A VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHIC ENQUIRY: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF ADULT CHILDREN WITH A PARENT IN PRISON

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Copyright statement

Abstract

Significant increases in prison populations in England and Wales, the United States and throughout Western Europe have consequently led to an increase in children who will experience parental imprisonment within these locations. Despite increased academic interest in children with a parent in prison, it remains that relatively little is known about this highly heterogeneous and hard-to-reach social group. In particular, there is a dearth of research undertaken which assesses adult children's perspectives and experiences of parental imprisonment. The overall aim of this exploratory study thus attempted to overcome this gap in knowledge and examined current and retrospective accounts of parental imprisonment from adult children. Bearing in mind the hard-to-reach aspect of this social group, an unobtrusive, virtual ethnographic enquiry was employed for this study.

A thematic analysis of asynchronous computer mediated communication data, as found in an online virtual community comprising adult children with a parent in prison, was undertaken. A central theoretical concept utilised in this study was 'stigma by association'. This concept was a useful analytic tool and served to highlight potential methods of information control and/or management adult children with a parent in prison may employ as a means of limiting the effects of stigma on their identity. Findings indicated that concealment, secrecy and withholding information about parental imprisonment might be employed by this social group. Reasons for adult children's loss of contact with an imprisoned parent might include barriers to consistent and sustained contact, a parent's prolonged imprisonment and/or high rate of recidivism. In addition, adult children with a parent in prison could be parentified, where they might be required to adopt an emotional and/or financial caregiver role for their imprisoned parent, non-imprisoned parent and/or younger siblings.

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Dedications and Acknowledgements

Dedicated to the memory of my beloved grandmother Avril Mary Swallow, for her generosity, encouragement, and especially for her unerring belief in each person's potential, including mine.

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'There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.' (Arundhati Roy).

List of abbreviations

AOIR   Association of Internet Researchers

BSA   British Sociological Association

CMC   Computer mediated communication

DWP   Department for Work and Pensions

KWIC   Key Words in Context

PNC   Police National Computer

TOS   Terms of Service

VC   Virtual Community

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background Context

According to *Penal Reform International's* (2016) report on global prison trends the world prison population has risen by 10% since 2004. The United States had one of the world's highest rates of imprisonment at 724 per 100,000 population during 2014, which amounted to just over 2.2 million people imprisoned (Institute for Criminal Policy Research, 2014). England and Wales had the highest prison population in Western Europe, with 149 people for every 100,000 of the population (Ministry of Justice, 2015). There were approximately 2.7 million children with a parent in prison in the United States as of 2010, which equated to 1 in every 28 children (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010). Approximately 200,000 children in England and Wales had a parent in prison during 2009 (Williams et al., 2012). Estimates suggest that 800,000 children within the European Union experience parental imprisonment each day (Scharff-Smith and Gampell, 2011).

Increases in world prison populations have led to scholars to claim, particularly in the United States, that there has been a punitive turn, which consequently led to an era of mass imprisonment (Wacquant, 2001). Debates also claimed that a 'culture of control' (Garland, 2001) had emerged and was most evident in the United States and Western Europe. A full discussion of potential explanations for increases in prison populations is beyond the scope of this study. The most important aspect to increases in prison populations and most relevant to this study are the consequences of imprisonment for families, more specifically, consequences for (adult) children with a parent in prison.

It is argued that domestic and childcare responsibility links to gender roles and women's continued responsibility within domestic and/or childcare domains (Codd, 2008; Petrillo, 2007). It is further claimed that the majority of remaining caregivers for children with a parent in prison are mothers, which correlates with the number of men and women in

prison, in that men are more likely to be imprisoned (Glaze and Maruschak, 2010; Parke and Clarke-Stewart, 2001; Johnston, 1995). For example, as of week ending 30th December 2016, the prison population in England and Wales was 3,869 females and 80,988 males (HM Prison Service, 2016). According to Johnston (1995) in America around three-quarters of mothers, and half of fathers, lived with their children prior to imprisonment. There is also increasing evidence that grandparents become responsible for the care of children with a parent in prison (Philips and Dettlaff, 2009; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

The *Prison Reform Trust* (2013) stated that women's imprisonment rates in England and Wales increased rapidly between 1995 and 2010, by 115% (Ministry of Justice, 2013). Home Office research revealed that an estimated 66% of female prisoners had dependent children under 18 years old within England and Wales (Hamlyn and Lewis, 2000). A central report highlighted the experiences of women in prison in England and Wales, *The Corston Report* (2007), claimed that approximately 18,000 children during 2007, and 17,240 children during 2010 (Wilks-Wiffen, 2011) were separated from their imprisoned mothers. For children who were in their mother's care at the point of imprisonment in England and Wales, it was suggested that 9% were cared for by their fathers and 5% remained in the family home (Corston, 2007). In contrast, an earlier suggestion from results of a survey of male prisoners stated that 90% of children with a father in prison were cared for by their mothers (Dodd and Hunter, 1992).

Wolfe (1999) claimed that 55% of women in prison in England and Wales did not have their children living with them at the time of their imprisonment. From analysis of linked data from the Police National Computer (PNC) and Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) benefits data, an estimate from the Ministry of Justice (2015) suggested that between 24% and 33% of female offenders had dependent children, who had an average of 1.9 children each. In a special report by the *Bureau of Justice Statistics* in the United States, during 2007 it was claimed that 37% of imprisoned parents held in state prison were living with at

least one of their children in the month prior to their arrest. In the United States, mothers were more likely to be living with at least one child in the month prior to arrest, which equated to 60% of mothers compared to 36% of fathers (Glaze and Muruschak, 2010).

Although research has increased on this topic, only quite recently has this social group received the interest of an international audience in the form of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 58th General Day of Discussion 2011 entitled: 'Children of Incarcerated Parents' held at the United Nations, Geneva (United Nations, 2011). Numerous representatives from academic, legal, professional, non-governmental and practitioner based organisations advocated their interest in this social group, including submissions of recommendations from each respective area of interest.

This event serves to highlight the academic neglect of this social group, when one considers early Prison Reformer Elizabeth Fry's initial concern was for the children of imprisoned females she visited in 1817, 194 years earlier (Gurney, 1819). Despite increased interest in this topic, it remains that further research is required. There is a dearth of research concerning adult children with a parent in prison that might further inform knowledge of this social group, which influenced the choice of topic for this study.

1.2 Aims of the Study

Research relating to children with a parent in prison has tended to focus on younger children with a parent in prison (below the age of 18), leaving a dearth of research and insights into adult children's experiences of parental imprisonment. This research aims to explore and recognise the experiences and challenges adult children with a parent in prison might face. Overall, the intention of this research is to add to current knowledge of this social group, which might also inform debate about empowerment, and how policy makers and practitioners might empower children who experience parental imprisonment.

The aims of the research are as follows:

Research Aim 1: Investigate and assess the effects, perspectives and experiences of parental imprisonment particular to adult children.

Research Aim 2: Examine and explore adult children's perceptions and experiences of imprisoned parent/s and parenting.

Research Aim 3: Undertake an analysis of the effects of stigma by association from the perspective of adult children with a parent in prison.

Research Aim 4: Identify, examine and explore potential methods employed by adult children with a parent in prison to limit potential effects of stigma by association.

1.3 Outline of the Thesis

In addressing these aims, the outline of this thesis is as follows. Chapter two is a review of existing literature which provides the reader with a broad, critical review and analysis of literature relating to children with a parent in prison. The review concludes with an evaluation of the gaps in current research and how they relate to this studies research aims. Chapter three provides an overview of the methodology employed for this study, and includes a discussion of the philosophical underpinnings and epistemology adopted for this study. Online research methods are discussed alongside a discussion of the rationale of the chosen method employed for this study, namely a virtual ethnography. A discussion of the sample, data collection method and the use of a thematic analysis of asynchronous, online computer mediated communication data will be provided. Lastly, ethical considerations will be addressed herein.

Chapter four discusses the main research findings concerning adult children's experiences and perceptions of imprisoned parents and parenting and addresses Aims 1 and 2 set for this study. Chapter five presents an analysis and discussion of the main findings concerning stigma by association, stigma and stigmatisation from the perspective of adult children with a parent in prison, and specifically addresses Aim 3 and 4 set for this study. A presentation of the main conclusions to be drawn from this study will be provided in chapter six. This will also include a section which will address the limitations of this study and opportunities for further research on this topic.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The following review provides a broad overview and critical analysis of academic literature available in relation to children with a parent in prison. A substantial amount of academic literature and media discourse construct somewhat adverse outlooks and outcomes for children who experience parental imprisonment. There appears to be a general consensus among current researchers that there are particularly negative effects on children who experience parental imprisonment. Negative effects might include experiences of trauma and increased risk of experiencing mental health problems (Roberts et al., 2014; Glover, 2009; Laing and McCarthy, 2005; Lowenstein, 1986); an increased risk of expressing delinquency, offending and/or antisocial behaviour (Besemer, 2012; Goodwin and Davis, 2011; Repo-Tiihonen et al., 2010); stigma and stigmatisation (Phillips and Gates, 2011; Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008); social isolation, shame, guilt and social exclusion (Schlafer et al., 2012; Martynowicz, 2011; Social Exclusion Unit, 2002).

This review will begin by providing an overview of broad, general effects of parental imprisonment on children. An analysis of one of the largest and growing bodies of academic literature that tends to view children with a parent in prison, principally boys, through a lens of criminality will follow. This includes a review of the most notable studies that focus on intergenerational transmission of crime, who suggest children whose parents are imprisoned may be more likely to, and are at risk of, expressing anti-social and/or delinquent behaviour (Murray et al., 2012; Van der Rakt et al., 2010). Academic discourse also tends to pathologise and/or criminalise children who experience parental imprisonment, and focus attention on constructing them as also being particularly susceptible to and at risk of mental health problems and/or delinquent/antisocial behaviour (Jones et al., 2013; Murray et al., 012; Wildeman, 2010; Farrington et al., 2009; Glover, 2009; Murray and Farrington, 2006).

