie about their parents' whereabouts and claim they are working abroad (Chui, 2010), as was the case for three of the six children described below. How much children know about parental imprisonment appears closely connected to concerns about children being exposed to stigma arising from incarceration. While we acknowledge that there are great differences in the experiences of HIV/AIDS-related stigma, the notion of a 'circle of stigma' borrowed from AIDS research (Gossart-Walker & Murphy, 2005) is useful in increasing understanding of the ways in which the impact of the social shame of imprisonment might expand from the individual to those around him or her. Gossart-Walker & Murphy describe stigma as '*... expand* [ing] *from the infected person, attaching itself to those closely associated with him or her, especially family'* (p290).

NGOs supporting children and families of prisoners (see for instance the European Network for Children of Imprisoned Parents (Eurochips, www.eurochips.org)) have consistently emphasised the importance for children of receiving clear information about their imprisoned parent. Poehlmann (2005) concluded that '*telling children about difficult situations* (such as parental imprisonment) *in honest, sensitive and developmentally appropriate ways'* (p682), affirmed children's trust in care givers; whereas hidden or distorted information could result in distrust or contribute to mental

health problems. Bocknek et al (2009) found that children with a greater understanding of their imprisoned relative's whereabouts appeared more comfortable when interviewed; and most children wished they knew more.

Indiscriminate sharing of information about parental imprisonment by children can be a sign of insecurity. Hagen & Myers, in their important contribution (2003), explored secrecy and social support issues for children of female prisoners. They found that more socially skilled children experiencing higher levels of support were more likely to exercise caution about sharing information, restricting this to trusted friends; whereas children with less guidance from care givers and less social support exercised less discrimination and talked more freely about parental imprisonment. Secrecy was associated with stigma surrounding maternal imprisonment. These findings illustrate the difficult choices that children of prisoners have to consider. Some well informed children may decide that guarding their privacy, or even keeping their situation a secret, may be their best option; but doing so may cut themselves off from support from friends or school.

Some previous research has identified enhanced risks for children's education and academic performance linked to parental imprisonment (Dallaire et al (2010), Chui (2010)). However, Nesmith & Ruhland (2008) found that most children in their study did well at school; and Poehlmann (2005) found that the majority of children of prisoners do not experience adverse school (and life) outcomes.

Research exploring children's reactions to other kinds of loss has relevance for children of prisoners. Wade & Smart (2002) recommended that teachers could do

more to offer a listening ear and emotional support for children experiencing parental divorce, opening up access to welfare services outside school. They found that some children wished their parents divorce to be kept private. Mullender et al (2002) found that in families experiencing domestic violence, friends were the most likely confidants for both sexes (more so for girls), especially teenagers. Both Wade & Smart (2002) and Mullender et al (2002) found that children preferred informal to formal support. Mullender et al found that some children were strengthened by their very harsh experiences, echoing Rutter (2007). Their comments emphasised the uniqueness of each child's experience.

While previous research has emphasised the importance of caregivers' support and the significance of choices children of prisoners make about whether and how to communicate their situation to others there has been less exploration of the processes families have to go through to re-appraise their view of the imprisoned parent, and the consequences this may have for their children.

Findings

The themes identified through analysis and discussed in our review of the literature above were managed through internal family processes such as adults re-appraisal of the imprisoned parent, the impact of perceptual shifts on children, and the emergence of family policies to handle shame and stigma. These issues are further explored in relation to the selected case examples.

From the total interview data set, two competing narratives emerged. The first emphasises children (and parents) adjusting to having a parent in prison; trying to get on with their lives and make them as normal as possible; and finding support where needed, from family and friends, schools and agencies. The second is about children being shocked, confused, and sometimes traumatised, and families whose lives have been turned upside down. These effects frequently occurred against a background of serious drug and alcohol misuse, domestic violence, prior experiences of the criminal justice system, and by having to re-frame every aspect of daily life. One finding from the interview data was that progress was usually made towards ensuring children's well-being if they had strong relationships with either one or both their parents, Overall, parents and children who involved schools mainly found them helpful.

The study showed that how children handle these issues is shaped partly by their prior experiences at home; partly by the attitudes and advice of both their care-giving and their imprisoned parent; and partly by individual circumstances, including type of offence and length of sentence. A key finding from our data is that challenges facing children of prisoners were broadly similar across the four countries, and these are illustrated in *Figure 1* below.

(See Figure 1)

Figure 1 is based on interview data from all four countries. Based on this we suggest that children respond to parental imprisonment in their own unique ways. They need information, although providing it can be difficult for parents. Children have to deal with ambivalent feelings including anger and sadness, and their need for continuing

contact. Where one parent has been imprisoned, the other (care-giving) parent has to re-appraise their view of their partner, and children are likely to be affected by this. The parents' criminal activities may lead to a loss of parental authority through their failure to provide an example of how to behave well to their children. We found that families usually have to develop some kind of policy about how to relate to the outside world. They may lean towards being more open, more private or more secretive; and they also have to decide whom to talk to, including relatives, friends and schools. These findings are explored further in the case examples below.

Case Examples

Information to illustrate decision making processes within families and their impact on children of prisoners is summarised in *Table 2* below based on six cases, two each from Germany, Romania and the UK. Children's age and gender, the offence and length of sentence for the imprisoned parent, and the parents' relationship status are included. Decision making processes include re-appraisal by the family of the imprisoned parent, and handling issues of shame and secrecy; and subsequent emergent family policies are covered. Information about the child's viewpoint, including their view of the imprisoned parent, conflict experienced, school progress and resilience are also included.

(See Table 2)

Five out of the six children in our case examples were girls. Three of them had their mother in prison; and three their father. Gravity of offence and length of sentence

varied widely. Two of the parents were together, or planned to be together; three were separated or divorced; and one was a single parent. Five of the children had a positive regard for their imprisoned parent; and five of them were progressing well at school. Three of them were 'only' children; two had siblings; and one lived with a cousin.

Re-appraisal Process

Following the parent's arrest and imprisonment each of the six families had to reappraise their view of the imprisoned parent and decide their future role in the family. In the cases of Lena and Andreea, their fathers' long history of violence towards, and their separation from, their partner, were determining factors. Samantha's father and his relatives had been appalled and ashamed by the gravity of her mother's offences. Natasha's father downgraded his assessment of her mother when he learnt about her long involvement in fraudulent crime. The care-giving parent and his/her extended family contributed to the re-appraisal process, which was adult led. The study showed that the imprisoned parent was in a weak position to influence the family's views, although George's mother was sympathetically regarded. Only Andreea, one of the older young people, appears to have been influential at the re-appraisal stage, strongly endorsing her mother's view that her father had forfeited his role in the family because of past behaviour and the nature of his offence (rape).

Concepts of shame and stigma were powerfully present in the re-appraisal process for all the families. Shame transferred from the offender to his immediate family.

Andreea exclaimed: *'... nobody understands (that) I'm not to blame for what happened'*. Taunting and bullying from classmates about her mother being in prison had resulted in Samantha, then aged 5, having to be moved to another school. Lena's mother recalled her anguished embarrassment when she had been assaulted by her husband: *'I've always been ashamed in front of other people ... when he attacked me, I screamed for help and the neighbours have always called my parents and the police'*.

Shame and stigma were powerful influences driving parents' behaviour, (although parents could still retain positive views about their imprisoned partners). Natasha's father was aggressively determined not to let other members of his religious community know about his wife's imprisonment. *'I have not told anybody anything. ... it is none of their business and that's it. ... I have denied everything. It's up to them to prove it'*. Anna's mother's consciousness of stigma set the tone for how her family should react to the father's imprisonment.