A similarly large and growing body of literature relating to children with a parent in prison and their potential to experience mental health problems (Roberts et al., 2014; Laing and McCarthy, 2005) will be reviewed. It is argued by researchers that children with a parent in prison are more susceptible to mental health problems, particularly in light of the strain of parent-child separation, trauma and additional challenges parental imprisonment might generate (Roberts et al., 2014; Murray and Farrington, 2005). Finally, the potential for children with a parent in prison to be stigmatised will be addressed (Philips and Gates, 2011; Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008; Brown, 2001). In particular, the concept of a 'courtesy' stigma (Goffman, 1963) also referred to as 'associative stigma' (Mehta & Farina, 1988), referred to as stigma by association throughout this thesis, will be reviewed herein. This includes an assessment of the potential effects of stigma by association on adult children with a parent in prison (Phillips and Gates, 2011). The chapter concludes with a summary of current gaps in the literature and the purpose of this investigation and its significance.

2.2 Children with a Parent in Prison: Parental Imprisonment and its Impact on Children

Early estimates suggested that: '7% of the child population (approximately 600,000) will experience the imprisonment of a parent during their time at school' each year in England and Wales (Gampell, 2003, p. 1). It is estimated that the number of children experiencing parental imprisonment equates to: 'around two and a half times the number of children in care, and over six times the number of children on the Child Protection Register' (Ministry of Justice and Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2007, p.7). Codd (2008) posits that children with a parent in prison become single parent families once a parent is imprisoned, and children might thus experience additional financial strain over and above that of parental imprisonment. The *Joseph Rowntree Foundation* also proposed that as a direct consequence of imprisonment potential costs to state agencies (for example, the NHS and social services) and support services from voluntary organisations could be on average £4,810, per family (Smith et al., 2007).

Literature presents 'maintaining family ties' as conducive to children's wellbeing and might contribute to lower rates of reoffending (Saunders and McArthur, 2013). Losel et al. (2012) also concluded that high quality family relationships for men leaving prison were important in reducing re-offending. However, Codd (2007) problematizes these assertions and highlights the gender bias of childcare responsibilities and that the burden of managing prisoner resettlement might fall disproportionately on women, already struggling with the imprisonment of a spouse/family member. Schlafer et al. (2012) further argues that maintaining such ties might not be considered positively by all children with a parent in prison, and that destabilisation of children's home life might impact negatively on both primary/remaining caregiver and child where a disruptive parent is reintroduced. Research has also found that children with a parent in prison might also be placed into a parentified position as a result of parental imprisonment (Codd, 2008).

Laing and McCarthy (2005, p. 4) stated that: '…children may experience fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, guilt, loneliness, low self-esteem, depression [and] emotional withdrawal'. The impact on families when a family member is imprisoned can be highly problematic, especially if the imprisonment is sudden and unexpected. Lowenstein (1986) conducted semi-structured interviews with remaining caregivers of children experiencing parental imprisonment, predominantly mothers, not the children. The study claimed that children experienced behavioural and emotional problems as a direct result of their father's imprisonment and indicated that many children would like more contact with their imprisoned parent. Children with a parent in prison are a diverse and hard to reach social group who might be unwilling to discuss their 'lived experiences' openly and freely with those they perceive as official/authority figures and/or treat authoritative institutions with contempt, often due to a parent being forcibly removed from them by such figures (Brown, 2001).

Boswell (2002) carried out a small scale qualitative study and conducted interviews with children with a parent in prison (*n*17). Primarily, this study aimed to give the children of prisoners a platform to 'voice' their experiences of parental imprisonment. Some of the children interviewed told how they found it difficult to confide in fellow pupils and teachers at school about their father's imprisonment. In part, due to feelings of shame and fears about being teased or bullied and some referred to instances of being bullied by their peers in a school setting, which lead them to feel isolated. Although the results of this study uncovered valuable data relating to children with a father in prison, as with many studies attempting to study this issue, the study was particularly small-scale and interviews were not particularly in-depth due to time constraints and problems securing interviews with these children.

So far this section has briefly introduced broad, general effects of parental imprisonment on children. The following section will now introduce the impact parental imprisonment might have on children with a parent in prison in more depth, and the next section will concentrate on intergenerational transmission of crime research.

2.3 Inter-generational Transmission of Crime and the Management of Risk

Murray and Farrington (2005) analysed longitudinal data to assess antisocial behaviour and delinquency through the life-course of children with a parent in prison; this was the first prospective study of outcomes through the life-course. It was concluded that children with a parent in prison were a: '…highly vulnerable group' who were: 'at risk of expressing antisocial behaviour and delinquency, up to age 40' (Murray and Farrington, 2005, p.1269). Murray and Farrington (2005) claimed that this group of children suffered worse outcomes and were exposed to more risk of expressing antisocial behaviour and delinquency, than parent-child separation for other reasons, such as divorce.

Bijleveld and Wijkman (2009, p.143) argue that: 'Numerous studies have shown that when parents are delinquent their offspring have an increased risk of becoming delinquent themselves'. The study analysed conviction data on five generations (*n*6322) that covered the years 1882 to 2007 to assess intergenerational transmission of crime from parent to child. In conclusion to the study they conceded that:

> 'While the results confirm what was known from previous studies, namely, that offending parents increase the risk that their children offend, our results nevertheless show that the risk increase was, in general, not very high.' (Bijleveld and Wijkman, 2009, p.154).

Aaron and Dallaire (2009) undertook a hierarchical linear regression analysis of an archival dataset of children's risk experiences, as reported by children with experience of parental imprisonment between the ages of 10-14, and their parents and/or guardians. Self-reports of children's delinquency were analysed at two separate points in time. Two hypotheses were tested, firstly, that children would self-report being exposed to higher levels of risk, than that of their peers who had not had exposure to parental imprisonment. Secondly, they hypothesised that children with experience of parental imprisonment would exhibit more delinquent behaviour than their peers who had not.

Variables used to assess children's exposure to risk were conceptualised as: 'unemployed parent, parental drug use, parent did not complete high school, single-parent family, 4 or more kids at home, family financial problems' (Aaron and Dallaire, 2009, p.1474). Family processes of risk were examined and included levels of family victimization and conflict. A child's ethnic minority status was also conceptualised as a risk factor, with the reasoning that it was:

> '…included as a risk factor for psychosocial maladaptation in several studies…and represents a relative social disadvantage placed on these

individuals. Though the relation between delinquency and race is complex and may be explained by other contextual risk variables…the total arrest rate for black juveniles aged 10–17 is more than twice that as of white juveniles' (Aaron and Dallaire, 2009, p.1474).

The study concluded that when sibling delinquency and family victimisation were controlled for, delinquent behaviours of children who had experienced parental imprisonment could not be predicted. They found that children in this study were not exposed to higher levels of risk than that of their peers who had not experienced parental imprisonment. Aaron and Dallaire's (2009) study included methodological deficiencies including missing data and some participants being excluded from the analyses altogether. The authors conceded that even though the analyses were quite large, with the opportunity to detect just small changes, little concordance was found between parental and self-reports of delinquency.

A major weakness of both Aaron and Dallaire's (2009) and Murray and Farrington's (2005) studies are the resulting adverse gender (specifically male children) and ethnic constructions of children with an imprisoned parent, as Armstrong (2006, p. 108) asserts, when: '…the link between risk factors and such social markers as ethnic group or gender are not adequately explained, it leaves open the possibility of defining ethnic group or gender as a risk factor in itself.' Reducing the complexity of human experience and behaviour to a limited number of variables and perceived risk factors is also problematic and may not sufficiently distinguish causal factors for specific individual behaviours (Besemer et al., 2011). The use of self-reports is notoriously problematic and often lack reliability in the analysis of crime data; in that the accuracy of data retrieved from self-reports relies on truthful responses and excellent memory recall of participants, which are not always possible (Maguire et al., 2007).

A Home Office study conducted by Murray and Farrington (2005) suggested that 65% of male children with a parent in prison might go on to commit crime. The data used to make this assertion was again derived from the *Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development [Great Britain], 1961-1981,* which began over half a century ago where social and cultural conditions were quite different to todays (Farrington, 1994). The *Cambridge study* was a prospective longitudinal study into delinquent development where 411 working class males, born in the years directly before and after 1953, were followed from age eight up to age thirty-two. Twenty-three participants were male, urban, working class children with a parent in prison. The figure of 65% was originally contested and Scharff-Smith and Gampell (2011, p.25) who brought attention to the author's acknowledgement: 'that their hypothesis must be treated with caution'. Murray and Farrington's (2005) study analysed male children and claimed that male children with a parent in prison may go on to commit offences in the future. Later analysis of the same data from this study by Murray & Farrington (2008) claimed that:

> 'Antisocial-delinquent outcomes were compared between 23 boys who were separated because of parental imprisonment…Parental imprisonment during childhood was a strong predictor of antisocial-delinquent outcomes through the life course…boys separated because of parental imprisonment, 65 percent were convicted between ages 19 and 32, compared with 21 percent of boys with no history of parental imprisonment or separation…' (p. 150).

They conceded that the: '…main limitation of the Cambridge Study for assessing the association between parental imprisonment and child antisocial behaviour is the small number of boys with imprisoned parents in the study' (Murray & Farrington, 2008, p. 152). The report summarised that:

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> '…parental imprisonment might be associated with negative child outcomes because children of prisoners are disproportionately exposed to pre-existing social disadvantage, not because parental imprisonment has a causal effect' (Murray & Farrington, 2008, p. 166).

The report concluded that: '…there is no experimental evidence on which to draw firm conclusions about the causal effects of parental imprisonment on children' (Murray & Farrington, 2008, p.170). Nevertheless, the gendered nature of this claim was lost and extended to all children with a parent in prison, both male and female, as well as to other socially excluded and marginalised children. Hazel Blears, the former UK Minister of State for Crime Reduction, Policing and Community Safety, claimed that children with a father in prison *will* go on to commit crime, in an attempt to have children with a parent in prison 'tracked' and 'targeted' at school, posing them as a risk of becoming future offenders:

> 'We can predict the risk factors that will lead a child into offending behaviour…About 125,000 kids have a dad in prison. That's a huge risk factor. Something like 65 per cent of those kids will end up in prison themselves. We need to track the children who are most at risk…I don't think it is stigmatising those children by targeting them…' (Woolf, 2004).

It remains unclear from where the figure Hazel Blears quoted was derived. The aforementioned government initiative was eventually abandoned, with complaints that children with a parent in prison might already be stigmatised and that proposed surveillance had the potential to stigmatise them further and compromise their rights (Scharff-Smith and Gampell, 2011; Sherlock, 2004). Despite evidence remaining equivocal, media reports in the UK continue to criminalise and stigmatise children with a parent in prison and claim that: '…65% of boys with a parent in prison *will* go on to offend…' in their coverage of new government initiatives for the prison estate and/or children with a parent in prison (Laws,

2016; Conway, 2014; Lyndon, 2014). In these statements, however, risk is replaced and transformed into predictive certainty.