> *'We, women and children, suddenly have a stigma without our fault. And we can't go public with it ... but I still need to go out. And my children still need to go out without shame. In a manner with our head held high and not with head bowed'*.

Anna's mother decided not to tell her daughters' school about their father's imprisonment. She was sure that *'... her children would be looked on with different eyes'*, although her fears were not borne out in practice. Feelings of shame and stigma could be strongly reinforced by extended family members. Lena's grandfather '...

always said my father was to blame for everything that happened'. Both Samantha's and Natasha's close relatives conveyed strong disapproval of their mothers' crimes.

Family Policy

As was reflected in the wider study, all the six families developed a settled position, something like a family policy, about how to deal publicly with parental imprisonment following the re-appraisal process. All the children knew that their parent was in prison; to that extent their parents had been honest with them. Five of the families decided on a policy of privacy or secrecy in what they decided to say to acquaintances and school. Natasha's mother (in prison) rationalised her view: *'Girls can be quite nasty … they can be very vicious and she (Natasha) might be embarrassed. Maybe she is ashamed'*. Natasha was unusual in deciding not to tell anyone at her school about her mother, even though her school, which she had attended since she was three, gave her much security. She seemed mature enough to handle this. Keeping parental imprisonment secret could be stressful. Samantha (four years younger than Natasha) had been told by her aunt to say nothing at school, but could not stop herself talking to her friends (who were sympathetic) when she was upset about a cancelled visit to see her mother.

Lena's mother, and Andreea and her mother, had no wish to talk to anyone outside the family. The children mainly took their lead from their parents. Three of them (Natasha, Anna and George) preferred to let their friends think that their imprisoned parent was working abroad[3]. Anna only shared this with her best friend. George

[3] We learnt that many Romanian fathers had to look for work abroad, and that this was a convenient "cover story" for children of imprisoned parents.

preferred to keep things private *'... I wouldn't want to speak with anybody else ...I wasn't told it is a secret. I really don't want others to know about it'.* Anna's parents allowed their daughters to decide for themselves. Her decision was: *'... We didn't want that everybody knows. It was kind of embarrassing ... I did not often talk about it. I rather pushed it to the back of my mind'.* Lena talked only to her best friend *'... because I was afraid of how others might react, when I tell them that my dad is in jail. I was afraid of being rejected by people and getting excluded'.*

George's family was the only one of the six which decided on a policy of openness and honesty, which they thought was in his best interests. His aunt had told him about his mother straight away: *'It wasn't easy, but he had to know. ... The truth told from the beginning doesn't hurt later on'.* His mother said: *'Why should the child be told by somebody: "Kid ... shut up ... your mum's in jail ...?" The child would be hurt ... I think the right thing to do is to say the truth'.* His aunt decided to tell his school which *'... reacted very well. There were no degrading attitudes'.* His mother seemed sure that her son would benefit from knowing the facts. It was George's decision not to adopt this approach with his friends.

Loss; children's views and experiences

Although children's role in the (family) re-appraisal of the imprisoned parent may be marginal, their views about their situation are individual and distinctive, and this may be explained partly by the different kinds of loss which children and parents experience. Natasha had lost her constant guide, companion and role model, while her father had lost both a regular source of income and community esteem. While

Samantha missed her mother greatly, she was an embarrassing and shameful memory for her father. Anna's father had been her hero and she missed him sorely when he was imprisoned, while her mother's experience seemed to be more a loss of status and respectability. Lena continued to feel the loss of her father, and her mother, very conscious of her lost dignity and divorced from Lena's father, probably could not help her much. George's loss of his mother was more bearable because of the support of his extended family, who had also lost a loved family member. Rather differently, Andreea and her mother had both mainly experienced loss of a source of income, and of reputation. Like her mother, Andreea was happy that her father was in jail because *'...he used to curse and beat me for no reason'*.

While Natasha respected her father's views, and probably understood his exasperation about her mother's offences and their impact on the family's finances, she continued to need her mother's guidance and was in frequent telephone contact with her. Samantha felt that her father did not care that her mother was in prison and was discouraging her contact with her. Lena's contact with her father was still important to her, long after her parents' divorce, and notwithstanding his imprisonment.

Lena, Anna and Natasha found their situations hurtful. Lena had suffered from insomnia, nightmares and physical symptoms, and no solution was in sight. Anna said that she and her sister had tried to act as if things were normal while their father was in prison, *'but inside it was very painful'*. Natasha found that covering up for her mother's absence with her friends could be embarrassing. Samantha's father made sure that there were no photographs of her mother on display, to avoid embarrassing questions. Samantha kept her photographs and memory box out of sight upstairs. She

longed for closer contact with her, but her mother's release from prison was a very distant prospect.

Resilience

In spite of the challenges they faced, five of the children's positive progress at school, which provided opportunities for achievement, demonstrated their resilience. Being able to socialise with friends was important for Andreea, Natasha and George, none of whom were looking for support regarding their parent being in prison, which they preferred to keep private. In spite of her scarred history, Samantha, who had witnessed her mother's crime and said that she had been abused by her stepmother, remained resilient, although vulnerable. Natasha was dignified and uncomplaining. Anna had put her problems behind her after her father's release, and had never wanted to dwell on her troubles. By contrast, Lena's school work had deteriorated and she still seemed psychologically distressed after her father's release from prison; the odds seemed to have been stacked too highly against her.

The way families perceived the impact of offences on children varied considerably. Samantha's and George's families took opposing views of their mothers' murder convictions. Lena's and Andreea's families' assessments of their fathers' offences were coloured by their earlier violence towards their partners. Re-appraisal of the imprisoned parent could also have been linked to parental status: Anna's and Natasha's parents were still together and both had their children's welfare in mind; Samantha's and Lena's parents had separated, and there was less evidence in these two families of understanding of the child's point of view. The re-appraisal process

may have impacted differently on the three 'only' children (Natasha, Samantha and Lena), who were more on their own, than on Anna and Andreea, who had the responsibility and companionship of younger siblings.

Country Differences

This article has highlighted family processes and decision-making common to all four countries studied, and shared experiences and challenges of children of prisoners. However, differences between the countries were identified, which potentially may impact on how families perceive imprisoned parents.

Romania being the most economically disadvantaged of the four countries relied more on the extended family unit as a source of support for children, and had far fewer services available. George's story illustrates how the wider extended family played a decisive role in the re-appraisal (and in this case continued support) of George's imprisoned mother. A more tentative finding in Germany was a widespread fear of stigma, and parental imprisonment seeming to be an affront to properly ordered life. Only a minority of German families interviewed told the children's schools that their parent was in prison. Fear of wider societal disapproval in Germany may potentially negatively influence families' assessment of imprisoned parents. In the UK we found evidence of reserve and privacy, of families accepting responsibility, and of self reliance rather than reliance on external support or experts. Re-appraisal of the imprisoned parent in the UK may therefore to this extent have been less child focused.

Discussion

The case examples focus on internal family processes; on the generic challenges facing children of prisoners; and emphasise the importance of adult re-appraisal of the imprisoned parent, its impact on children, and the emergence of family policies. Children in different countries face common challenges because they share experiences of loss highlighted in the literature as being filtered through families' different experience of stigma (an area for further research). The cases studied reinforce Hagen & Myers' conclusion that socially skilled and well supported children of prisoners exercise caution and discretion in their decisions about sharing information (Hagen & Myers, 2003). The children knew enough about their parents' situation. They appeared to value privacy and informal support as much as children experiencing parental divorce (Wade & Smart, 2002). Friends were key confidants for children experiencing parental violence (Mullender et al, 2002). Our study found that some children of prisoners can mature and even be strengthened by their harsh experiences, confirming Rutter's finding (2007).