Farrington et al. (2009) reanalysed data derived from the *Cambridge Study* to assess intergenerational transmission of crime by analysis of data from three generations of families. Data from three generations of individuals were analysed, the original boys from the *Cambridge Study* (generation two) were compared with their mothers and fathers (generation one) and with their own biological children (generation three), which included a criminal records search on all participants. The authors noted that many records were either deleted or not transferred over to new mediums of criminal record systems, resulting in a high probability for missing data.

Family risk factors in Farrington et al.'s (2009) study were, among others, having a young father, spouse assault, unmarried and/or divorced parents. Socio-economic risk factors included being unemployed, having low pay and not being a home owner. Finally, children's individual risk factors included daring, low verbal and low non-verbal IQ, and being unpopular. Conclusions claimed that there was evidence of a transmission of crime from generation one, to generation two, and from generation two to three for males. Degrees of intergenerational transmission of crime decreased when factors such as socio-economic status, family and individual risk factors were controlled for.

Conceptualisations of risk are, however, inherently problematic, simplistic and differ widely across disciplines, theoretical perspectives and researchers. For example, Eddy and Reid (2002, pp.20-21) in their paper regarding children of prisoners defined antisocial behaviour as: '…a cluster of related behaviors, including disobedience, aggression, temper tantrums, lying, stealing, and violence'. The authors immediately undermined their own definition of risk by arguing that, at certain ages, some of these behaviours can be understood as normative childhood development.

Besemer et al. (2011) examined two prospective longitudinal datasets originating from 1946 and 1981 from the *Cambridge Study* and the *NSCR Transfive Study*, in the Netherlands, respectively. This investigation aimed to uncover whether children of prisoners would have more adult convictions than children whose parents were convicted, but not imprisoned. These datasets were then compared and contrasted, whilst considering respective geographical and cultural differences to uncover correlations and differences between countries. Similar to the *Cambridge Study*, the study from the Netherlands collected data on perceived 'high risk' working class boys sent to a reform school between 1911 and 1914 for minor delinquency, who had exhibited 'problem' behaviour, or who had parents who could no longer care for them. The time in which the boys in the Netherlands' study were abandoned by their parents was at the beginning of World War I. Although the Netherlands was not directly involved in the war, they were indirectly affected by extreme poverty and starvation. It could be argued that these boys were not in reality delinquent, but rather in desperation parents might have left their children at the reform school as they could no longer care for them, as indicated by the authors.

An important limitation of the Besemer et al. (2011) study, as with the *Cambridge Study*, is the era within which those children and young people being studied were born, where historical, societal and criminal justice system differences cannot be easily quantified, or adjusted for. The authors conclude their main hypothesis: 'whether prisoners' children displayed more criminal behaviour than children whose parents were convicted' (Besemer et al., 2011, p.421) was partly supported. The authors highlighted the main limitation of this study was that it relied too heavily on quantitative data and simplistic conceptualisations of risk, and that:

> '…several other interpretations of the results should be considered. Our sample is relatively small, especially for females…Furthermore, this is a

quantitative study and, in that sense, we have simplified a complex reality to a few variables.' (Besemer et al., 2011, p. 431).

Sampson and Laub (2003) analysed newly collected crime data of 500 boys deemed 'high-risk' who were committed to a reform school during their adolescence, up to age 70. Extending a classic intergenerational transmission study undertaken by Glueck and Glueck (1968; 1950) where the original sample of 500 boys were followed up to age 32. They investigated whether or not there was a distinct group of offenders whose rate of crime remained stable with the advancement of age and throughout their life course. Childhood characteristics, family background and/or individual differences were assessed as to whether they could predict long-standing rates of offending. Both hypotheses were not supported by the evidence derived from the study. Sampson and Laub (2003) found many desisted with an increase in age. The results of the study failed to find evidence that theoretical risk factors at the point of adolescence, at the individual level, prospectively or retrospectively, identified persistent offenders and concluded:

> '…adult trajectories of offending among former delinquents cannot be reduced to the past. The fact, therefore, remains that there are important differences in adult criminal trajectories that cannot be predicted from childhood, contra the National Summits of the policy world, and apparently much yearning among criminologists' (Sampson and Laub, 2003, p.588).

Besemer et al. (2013) hypothesised that agents of the criminal justice system, for example, police and the courts, were more likely to target and convict known criminal families, and that this knowledge might result in higher conviction rates among children with a parent/family member already in the criminal justice system. Building on previous research, they conducted an official bias study and found that next to having a parent in prison, children from a lower socio-economic background and who were living in poor

housing, predicted the risk of higher future convictions; thus supporting the notion of official bias in the criminal justice system, rather than intergenerational transmission of crime. They concluded that: 'certain people have a higher risk of conviction - not necessarily because they commit more crime, but just because their parent(s) committed crime or because they grow up in poorer social circumstances.' (Besemer et al., 2013, p.451).

The preceding assertion is no less stigmatising and/or criminalising, however, especially for those with lower socio-economic statuses and those who live in poor housing conditions. Disadvantages of applying a deficit risk factor model of analysis to children who have a parent in prison is the potential of them being labelled (Becker, 1997) as 'problem' children through constructions of the potential to become future offenders, anti-social and/or delinquent (Phillips and Gates, 2011; McCarthy et al., 2004). Commentators warn against such constructions and argue that they have the propensity stereotype and negatively affect a child's social and/or self-identity (Major and O'Brien, 2005).

There is a focus on a genetic aspect to the intergenerational transmission of crime research (Besemer et al., 2013; Besemer et al., 2011; Repo-Tiihonen et al., 2010; Aaron and Dallaire, 2009; Biljeveld and Farrington, 2009; Farrington et al., 2001). Farrington et al. (2001) suggested that genetic mechanisms were potential mediators to explain the effect of parental imprisonment on children's potential for future offending. Aaron and Dallaire (2009, p.1482) claimed limitations to their study were that: 'genetic effects may play roles [they] were unable to address', without further elaboration of such effects.

Biljeveld and Farrington (2009) point out that intergenerational transmission studies, thus far, had not explicitly attempted to collect genetic information from children with a parent in prison. They claimed that undertaking such tests were important and would assist with: 'disentangling biological from non-biological explanations in the transmission of antisocial behaviour' (Biljeveld and Farrington, 2009, p.79). Repo-Tiihonen et al. (2010) were more

explicit in their assertions regarding potential and alleged genetic predispositions of children with a parent in prison and attempt to link children to their parents' psychopathology, and assert that:

> 'It is likely that these children suffer from many kinds of psychosocial risk factors in addition to their putative genetic vulnerabilities.' (Repo-Tiihonen et al., 2010, p.119).

Besemer et al. (2011) suggest a limitation of their study was that studies with adoptees and twins needed to be carried out, so as to assess genetic mechanisms of intergenerational transmission of crime. Besemer et al. (2013, p.450) adopt the concept of: 'assortative mating' being a potential risk factor for children with a parent in prison, which is defined as: 'the tendency for people to form unions with similar others'. They go on to state that children with a parent in prison, with two anti-social parents inherit an: 'antisocial phenotype twice', thus experience a: 'double whammy' effect. They do however concede that 'assortative mating' is not a risk factor mechanism in and of itself, but rather that 'intergenerational transmission would be stronger with two than with one criminal parent'.

The preceding section has introduced the reader to the literature and arguments put forward by intergenerational transmission of crime researcher in relation to children with a parent in prison. The following section will now move on to literature concerning potential impacts of parental imprisonment on their children and mental health research.

2.4 Children with a Parent in Prison and Mental Health

Boswell and Wedge (2002) highlighted that children losing a parent due to imprisonment might be traumatic and some may experience it as bereavement. This trauma may be exacerbated should a child witness the, mostly violent, arrest of a parent in the home. A study by Roberts et al. (2014) undertook an assessment of how the exposure of children to their parents', or another family members arrest, was associated with poor mental health

outcomes. Research conducted by the UK's Social Exclusion Unit (2002) claimed that almost a third of children with a parent in prison experience mental health issues, compared to 10% of the general population. Just over ten years later it was claimed that approximately two-thirds of children with a parent in prison were at risk of and more likely to experience mental health problems than those who had not experienced parental imprisonment (Jones et al., 2013).

In a systemic review of previous studies concerning the mental health status of children who experience parental imprisonment (*n16*) Murray et al. (2009) claimed that children with a parent in prison were more likely to have worse outcomes in terms of mental health and antisocial behaviour than their peers. However, adopting a cautious interpretation of findings they could not: '…draw firm conclusions about whether or not parental imprisonment causes an increase in child antisocial behaviour or mental health problems' (Murray et al., 2009, p. 56). Murray et al. (2009) explained one of the biggest limitations to the explanation of effects of parental imprisonment on children was that they could not disentangle whether or not pre-existing disadvantage or parental imprisonment were causal links to mental health outcomes for children.

An early study by Fritsch and Burkhead (1981) took a random sample of 91 inmates, both male and female, from a minimum security prison with a total of 194 children between them. They surveyed prisoners about any behavioural changes they had observed in their children post-imprisonment. Conclusions claimed that the gender of an imprisoned parent was a correlate for certain types of behaviours exhibited by children. They asserted that children with a father in prison exhibited 'acting-out' behaviours, whereas children with a mother in prison exhibited 'acting-in' behaviours. Acting-out behaviours were reported as: 'hostile behaviour, use of drugs or alcohol, running away, school truancy, discipline problems, aggressive acts, and involvement in delinquent activities. Acting-in behaviours included: 'daydreaming, unwillingness to engage in play, withdrawal, acting babyish, fear of

school, a drop in school work, crying a lot, and nightmares' (Fritsch and Burkhead, 1981, pp.85-86).

A recent study by Tasca et al. (2014) analysed both male and female prisoners' assessments of their children's mental health post imprisonment. This was with a view to uncover whether there were differences in mental health outcomes for children experiencing either paternal or maternal imprisonment. Three hundred interviews with both mothers and fathers who had a least one child under the age of 18 (biological, step-child, or adopted), were undertaken for the study; data analysed included parental perceptions of a total of 1,221 children. Conclusions suggested that results were unclear as to whether or not children of imprisoned mothers fared differently to those of imprisoned fathers. Studies that rely on reports and perceptions of behaviour of children with a parent in prison from parents and/or caregivers, rather than through direct observation, or via interviewing the children risk missing valuable insights into this social group. One major weakness of both Fritsch and Burkhead (1981) and Tasca et al.'s (2014) studies were that perspectives from children were excluded.