The case examples illustrate the difficulties of reaching firm conclusions about gender differences. The three children whose mothers were in prison were profoundly impacted. Two of the mothers had been convicted of murder and their long sentences and related stigma were key factors. The third (Natasha)'s daily contact with her mother was crucial in helping her organise her life. Of those whose father was (or had been) in prison two had the support they needed from her mother and the other did not. Five of them demonstrated much resilience, as evidenced by their progress at school and they handled their experience of loss and stigma with dignity. Three of them (Natasha, Samantha and Anna) consciously decided not to let their situation

dominate their social and school lives. Four of the girls and the one boy thought carefully about how to handle parental imprisonment and were able to express their feelings clearly.

The case examples illustrate an important issue to emerge in the larger data set: that parental imprisonment requires families to take stock, to re-appraise their view of the imprisoned parent and to adjust to their altered state. Our contention is that the re-appraisal process almost always happens, and is usually led by the care-giving parent and other adult family members. In the interpretative frame adopted by adults, they will be influenced by the nature of the offence, by how much the imprisonment impacted on the family's circumstances (for example, income and housing); and by how much or how little shame and embarrassment the imprisonment caused. The process of re-appraisal may be invisible or impenetrable for children, but how adults interpret parental imprisonment and convey this to children seems certain to impact on them and to influence their perception of their imprisoned parent. Children are likely to experience conflict if their view of the imprisoned parent differs significantly from that of adults in the family.

Evidence that families develop a policy for handling parental imprisonment, based on the re-appraisal process (the interpretative frame), is strongly supported by our qualitative data, including the case examples. While it might have been expected that families would prevaricate about their preferred way of handling the imprisonment, they seemed not to do so, and their policy mind-set seemed to guide their subsequent actions. Children may contribute to the family policy, if encouraged to do so. The study found that their role is unlikely to be decisive except where children or young

people have taken on an adult role within the family, for example in cases where the care-giving parent is incapacitated through physical or mental disability; or where the parent is too distressed because of the nature of their partner's offence or by extreme experience of stigma to be able to function as a parent.

Limitations

While the study was successful in obtaining comparable interview data from the four countries, and in ensuring a consistent approach to interviewing participants, there were significant limitations. More children from the *'normal'* than the *'borderline/abnormal'* groups, as assessed through the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, were interviewed. The gravity of offence and length of sentence of imprisoned parents varied considerably between countries. Children interviewed were all aged between 7 and 17; and children not in contact with their imprisoned parents were under-represented. Some sampling bias was evident: one example was that in Sweden most children recruited were supported by an NGO which strongly encouraged parents to ensure that their children had accurate information about the imprisonment.

Policy and Practice Implications

Our findings have significant implications for agencies working with families of prisoners. Professionals working with families of prisoners need to be able to help children and care givers, where required, to understand the implications of the loss of their imprisoned parent, their ambivalent or conflicted feelings, and their hopes and

plans for the future. Children may need help able to disentangle their own views from those of other family members. Care-giving and imprisoned parents may need support in focusing on their children's needs at a very difficult time for themselves. Families have to decide how much information they wish to share; and with whom. Parents may feel able to be honest with their children and close relatives, but still be reluctant about sharing information more widely. Agencies need to be aware of family policies for handling parental imprisonment. Some parents will need help in working out the imprisoned parent's new status in the family and in handling associated stigma. Families have to decide whether to share information with schools, which can open up a source of support for children. Some families, for example where parents have committed offences against children, will need protection and shelter from neighbourhood abuse.

Notes

1 Children of Prisoners, Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health. The Coping partnership comprised a University and Non-Governmental Association (NGO) in each of the four countries, assisted by Eurochips, supporting children of prisoners across Europe, and the Quaker United Nations (Human Rights) Organisation (QUNO).