Applying a mixed methods approach Bocknek et al. (2008) attempted to uncover key themes associated with parental imprisonment and effects on children. Interviews were carried out with 35 school aged children who were enrolled with a federally funded mentoring program; 20% had a mother in prison, 65.7% a father. The overwhelming majority of participants were from black, minority, ethnic (BME) backgrounds (94.3%). Results highlighted that children experienced very high levels of stress and trauma. A significant correlation between withdrawal behaviours and posttraumatic stress as a consequence of the 'ambiguous loss' of their parent due to imprisonment was also reported.

Bocknek et al. (2008, p.331), however, warned that the generalisability of their research was limited, due to the: 'geographical homogeneity' from where participants were recruited,

and the relatively small sample size. They did, however, assert that their research was not meant to provide casual inferences about this social group, but rather that research such as theirs might be a conduit for further research. Mentoring staff also highlighted, informally, that mentoring for children with a parent in prison could be a useful supplementary tool to support children and their families who experience parental imprisonment. When one contextualises, rather than pathologizes, the behaviour/s of children in light of the separation from their parent due to imprisonment, which can be unexpected, traumatic and often times violent, an appreciation might arise that their behavioural and emotional reactions are justified.

It would be highly remiss to claim that many children do not/will not experience psychological and emotional distress at being separated from their imprisoned parent. Mental health professionals and/or researchers might wish, however, to employ a certain amount of caution as a means to avoid the potential unnecessary application of a diagnostic label to children with a parent in prison as being at risk of, or of having mental health problems. To illustrate the preceding assertion, in discussions surrounding children and adolescents being diagnosed with a conduct disorder, Worley (2014, p. 185) contends that it is not those who display distress when confronted with: 'legitimately distressing events' that would be found to be disordered. On the contrary, Worley (2014) argues it is more likely those who do not display distress who would be more likely found disordered. Having briefly discussed mental health in relation to children with a parent in prison, the focus will now turn to stigma and stigma by association.

2.5 Stigma/Stigma by Association

The analysis of the data within this thesis draws on and applies Goffman's initial work on stigma, especially Goffman's original concept of 'courtesy stigma' (Goffman, 1963), more recently referred to as 'stigma by association' (the term used throughout this thesis),

alongside the reconceptualization of stigma as posited by Link and Phelan (2010; 2006; 2001). Goffman (1963, pp.2-5) asserted that stigma is:

> '...a special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype...an attribute that is deeply discrediting...we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances.'

Goffman's (1963) analysis of stigma identified three types of stigma: a) bodily 'defects', b) character 'defects' and c) membership of devalued social groups. It is the latter type of stigma, as identified by Goffman, which is most pertinent to this study. According to Goffman, stigma and social identity are intrinsically linked, in that bodily signs (a signifier) might expose an unusual and/or a bad moral status. However, bodily signs are visible, not potentially hidden as associations to devalued social groups might be. According to Goffman, stigmatised individuals might receive negative evaluations and might develop protective strategies when dealing with 'normals' ('normals' as conceptualised by Goffman are those who do not have any type of stigma). Goffman argued that individuals might attempt to hide/disguise their stigma, and limit potential negative a/effects on their identity.

Strategies employed to manage stigmas, for example 'information management' (Gorman, 1963, p.42), might include withdrawal and limiting one's participation in society. An alternative stigma management technique may involve joining and/or creating a social movement to contest the negative stereotypes attached to a given stigma. Goffman (1963) claimed that individuals might attempt to hide/disguise their stigma, and limit potential negative effects upon their own identity. Most pertinent to this study is the idea that individuals related to a stigmatised individual through social structures might acquire a level of stigma themselves, as Goffman termed a 'courtesy stigma' that:

'…lead the wider society to treat both individuals as one. Thus the loyal spouse of the mental patient, the daughter of the ex-con…are all obliged to share some of the discredit of the stigmatised person' (Goffman, 1963, p.30).

Goffman argued that there are 'structural preconditions' for stigma to occur (1963, p.2). Link and Phelan (2001, p. 375) further suggested that: 'Stigma is entirely dependent on social, economic, and political power - it takes power to stigmatize'. Link and Phelan (2001, p.378) argue that: '…in the list of undesirable attributes that form the stereotype about the stigmatized group' is that: 'they are additionally "passive," "helpless," or "acquiescent"'. To illustrate the preceding assertion, it is generally accepted in current literature that families related to an imprisoned person can become economically, socially and politically powerless, including children once a parent is imprisoned. Expanding on and reconceptualising Goffman's definition of stigma, Link and Phelan (2001) argue that stigma is concomitant with labelling, stereotyping, separating, status loss and discrimination.

In the specific case of children with a parent in prison, the list of undesirable attributes, over and above their alleged potential to have mental health problems and/or express criminal/delinquent/antisocial behaviour, is that they can also be positioned and constructed as passive: 'Not seen, Not heard, Not guilty' (Marshall, 2008), and helpless: 'Orphans of Justice' (Shaw, 1992). Children with a parent in prison's place in research can also be constructed in similar terms, for example, as acquiescent: 'the Cinderella of penology' (Shaw 1987, p. 3) and passive and helpless: 'forgotten victims of crime' (Matthews, 1983).

Children with a parent in prison might face stigma and discrimination and thus social exclusion of varying degrees (Phillips and Gates, 2011; Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008; Brown, 2001). Evidence highlights that schools, school-friends and teachers might be stigmatising when they become aware that a child's parent has been imprisoned, leading the child to potentially experience stigmatisation, discrimination, isolation and social exclusion. For

example, Brown (2001, p.62) highlighted concerns children with a parent in prison might have when faced with schools becoming aware of their parents imprisonment, and stated: 'teachers were mainly mentioned negatively…the majority of young people clearly stated they did not want their schools to know about their situation'. Schlafer et al. (2012) interviewed children who claimed they were teased at school due to the social stigma of having a parent in prison, and suggested that school staff be educated about children who were feeling stigmatised might have difficult relationships with their peers.

Unintended consequences of adopting certain constructions of children with a parent in prison, the predisposition to commit crime, for example, might lead those who come into contact with these children in wider society to behave toward them in accordance with such constructions, thus discriminate against them. For example, a study conducted by Dallaire and Wilson (2010) concluded that some teachers (and other potential role models) could be supportive and compassionate when aware of a child having an imprisoned parent. However, certain teachers might also be stigmatising and/or discriminate and have lowered competency expectations of children with a parent in prison, especially female students with an imprisoned mother.

Children might attempt to hide the true whereabouts of their imprisoned parent as a means of self-protection from stigmatisation and/or discrimination. For example, Phillips and Gates (2011, p.288) argue that: 'children may find questions that routinely arise about parents at school and in other settings anxiety provoking'. Parke and Clarke-Stewart's (2001) earlier research also found that children may become anxious about the potential of being stigmatised at school that they may avoid school altogether (non-attendance) and/or develop school phobias. Intergenerational transmission of crime and mental health studies generally focus on perceived deficits children with a parent in prison might possess. However, using the concept of stigma by association Phillips and Gates (2011, p. 291) suggest that:

> '…a comprehensive response to these problems should address the
> stigmatizing attitudes and beliefs of others and strive to identify and end
> discriminatory treatment rather than focusing only on "fixing" affected
> children.'

A strong criticism levelled against risk-focused research comes from O'Mahony (2009, p. 110), who argues that their claims are: 'myth-building'. Siegel (2011) highlights that negative stereotypes of children with a parent in prison can inform and prolong a certain stigmatising mythology about them. For example, in relation to statistics surrounding children with a parent in prison, Siegel (2011, p.6) argues that:

> '…the "six times more likely" figure seems to have become a popular
> myth…its staying power probably arises from its conformity to stereotypes
> about prisoners' children.'

Armstrong (2006) is highly critical of theories of crime which sought to uncover correlations between simplistic, yet problematic, notions of risk, and children's and youths' potential future offending outcomes. Armstrong argued that such endeavours had the potential to stigmatise already marginalised social groups. The most significant of these criticisms of prevention based, risk focused standpoints are, as Armstrong (2006, p. 274) asserts:

> 'The criminalization of children and youth is revealed in the expansion of
> policing and crime prevention technologies, the promotion of moral panics
> and public fear of crime, and in the targeting of interventions towards the
> disempowered.'

It is surprising then, that only a small number of research papers have applied the concept of stigma by association when analysing the experiences of children with a parent in prison.

Extending and adapting the work of Link and Phelan (2006), Phillips and Gates (2011) suggested a conceptual model to analyse how stigma by association might impact on children with a parent in prison. This study applied this model to the interpretation and analysis of data in the context of adult children with a parent in prison, as a means to uncover and identify potential methods of information control and/or management adult children with a parent in prison might employ as a means of limiting the effects of stigma by association on their identity (Research Aims 3 and 4).

2.6 Conclusion

The preceding literature review illustrates a number of gaps in knowledge of this social group. In general, previous studies have been: small scale, with small samples (Bocknek et al., 2008; Boswell, 2002); heavily reliant upon estimations and/or predictions, rather than actual figures (Ministry of Justice, 2015); have found problems accessing and securing interviews with children with a parent in prison (Boswell, 2002); focused attention on potential mental health/intergenerational transmission of crime issues these children might experience, while ignoring cultural, political, ideological and societal factors (Aaron and Dallaire, 2009); and focused attention on the perceptions of parent(s)/caregivers, prisoners and prison staff, and not the children themselves (Tasca et al., 2014; Fritsch and Burkhead, 1981). Studies have relied on data collected when social conditions were very different, alongside differences in terms of the gender, age, and ethnicity of populations studied (Bijleveld and Wijkman, 2009).

Researchers tend to overwhelmingly access and interview children with a parent in prison who maintain contact with imprisoned parents. For example, children recruited from prison visiting centres that have contact with state institutions and/or have access services specifically tailored to the families of prisoners (Jones et al., 2013). Thus, children who are more likely socially isolated, excluded and/or estranged from their imprisoned parent are

seldom represented in research outputs. Research on this social group can have an overreliance on gaining the perspectives of remaining caregivers, partners and families of prisoners and/or prison staff. Research further relies heavily on estimates, inferential, and causal-predictive analysis and problematic research designs and methodologies.

Longitudinal studies are largely missing from the available literature and research on this social group, which raises an immediate reason for the importance of gaining the views of adult children. Of the longitudinal studies available, most are quantitative, causation-predictive and concerned with constructing children of prisoners as at risk of antisocial behaviour and/or mental health issues (Clewett and Glover, 2009; Glover, 2009; Murray et al., 2009; Murray and Farrington, 2008), while qualitative insights of adult children of prisoners are largely missing altogether. The generalisability of much of the research relating to this social group is problematic due to predominantly small-scale studies being conducted, the heterogeneity of this social group, alongside research that does not include the views of the children.

Research can view children with a parent in prison through a lens of criminality and use inherently problematic and flawed perceptions of risk as mechanisms through which the intergenerational transmission of crime might take place. Conceptualising risk as a child living in social housing, from low socioeconomic backgrounds, having unemployed parent/s and not being academically gifted, for example (Besemer et al., 2013; Farrington, 2011). Studies that claim a biological and/or genetic component to intergenerational crime are arguably overly reductionist and deterministic, and in the extreme, dangerously discriminatory (Besemer et al., 2013; Biljeveld and Farrington, 2009; Farrington et al., 2001). The focus of intergenerational transmission of crime research might have profoundly negative implications for predominantly male children, from black, minority and ethnic backgrounds with a parent in prison. Evidence to support the intergenerational transmission of crime, however, remains equivocal and causal factors (mediators and

moderators of risk) for intergenerational transmission remains unclear (Murray and Farrington, 2008; 2005).

The genetic determinist aspect of intergenerational transmission research is one of the most troubling academic constructs, especially its implications for children with a parent in prison. Clearly human beings are not free from their own biology. However, the genetic aspect of intergenerational crime research assumes that criminality has biological roots, thus contagious. This assertion implies that children with a parent in prison are somehow genetically inferior/abnormal, predisposed to becoming future offenders, antisocial and/or delinquent and that it is somehow inevitable, thus unalterable. Fishbein (2002, p.47), however, argues that the genetic study of crime: 'suffers from a high level of abstraction because "criminal behavior" is a legalistic label, not descriptive of actual behavior'.

Seemingly inflexible assertions of genetic determinism beg the question why waste resources to change allegedly inevitable life and social outcomes? What of individual agency? The genetic determinist stance leaves little acknowledgement of structural/societal inequalities, or for them to be reformed with a view to them being less so. This stance also has the potential to write-off whole swathes of children with a parent in prison, particularly boys from black, minority and ethnic backgrounds. The dangers of such a stance and resultant constructs cannot be underestimated. In an extreme example of genetic determinism, between 2006 and 2010 one hundred and forty-eight out of one hundred and fifty sterilisations in a California prison were coerced and/or forced on female prisoners by prison staff and doctors. According to Lawrence (2014, p. 21): 'women were targeted because they were believed to become repeat offenders'.

It is not only deeply disturbing that these women were coerced or forced into sterilisations, equally disturbing is that by denying these women the possibility of having children, the mere potential of a child with a parent in prison being brought into existence was entirely

prevented. According to *The Guardian* a prison administrator speaking of costs stated that: 'Over a 10-year period, that isn't a huge amount of money compared to what you save in welfare paying for these *unwanted children*...' (Johnson, 2013). Although these procedures against female prisoners have since ceased and are now under investigation, eugenically oriented practice remains, and has continued to receive state approval. This is perhaps the strongest possible illustration of discrimination children with a parent in prison might face, despite their innocence of any crime.

It is well documented how a diagnosis of a mental health condition might lead to an individual being stigmatised and/or discriminated against in wider society (Link and Phelan, 2014; 2010; 2006). Already vulnerable to being stigmatised due to parental imprisonment, unintended consequences such as further stigma/self-stigma resulting from the application and/or internalisation of an unnecessary mental health (mis)diagnosis/label, for example, could prove more harmful than helpful for children with a parent in prison (Phillips and Gates, 2011). Causal factors of mental health outcomes are not easily accounted for, for example, whether parental imprisonment or pre-existing disadvantage accounts for negative outcomes. One major criticism of much of the literature where the focus is to pathologise children with a parent in prison is that it has the potential to marginalise the already marginalised (Siegel, 2011), which Armstrong (2006, p. 108) asserts has: 'the potential to stigmatise people rather than to value individuals and their abilities'.

This thesis attempts to build on and extend existing knowledge through a focus on adult children of prisoners as a means to gain a richer understanding of this social group; adult children for the purposes of this thesis are conceptualised as those aged 18 years old and over. In an attempt to overcome the difficulties outlined above, particularly to overcome accessing children with a parent in prison, this research employed a non-traditional online research method. This included an analysis of computer mediated communication data as found in a virtual community (referred to hereafter as VC) in the form of an online forum

discussion thread. Children with a parent in prison have not yet been studied via this innovative, burgeoning medium of communication and contemporary arena for research.

The reader will now be introduced to the methodology employed for this research in the following chapter. Details of the theoretical perspective, method, sample, data collection and analysis adopted for this study, and ethical considerations for the chosen method will be provided therein.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will begin with a discussion of the theoretical perspectives deemed most appropriate for this study and will move on to discuss and evaluate foundations of the research process and its philosophical underpinnings. This will include a discussion of the research design and methods, including an assessment of their appropriateness and use. An assessment of the social constructionist framework adopted for this study will be provided. Online research methods and the use of innovative and emergent methods for research and researchers alike will then be addressed. Discussions include an evaluation of the advantages of online research, including concepts such as participant catharsis (Suh, 2013), participant disinhibition (Suler, 2004) and candid self-disclosure Joinson (2010; 2001) relevant to groups using computer-mediated-communication (referred to hereafter as CMC) within Virtual Communities (referred to hereafter as VC's).

In the literature review it was illustrated how children with a parent in prison can be a hard-to-reach social group, and that gaining access to them for interview and/or survey might prove difficult. One advantage of online research is the ability to overcome barriers of access (McDermott et al., 2012; Brotsky and Giles, 2007) and is one reason why online research was the preferred method for this study. An assessment and justification for the use of a virtual ethnography will also be provided, including details of the sample used and the data collection strategy employed for this study. The reader will then be informed of the method of data analysis used for this study, namely a thematic analysis of asynchronous, online archival data. Finally, ethical considerations when utilising non-traditional online research methods will be addressed herein.

3.2 Theoretical Perspective

According to Crotty (1998, pp. 1-6) the epistemology chosen for a piece of research should be embedded within the philosophical underpinnings of the theoretical perspectives implemented for a piece of research and *relate* to it, which in turn should inform the methodology and methods used. It is, therefore, necessary for researchers to have a clear epistemological and theoretical framework so as to understand the philosophical assumptions of such frameworks to ensure, as Alvesson and Sköldberg (2010, p. 8) assert: 'good social science'; whilst simultaneously avoiding adopting potentially competing perspectives and approaches.

Crotty (1998) claims it is simply not sufficient to merely describe the methodology, but rather to provide the reader with a rationale. Adopting certain methodologies contains many assumptions embedded within them and theoretical frameworks, therefore, require elaboration. With these concerns in mind, a critically assessment of the epistemological and theoretical framework being adopted for this thesis will follow. A social constructionist epistemology was chosen for this study, which guided and informed the choice of methods employed and the approach to the data analysis, including a rationale for their choice and use in this study.

A social constructionist epistemology rejects the realist position, whereby it is argued that there is an absolute, single and objective truth and/or reality that can be known and/or discovered through objective scientific enquiry (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2010). Instead, social constructionists argue that there are a plurality of truths and/or realities and that meaning (knowledge) and realities are created and constructed through language and processes of social interaction (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). Social constructionism posits that purely objective truth and reality are thus unachievable and unknowable.

One of the main tenets of social constructionist thought is that knowledge is subjective, including that of the researcher. The author of this thesis has personal experience of parental imprisonment (her father was imprisoned at the time of her birth and throughout her childhood). The author, therefore, had to carefully balance her insider positioning within the research against the specific aim of giving 'voice' to adult children who have experience of parental imprisonment; and thus avoid superimposing her own experience on to participants (posters to the forum discussion thread) (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2013). In further consideration of researcher bias, and to strengthen the validity and reliability of this study, critical reflective writing and practice was adopted throughout the research process (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2010).

According to a social constructionist perspective, knowledge is not static and is constructed through interactions with society and others in that society, and can be subject to change and fluidity. Additionally, knowledge is socially situated and there is no supposition of just one truth, and therefore multiple perspectives are possible within a social constructionist framework. An acknowledgement and awareness of the heterogeneity of the social group of adult children with a parent in prison, together with how diversity might exert powerful influences on how children experience parental imprisonment, was kept in mind throughout this research.

This understanding and acknowledgment complements the epistemological stance being adopted for this research and demonstrates the author's commitment to a social constructionist epistemology. Adopting this perspective highlights that through interactions and relational processes reality is created, leading to the probability of there being multitudinous realities. Through analysing data produced by adult children of prisoners, for example, this perspective foregrounds the construction of meaning and gives an insight into how they may construct themselves differently over time and in different contexts. It was

imagined that such explanations and descriptions might change according to contexts, for example, who is being spoken to, or who the audience might be.

3.3 Online Research Methods: A Virtual Ethnographic Enquiry

O'Reilly (2004) first coined the term 'Web 2.0', the term given to the second generation of the World Wide Web whereby interaction, interpersonal communication, collaboration and information sharing between individuals and social groups became conceivable and possible; especially with the introduction of social media web sites such as Facebook™ in 2004. There are now vast arrays of web sites on the Internet today that show traces of social life, where groups and individuals can express their accounts of lived experience, in their own words. As such, the Internet has become an abundant documentary resource for textual and visual (re)presentations of people's social lives.

Rapid advances in the development of the Internet, social media and socio-technology have (re)shaped research possibilities, gained an ever increasing following of researchers, and a corresponding wealth of online research methods (Hooley et al., 2012). The interactive aspect of this second generation of the Internet has garnered interest from innumerable researchers, and from a multitude of perspectives including, but not limited to psychology, cultural studies, medicine/health, politics, art and marketing/business and so on (Roberts, 2015). There is also a continuum of methods available to researchers when using online research methods, from qualitative, quantitative, to mixed methods, ethnographies and online surveys, to online asynchronous and/or synchronous interviews via email, or face-to-face interviews using online CMC software (Hooley et al., 2012).

Advantages of online research methods include data that can be generated and/or gathered rapidly and relatively cheaply, online surveys, for example. Traditional ethnography is a qualitative research method that generally requires a researcher to undertake fieldwork and

observe and study participants, often unobtrusively, over extended periods of time (Fielding, 2001). Ethnographers immerse themselves into the everyday lives of participants in a natural setting and study interactions and assess shared beliefs, customs, habits, and cultural aspects of certain groups and/or communities (O'Reilly, 2004).