2 The intention was to recruit equal numbers of children whose SDQ scores in the wider survey were in the *normal*, *borderline* and *abnormal r*anges. None of the four countries achieved this, partly because more children in the normal range volunteered to be interviewed .In Romania and the UK the number of children in the *normal* range was approximately equal to those in the combined *borderline* and *abnormal* ranges. In Germany and Sweden numbers of children volunteering to be interviewed were lower and these were the children who were interviewed.

3 We learnt that many Romanian fathers had to look for work abroad, and that this was a convenient "cover story" for children of imprisoned parents.

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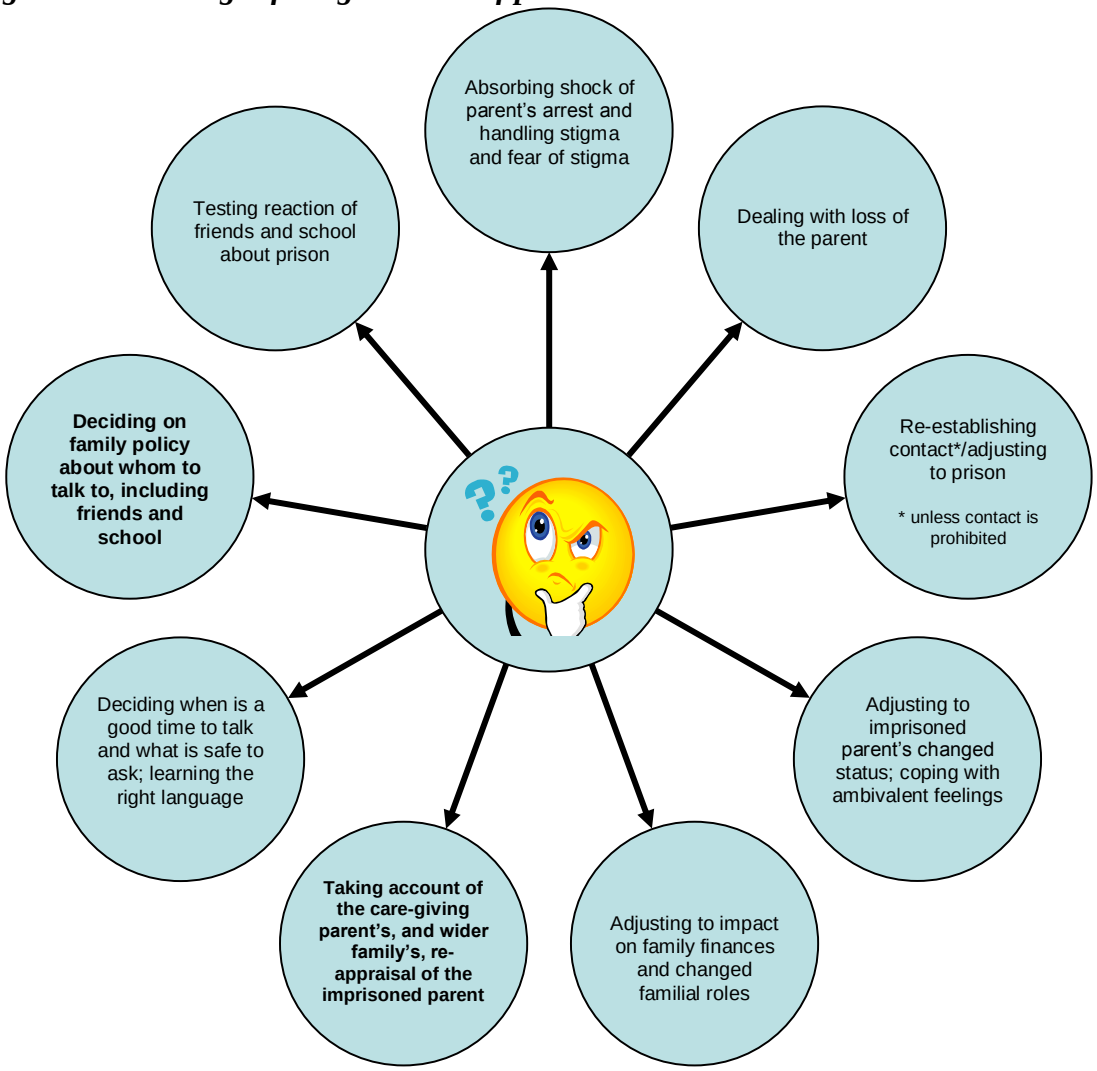
Tables and Figure