In offline ethnographic research, the 'field' is the specific location where the researcher undertakes their observation in situ, where fieldwork and field notes are undertaken (Fielding, 2001). Virtual ethnologists extend this method of interpretive and naturalistic observation and data collection to technological arenas, immersing themselves and observing interactions that are mediated through CMC (Garcia et al., 2009). In an online research environment, the ethnographic 'field' is thus re-conceptualised, and field notes are the ready-made textual/visual representations of social life and/or cultures specific to particular social groups, as found online in virtual communities (Kulavuz-Onal and Vásquez, 2013).

There is no single authoritative method as to how to conduct an online (or offline) ethnography and there are many variations of this method, variously referred to as online ethnography, ethnography of Internet, cyber-ethnography and/or virtual ethnography (the preferred term for this thesis) (Garcia et al., 2009; Hine, 2000). For example, *Netnography* (Kozinets, 2010) is one such specific form of online ethnography, subject to specific rules and procedures, whereby participant observation is the preferred method. The virtual ethnographical method employed by this study departs from the premises of *Netnography,* including its potential endangerment of the unobtrusiveness of ethnographic and online communication research (Langer and Beckman, 2005), and has instead employed unobtrusive observation (Hine, 2011). This method allows by far the least disruptive access to this social group, as Hine (2011, p. 3) asserts:

'Unobtrusive collection of Internet derived data can be less labour intensive not only for the researcher but also for the researched…Unobtrusive methods using Internet-derived data make use of what people have already said and done'.

Suler (2004) argues are that VC's might create a disinhibition effect, where the anonymity and visual invisibility of posters, has the effect of allowing posters to express and reveal parts of their identities usually undisclosed. Joinson (2010; 2001) further asserts that, encouraged by visual anonymity, spontaneous self-disclosure can be heightened during CMC. Joinson (2010; 2001) found that heightened self-awareness, combined with reduced public self-awareness, was associated with significantly higher levels of spontaneous self-disclosure compared to face-to-face scenarios.

Online research studies highlight the potential for the Internet as a source of social support, especially for people who might be stigmatised, marginalised and/or those from hard-to-reach groups (McDermott et al., 2012; Brotsky and Giles, 2007). Suh (2013) argues that those who use VC's and share aspects of hidden, marginalised and/or stigmatised identities can experience a cathartic release. Catharsis, defined by Suh (2013, p. 248), is where an: 'emotional purification by expressing feelings such as anger, frustration, or sadness through which people can reduce inner tension' can, within an anonymous environment, be psychologically beneficial for those who access VC's. These concepts are especially pertinent and beneficial to this study, considering the hard-to-reach aspect of adult children with a parent in prison, and their potential reluctance to speak with perceived authority figures (Brown, 2001).

3.4 Sample

An unobtrusive observation of an online VC consisting of adults with, or who had had, a parent in prison at PrisonTalk.com™ was undertaken. PrisonTalk.com™ is an online forum dedicated to friends and families of people in prison, where they can connect online with people in the same/a similar situation to their own. It is also aimed at those in the legal profession, prison advocates and those who work with prisoners and their families, and as such a public site. As of writing, PrisonTalk.com™ has 450,308 members, 526,518 threads and 6,486,399 individual posts. A forum discussion thread was identified within a sub-forum titled: '*Raising Children with Parents in Prison*' and was passively observed until it was finally archived by the web site moderators in 2013.

The forum discussion thread analysed for this research ran from 5th February 2007, until 14th December 2011 (the final date a post was made). Originally, there were just twenty-nine participants; by the time this research had begun the number of participants had significantly increased. The details of posters involved in the forum discussion thread, where archival data (asynchronous CMC) for this research was obtained, included a total of n128 participants, n113 of who were identified as adult/children with a parent in prison. This represents access to a potentially unobtainable amount of participants using traditional research methods, especially taking account of the hard-to-reach nature of this social group and considering the time limits set for this study.

Participants with or who had a parent in prison identified in the discussion thread were aged between 13 and 50 years old, and were predominantly female (female: n90, male: n6, unknown: n17). The number of participants who had a father in prison was n80, a mother in prison n29 and both parents in prison n4. Many posters to the forum discussion thread had a personal profile that provided demographic details (age, gender, location), and many included details of their parent who was imprisoned.

3.5 Data Collection

Archival data, as found within the online forum discussion thread at PrisonTalk.com™ was used for this study. Data collection involved the task of using PrisonTalk.com's™ own search engine for the key words: 'children', 'adult' and 'prisoner', for example, as a means to locate an appropriate forum discussion thread. Archival data (textual representations of online communication between adult children with a parent in prison, thus online ethnographic field notes) retrieved from this web site were self-transcribing. Therefore, data collection involved identifying and selecting the appropriate forum discussion thread and printing it off.

3.6 Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis of Asynchronous Online Archival Data

As this investigation was exploratory, this method allowed for a theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data that allows patterns (themes) embedded within data to emerge and/or be uncovered (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis of data is widely used across many disciplines, with many variants within this method of data analysis and no firm agreement as to how to undertake a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). With this in mind, thematic analysis was carried out according to a system proposed by Bernard and Ryan (2010, pp.53-73), which used a system involving observational, manipulative and selection techniques as an aid to finding emergent themes from data. Bernard and Ryan (2010, p.53) suggest using observational techniques, including looking for the following in the type of data collected for this investigation:

1. 'Repetitions

2. Indigenous Typologies or Categories

3. Metaphors and Analogies

4. Similarities and Differences

5. Missing Data

6. Theory-related Material'.

Once the above had been identified from the data, the next part of the process involved using four (only two were used here as the original process related to printed material, not electronic data) manipulative techniques (ways to process texts), this included:

1. 'Sorting the data.
2. Creating Word lists and Key Words in Context (hereafter referred to as KWIC), for example, looking closely at the words used in the data and building lists with surrounding context included' (Bernard and Ryan, 2010, p. 53).

A line by line analysis of data from the forum discussion thread was undertaken; in part due to assertions of candid self-disclosure put forward by Joinson (2005) and 'thick' descriptions (Fields and Kafai, 2009) as found in online data. The data was coded, these codes were then categorised, which informed the over-arching themes identified for this study. Bernard and Ryan (2010) suggested locating 'theory-related material' during the thematic analysis of data, and the concept of stigma by association was identified as highly significant to this study and thus applied to the analysis of data.

One distinct variant of Thematic Analysis as proposed by Bernard and Ryan (2010) suggest creating word lists and KWIC. KWIC involved looking closely at words used repetitively within the data and building lists with surrounding context included. An example of this is included in Appendix 1, which provides a KWIC of the word 'Alone'. Once contextualised, this technique served to uncover potential social isolation adult children with a parent in prison might experience and self-censoring behaviours they might employ.

3.7 Ethical Considerations for Online Research

Early ethical guidance as posited by the Association of Internet Researchers (referred to hereafter as AOIR), claimed where data is in the public sphere: 'fewer obligations to protect autonomy, privacy, confidentiality, etc., will likely follow' (Ess and AOIR, 2002, p.7). Online research ethical guidelines were only beginning to be discussed and debated as late as 1996 (Hooley et al., 2012). Since then, there have been significant shifts in ethical thinking surrounding online research methods guidelines and practice. Ethical guidelines were once brief and lacking in detail and have since rapidly expanded to include a much more defined guidance.

The sheer scope of research techniques, methods and situations that may fall under the all-encompassing rubric of online research methods are almost infinite, and extremely difficult for researchers to keep entirely informed with (Farrell and Peterson, 2010; Rosenberg, 2010). Ethical issues might alter depending on the different type of online research and/or data being undertaken and/or analysed. Ethical guidelines thus remain equivocal and thus subject to future amendments (Snee, 2013; Markham and Buchanan, 2012; Hine, 2011). More recent ethical considerations as suggested by AOIR, however, require the researcher to ask ethical questions relating their particular online research method and/or venue of inquiry (Markham and Buchanan, 2012).

Recent ethical guidance posited by Hine (2011), the AOIR (Markham and Buchanan, 2012) and ethical guidelines from the British Sociological Association (2002) in researching human subjects were adopted for this study. The most applicable venue as outlined by AOIR specific to this study was that of: 'Special Interest Forums (email or web based conversations and archives, e.g., *threaded discussion forums*, chatrooms)' (Markham, 2012). The particularly small amount of archival data retrieved from the forum discussion

thread used for this study also fully adhered to 'Fair Use' considerations for data retrieved from a single Internet source (Markham and Buchanan, 2012).

The 'blurring of boundaries' inherent online research, when compared to more traditional, reactive methods of research, ensures that debates surrounding ethics and methodological frameworks remain equivocal. Enduring debates suggest that CMC is conducted simultaneously in both a private (e.g. the home) and a public (e.g. public forum discussion) space (Roberts, 2015; Snee, 2013; Whiteman, 2010). However, expectations of what is public online remain unclear. Rosenberg (2010, p. 24) presents the notion of two polarised and distinct discourses surrounding online research ethics and that online: 'phenomena can be considered public either (1) if publicly accessible or (2) if perceived as public by participants'. Rosenberg highlights the ambiguities of online research ethics in the context of debate surrounding the distinction between public and private spaces in online environments and claims that: 'the panoptic character of online environments provides us not only with new research opportunities, but an ethical conundrum' (2010, p. 35).

A careful analysis of whether or not the archival data used for this research from PrisonTalk.com™ could be perceived as public or private by its users was undertaken. PrisonTalk.com™ explicitly states that their forum is a public space. They emphasise that their website is not just for online communication, but that it is also there to provide information for advocates and those with connections to people in prison. According to their Terms of Service (TOS) regarding their 'Public Forums', they state that:

> 'This site makes chat rooms, forums, message boards, and/or news groups available to its users. Please remember that any information that is disclosed in these areas becomes public information and you should exercise caution when deciding to disclose your personal information…ANYONE, including guests to PTO, can read the public forums…Please consider what you are

about to post before you "submit" it. Everyone should keep in mind that what you are saying is public and just like you were standing up in front of a giant crowd talking into a microphone, but with one catch - what you say is available for reading into the future.'

There was no need to register with PrisonTalk.com™ or use a password to gain entry. The ethos of being a public site is consistent throughout PrisonTalk.com™ and it is likely that users of the site will be aware that what they post to the website is publicly available. The site owners also explicitly state that information provided on their website is available for easy retrieval and download to third parties for (legal) advocacy and/or information purposes, for example.   Users also have the option to send private messages to one another instead of using the public forum discussion threads should they want their comments to remain private.

The ethos of the website being in the public domain is often repeated to posters. Consequently, it is reasonable to argue that expectations of user's privacy are thus likely reduced, and that they would be aware that their posts are in the public domain. However, as Rosenberg (2010, p. 34) contends: 'It is not enough to consider whether a space is public, who the intended audience is or whether some information is personal. All three must be considered'. Rosenberg thus suggests that researchers develop and employ measures to ensure people's privacy is protected. Ethical considerations of privacy, confidentiality and anonymity were also considered.

The forum discussion thread was initially accessible through a general search engine, for example *Google*™, using a basic key word search of 'children' and 'prisoners' and 'talk'. Prior to the thread becoming archived individual posts within the discussion thread were no longer searchable via *Google*™. Although the forum discussion thread might be archived now, Hine (2011) suggests that archived data might become live at a later date. It was

therefore decided not to name the forum discussion thread used for this research to protect the posters confidentiality and anonymity.

As this was an entirely unobtrusive observation of CMC data from an online forum discussion thread, now archived, informed consent was unable to be sought, as was any participation. It might seem than an extremely important ethical consideration has been overlooked, it has not. Researchers argue that this type of unobtrusive observation of online discussion threads is akin to more traditional document/newspaper analysis, where consent would not be sought from participants (Paechter, 2012; Langer and Beckman, 2005). It is also considered ethical to record activities in a public place without consent, provided that individuals are not identifiable and their privacy is protected (British Sociological Association, 2002). This also applies to online research, however, it is stressed that data retrieved remain confidential, the anonymity of participants (posters) is protected and participants are not identifiable (Hewson, 2014). Steps were thus undertaken to ensure data confidentiality and anonymity of participants (posters).

As above, online research ethicists stress that this archived data could potentially become live online again (Hine, 2011), the advice is that caution should be, and was, adopted for this study. To test this step, a test (via a simple Google™ search, for example) to see if pseudonyms chosen by participants could lead to their pseudonym being identified on PrisonTalk.com™ was undertaken. This was indeed the case. Therefore, every participant's chosen pseudonym was anonymised and the only other identifying information was their age and gender (male or female were the only gender categories posters identified with throughout the forum discussion thread) as a means to prevent their data from being traced back to them.

It is expected that this thesis will be published and disseminated online. To further protect the identity of participants (posters) and their data, to eliminate the possibility of extracts

from the forum discussion thread used in this thesis being traced back to the original poster, and to minimise any potential harm, all extracts used in this thesis were paraphrased. This measure was done with great care, consideration and sympathetically, so as not to lose the original sentiments of individual participants (posters). For the purposes of this study, vulnerable persons were defined as those below the age of 18 years old. Any participant (poster) of the forum thread that was identifiably below 18 years old, or where someone's age could not be identified, their data was excluded from this study. There were a total of 13 participants whose data was excluded from the study for these reasons. In total, there were 100 remaining participants who posted to the forum discussion thread and whose data was included in this thesis. This study received appropriate ethical approval from the University of Huddersfield's School Research Ethics Panel (SREP).

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed and reviewed the philosophical underpinnings and foundations of the research process. The research design, including an assessment of its appropriateness and use for this study, was also provided herein. In consideration of the heterogeneity of this social group and potentially multitudinous realities of parental imprisonment, a social constructionist perspective served as a conceptual structure for the approach, direction and interpretation of this research (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2010; Crotty, 1998). To overcome barriers of access to this hard-to-reach social group, a virtual ethnographic method of enquiry was undertaken. In light of the potential reluctance of this social group to engage with perceived authority figures (Brown, 2001) advantages of this method included access to numerous participants and candid self-disclosure (Joinson, 2010; 2001). An unobtrusive observation of archival, asynchronous CMC data, as found within an online VC consisting of adults with or who had had a parent in prison, was undertaken (Hine, 2011). As this was an exploratory study, a Thematic Analysis allowed for a theoretically flexible approach to

data analysis and for themes and theory-related material embedded within the data to emerge and/or be uncovered (Bernard and Ryan, 2010; Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Having considered the methodology and ethical considerations for this thesis, the following two chapters will present an analysis of the main findings from a Thematic Analysis of online archival data as found in the forum discussion thread. These chapters present an exploration and analysis of several major themes that emerged from Thematic Analysis, and specifically address the aims set for this study.

Chapter 4: Adult Children's Experiences and Perceptions of Imprisoned Parents and Parenting

4.1 Introduction

The review for this study highlighted a dearth of research in the context of adult children with a parent in prison. Gaining current and retrospective accounts of parental imprisonment from adult children has the potential to enrich current information and knowledge of this social group. Adult children, for example, offer insights into the longevity of potentially harmful and distressing effects of parental imprisonment that might not be apparent during childhood. Additionally, adult children can have more referential life experience, thus the potential to understand their experience of parental imprisonment in more depth. Overall, this entire chapter will explore both current and retrospective personal accounts and perspectives of parental imprisonment from adult children (Research Aim 1).

A major theme to emerge from the data analysis, and a central topic of discussion in the forum discussion thread, included the emotional impact of parental imprisonment on adult children. This over-arching theme will be considered by way of an analysis of adult children's personal accounts of ambiguous and broken trust and ambivalent adult child-imprisoned parent relationships. The chapter further examines and explores adult children's perceptions and experiences of imprisoned parents and parenting (Research Aim 2). This theme includes an analysis of the impact of insufficient imprisoned parent-adult child contact, effects of parental recidivism and adult child parentification.

Parenting and parent-child relationships are severely disrupted as soon as a parent is imprisoned, whereby parent/child contact is strictly restricted (Roberts et al., 2014). Posters to the forum discussion thread revealed the emotional impact and concerns that arose from restricted contact. Discussion and analysis begins with how a lack of contact

might lead to imprisoned parents missing out on significant life events of their adult children, and vice versa, and how this had a negative emotional impact and could potentially lead to weakened parent-child bonds. Factors that might lead adult children to either lose contact with, or influence their decision to completely disengage with an imprisoned parent, will also be presented and discussed herein. In addition to this, features that might contribute to adult children with a parent being placed into a parentified position, pre and post parental imprisonment are also presented in the context of Research Aim 2. Discussion and findings from this study will be illustrated and supported by the inclusion of paraphrased quotes as found in the forum discussion thread (please refer to the 'Ethical Considerations for Online Research' section of this thesis for further discussion on this point).

4.2 Adult Children and the Emotional Impact of Parental Imprisonment

A large amount of research relating to children with a parent in prison tends to focus on their mental health (Tasca et al., 2014; Bocknek et al., 2008; Fritsch and Burkhead, 1981). A major theme to emerge from the data analysis was the negative emotional impact parental imprisonment had on adult children with a parent in prison, where over a third of posters (*n*38) discussed distressing emotional difficulties they had faced as a result of their parent's imprisonment. Reasons given for emotional distress included feelings of helplessness and powerlessness to change the situation they and their imprisoned parent were facing. Children can be largely excluded from criminal justice proceedings when a parent is imprisoned (Roberts, 2012; Arditti et al., 2003), which can leave children anxiously uninformed and uncertain as to what is happening to their parent. This also appears to be the case for adult children:

> *'…I feel completely helpless. I just got back from a visit there…I am still very confused…I wish there were more I could do, I feel so trapped.'* (Female, aged 26).

'It hurts so bad, but I try not to think about it so much anymore, because I can't change it.' (Female, aged 27).

Evidently, despite their age, adult children too experience anxiety and feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. Laing and McCarthy (2005) also claim that children with a parent in prison might experience feelings of guilt, and discussion on the forum thread largely supported this. For example, where adult children no longer remained in regular contact with an imprisoned parent, or they were enjoying their own lives despite their parent being in prison, they described feeling guilty:

'Since he was sent to prison again I have only visited him once, this makes me feel even worse.' (Female, aged 28).

'I feel guilty when I laugh, smile, or have any kind of fun knowing she's there doing who knows what!' (Female, aged 31).

'The worst part about this whole thing is I feel so guilty because I am living my life...' (Female, aged 26).

Adult children's preoccupation with concerns for their imprisoned parent's welfare evidently contributed to emotional difficulties and feelings of guilt. Posters discussed a belief that they were repressing challenging emotions, thoughts and feelings about parental imprisonment, as well as difficulties trusting people, for example:

'It wasn't until recently that my emotions finally started catching up to me. I have become that person who runs from every relationship and is scared to let people get too close and it is beginning to eat at me badly.' (Female, aged 21).

'...I have been overcome with guilt, pain, regret, hate, anger, depression, etc. I have noticed that my personal relationships have suffered because of my inability to cope. Thinking about him makes me cry. Writing this makes me cry.' (Male, aged 26).

Importantly, the extracts above highlight potential consequences for adult children of avoiding social support and connections with other people. Consequences of such actions

might include difficulties managing negative emotions, especially when support might not be sought and/or rejected through feelings of shame and guilt. Having briefly introduced the reader to broad emotional impacts, the following sections will move on to deal with emotional impacts of parental imprisonment for adult children in more depth. This includes interpersonal relationship difficulties during adulthood and how general feelings of mistrust toward people in wider society might develop over time.

4.2.1 Ambiguous and Broken Trust

A fifth of posters (*n*20) discussed a distrust of both imprisoned and non-imprisoned parents/caregivers that had developed as a result of lies, mistruths and/or information being withheld about the extent of their parents offending and/or imprisonment. Although imprisoned and non-imprisoned parents might want to protect their children from the full facts of a parent's imprisonment, unintended consequences of doing so might include adult children's resentment for not being told the truth, as follows:

> *'He told my mom to tell me he was in the hospital with pneumonia….for 7 years… it was pure torture…'* (Female, aged 23).

> *'…she is VERY vague about WHY she's in prison...she doesn't know that I know why she's there…she always gives me some ridiculous story…'* (Female, aged 29).

> *'I guess I always had resentment toward my mom for keeping the truth from us for so long, to this day she hasn't sat any of us down to talk about the situation'* (Female, aged 21).