Table 1: Number of interviews conducted in the four countries

	UK	**Germany**	**Romania**	**Sweden**	**Total**
Families	47	26	35	27	135
Non-imprisoned parents/carers	46	25	33	19	123
Imprisoned parents/carers	26	7	20	12	65
Children	67	27	38	29	161
Male Children	39	12	23	11	85
Female Children	28	17	15	18	78
Mean Age of Children	11.60	11.69	10.66	11.83	Average 11.44

Figure 1: Challenges facing children of prisoners



The figure is based on evidence from COPING interviews.

Table 2 - Analysis of Case Examples

Name, Age, Gender, Country & Family	Parent in Prison	Parents Status	Offence	Sentence Length (years)	Re-appraisal of Imprisoned Parent and his family	Stigma – strength	Family Policy	Child's View	Attitude to Imprisoned	School Progress	Conflict – child's experience	Resilience (child)
Natasha G14 UK Only child with father	Mother	Together	Fraud	3½	Father downgraded mother because of offences.	Shame apparent.	Determined, combative, secrecy, privacy, deceit.	F14 respects father's views; remains very close to mother; frequent contact.	✓	✓✓	Evident; managed by F14 without fuss.	School life and success very important to F14. Support from mother, PGM and aunt
Samantha G10 UK Only child with father	Mother	Separated	Murder	14 Minimum	Mother "closed out" by father & family.	Family shame and revulsion.	Secrecy and privacy caused by embarrassment.	Lives with father; longs for closer contact with mother.	✓	✓	Evident because family reject mother.	Resilient in spite of trauma; vulnerable. Support from PGF, aunt, friends.
Anna G15 Germany With mother and 2 younger sisters	Father	Together	Drug Offences	3½	Parents adjusted to offences.	Very conscious of societal stigma.	Privacy/secrecy. F15 free to decide whom to tell.	Close to father; able to make own choices.	✓	✓	Painful experience but little conflict within family; mother supportive.	F15 maturing; problems now in past. ✓ use of therapeutic group (mother & F15).

Lena G17 Germany Only child with mother	Father	Divorced	Theft Robbery Assault	4	Scarred by father's earlier violence to mother; family now reject father.	Acute shame and stigma.	No discussion outside family; secrecy.	Relationship with father important to F17; very conscious of stigma/shame.	✓	X	Extremely conflicted situation for F17; insomnia, nightmares and physical symptoms.	Trauma of pas violence and conflict severe Some support from MGPs and best friend
George B12 Romania Only child; lives with extended family, aunt and cousins	Mother	Single Parent	Murder	8	Family have accepted mother's crime, and support her.	Family managing stigma, and less affected by it.	Openness, honesty; privacy outside family.	Loves his mother; frequent contact. Supported by family.	✓	✓	Conflict reduced because of family support.	Evidence of resilience in recovering performance a school/sports.
Andreea G15 Romania With mother and 2 younger siblings	Father	Separated	Rape	4	Mother rejects partner because of offence and long-standing violence. F17 agrees.	Family stigmatised and ostracised by local community because of offence.	Privacy and reluctance to talk outside family.	Rejects father; united front with family to try to deal with situation and community hostility.	X	✓✓	Less conflict because F15 united with mother; F17 angry about her situation.	Resilient; taking positive responsibility for school work and enjoys socialising.
G= Girl B= Boy									✓=positive ✓✓=very positive X=negative			PGM=paterna grandmother PGF=paternal grandfather MGP=materna grandparent