Martynowicz (2011) found that children might become distrustful, especially if they are not told the truth or are given a partial truth about a parent's imprisonment, which these findings support. An interesting finding, however, is how an early distrust of an imprisoned parent might develop in to a mistrust of others later in a child's life. For example, a female

poster whose father (a recidivist) refused to acknowledge how his actions (lies) had had a negative effect on his daughter:

> *'I am still struggling with all of my emotions and how to forgive and move past, but it is so damn hard to not be angry and upset. I am slowly trying to trust people, but there still seems to be this barrier that I can't quite get rid of, and frankly am not sure how to. I am taking everything day by day and trying my best to not grow angry whenever I talk to my dad.'* (Female, aged 21).

In discussing her problems trusting her imprisoned parent, particularly her increasing anger and resentment toward him for lies he told in the past, she explains how a mistrust of others had developed. One legacy of parental distrust during childhood is that it might manifest itself in the transference of mistrust to people in wider society, as a female poster illustrated:

> *'Through my experiences with my parents…I tend to be very shy and unsure of myself, very wary of people, people that I know and people I don't know. I have a lot of layers, and it takes a long time to get past my tough outer layers. I have a tough time making friends and communicating, even with the people I love and care about… I'm nervous about the future and worry about it a lot…'* (Female, aged 18).

This highlights broader effects of not being told the truth about a parent's imprisonment, difficulties making friendships, anxiety and being open with other people, for example. Considering these discussions where mistrust of an imprisoned parent might develop, thereby weakening parent-child bonds, the following section will address findings in relation to ambivalent adult child-imprisoned parent relationship.

4.2.2 Ambivalent Adult Child-Imprisoned Parent Relationships

Almost a quarter of posters (*n*23) discussed how they believed that they had an ambivalent relationship with their imprisoned parent. For example, posters expressed reluctance in sharing concerns with their imprisoned parent:

> *'I've always wanted to write him a letter and tell him how I feel…but I never had the heart to actually do it…I wish he knew how we felt about his lifestyle.'* (Female, aged 24).

> *'…we have to let them know how we feel and how their mistakes as parents affected our lives…'* (Female aged 21).

These findings indicate a lack of openness between adult children and their imprisoned parent. Restricted contact, weakened parent-child bonds, guilt and distrust appear to be factors involved in adult children's reluctance to confide in an imprisoned parent. This reluctance might manifest itself into adult children's eventual desire and/or intention to disengage from their imprisoned parent, for example:

> *'Should I be in contact with him or just move on with my life without him? I honestly don't know which will be better for my well-being…its time I look after that…I'm afraid if I write him with everything I feel, it will be too harsh.'* (Female, aged 24).

> *'…I really believe I have to let this go but it is so hard...'* (Female, aged 23).

> *'I don't know…if I will want to continue a relationship with him even after our contact…so confusing…'* (Female, aged 21).

Posters discussed their disappointment in their parent's failure to recognise how their offending and/or imprisonment had negatively impacted on their children's lives and emotional well-being. Additionally, after years of disrupted parenting a lack of closeness and an ambivalent relationship might develop between adult children and their imprisoned parent. These appear to be factors that could contribute to an eventual parent-child

estrangement. Having briefly covered emotional impacts of parental imprisonment on adult children in a general sense, discussion and analysis will now focus specifically on adult children and parentification.

4.3 Adult Children: Imprisoned Parent's and Parenting

The following discussion will analyse and discuss contact, recidivism, parentification, adverse aspects of parental imprisonment, including parental drug/substance misuse, in the context of parenting, as experienced by adult children.

4.3.1 Imprisoned Parent Missing Child's Significant Life Events

Almost a fifth of posters (*n*20) explained their distress and disappointment that their imprisoned parent had missed out on significant and important life events, for example, birthdays, weddings, graduations and/or grandchildren. Posters also discussed how they were distressed that their imprisoned parent was missing or had missed out on their lives in general, their day-to-day activities, for example:

> *'She missed so much in my life. People that didn't know her don't understand, but she was so much to me.'* (Female, aged 27).

> *'I need him here for so many reasons. He's my dad and I will always love him.'* (Female, aged 19).

> *'Now I'm 21 years old she missed the best parts of my life, I graduated high school, college, I got married, and now my son is 10 months old, I'm so sad that she had to miss all those things…she can't get that time back.'* (Female, aged 21).

Missing out on parental support during childhood and adulthood evidently elicited feelings of sadness and regret. An imprisoned parent missing out on relationships with their grandchildren also featured prominently in discussions. For example, after years of little

and/or intermittent contact with her imprisoned father, the following poster explained how resentment for her father's choices had increased, and how he had missed several important life events, including the birth of her first child:

> *'I'm 21 years old now and he's still is not out…I have had my first child and I am getting married in a few months. Those are some of the most hurtful things because those are the biggest milestones to me so far and he can't be here because of his selfish choices. It hurts so badly and I want to be mad but I have this curiosity and love for him still.'* (Female, aged 21).

The importance and significance of these findings is that restricted contact might lead to a weakening of imprisoned parent-adult child bond. Not only can imprisoned parents lose the bond between themselves and their own children, but bonds between extended family members, including grandchildren, might be compromised. The preceding brief analysis and discussion foregrounds the following assessment of findings regarding contact between adult children and imprisoned parents.

4.3.2 Contact: Uncertain Connections and Disrupted Parenting

A significant number of posters (*n*36) discussed their experiences and difficulties of maintaining contact with their imprisoned parent. Many discussed insufficient, sporadic and a complete loss of contact with their imprisoned parent, lending support to the assertion that maintaining regular contact with an imprisoned parent might have a bearing on the emotional wellbeing of children with a parent in prison. Saunders and McArthur (2013) noted the importance of 'maintaining family ties' and argued that children maintaining contact with imprisoned parents were conducive to children's wellbeing. Discussion in the forum thread suggested that adult children's wellbeing might well be compromised with insufficient contact. Adult children might also have a clearer understanding of imprisonment, which served to exacerbate distress and concern. When not in contact with a parent in prison posters explained how they would worry about their welfare, particularly

as they were aware that living conditions in prisons might be harsh. As one woman explains:

> *'He has not called yet and I am worried about him more than ever. I want to know if he got there okay, what he is doing, who/how many people he is living with, if he is being treated good, etc. I have so many unanswered questions…He has been in prison before but I was a little girl and now at 22, I am more aware of what prisons are like and unfortunately, it makes it much more difficult for me to cope with.'* (Female, aged 22).

It is recommended that children are kept informed of their parent's welfare and details of their living conditions while imprisoned so as to reduce children's anxiety (Martynowicz, 2011). In contrast and extending this argument, increased knowledge of the realities of prison conditions might mean that adult children become more anxious than their younger counterparts. Posters explained how seeing their parent in good health, for example, brought them comfort and relief from worrying about their parent's wellbeing:

> *'Every time he is transferred from one prison to another they retake his picture. I am happy to know that he has put on some weight and looks healthier.'* (Female, aged 23).

Children might also find it emotionally difficult to leave a parent after a prison visit (Martynowicz, 2011; Boswell and Wedge, 2002). Discussion on the thread supported this claim and highlighted that adult children too described that leaving a parent after a prison visit as emotionally distressing, for example:

> *'I just got back form a visit there. I was able to visit my mother, but it was so hard to see her like that.'* (Female, aged, 26).

Despite their advanced age and previous experience it appears no less distressing for adult children to leave a parent after a visit. It is claimed that travelling long distances to visit prisons might become a barrier to maintaining sufficient and/or regular contact with imprisoned parents (Martynowicz, 2011; Boswell and Wedge, 2002), as follows:

> *'I've just turned 24 years old and my dad has been in prison since I was 16 (8 years). I recently visited him for the first time in 2 years. He is in a prison 9 hours away so it makes it very hard for me to see him.'* (Female, aged 24).

The strain of trying to maintain contact with her father due to the distance she has to travel contributed to sporadic contact. A female poster explains how barriers to contact included long travelling distances, the strains and responsibilities of her mother's single-parenthood, her father's reluctance to write letters, and a weakened parental bond between her and her father contributed to her ceasing contact altogether:

> *'…as the years went on we visited even less…It's hard to have a relationship when he refuses to write…and we don't get to talk or visit much. He is a 4 hour drive one way and I have a family to take care of so the trips don't happen often…when we talk he usually just hounds me about my mistakes in life and sending him money. But I have never really had a "dad" so I am used to it.'* (Female, aged 23).

Data drawn from the discussion thread suggests that over time adult children might simply adapt to their parent being in prison, as above. The distress of visiting prisons, long journeys and fears for a parent's welfare, posters discussed factors that might contribute to an eventual loss of contact with their imprisoned parent. An important finding from this study implies that adult children, after years of intermittent and sporadic contact, can contemplate disengaging with their imprisoned parent. For example, a female poster highlighted how the emotional strain of trying to maintain contact with her father had become problematic with increased feelings of anger toward him and how this had led to a complete relationship breakdown:

> *'When I was younger I was in regular contact with him, and went to visit him a few times. As I got older I found out some awful things he had done, and started realising what a bad person and father he was. At about 17, I stopped all contact with him and haven't written or talked to him since.'* (Female, aged 24).

More life experience, maturity and knowledge of an imprisoned parent's behaviour/offending might influence adult children to disengage with their parent entirely. Generally speaking,

children and parents share important occasions and celebrate significant life events as part of the process of forging parent/child bonds. However, what might be taken for granted for children, in a general sense, proves problematic for children with a parent in prison as a direct result of restricted contact and/or repeated separations. The preceding discussion illustrates how limited contact over time might place a strain on the strength of parental bonds between adult children and their imprisoned parent, including repeated separations. Analysis and discussion will now move on to impacts specific to repeated parent/child separations in the context of a parent's recidivism.

4.3.3 Intermittent and Disrupted Parenting: Imprisoned Parent and Recidivism

There is a dearth of literature available on the topic of recidivism and its impact on adult children with a parent in prison. A considerable amount of research concentrates on much younger children who might have yet to experience repeated separations resulting from parental recidivism. A majority of posters to the forum discussion thread were identified as adult children with imprisoned parents who were recidivists (*n*59). Over and above a lack of contact with an imprisoned parent, repeated separations due to parental recidivism was found to be highly problematic for adult children. A significant number, almost a third (*n*33), explained how their parent's rate of recidivism contributed to scepticism that their parent understood or cared about the emotional toll their recidivism had generated. For example, crime was perceived as being more important to the parent than their child, as illustrated by the following poster:

> *'My father has been in and out of jail all of my childhood…that was then, I am now 25 and haven't seen him since I was about 16 because I feel like he chose to ruin our lives for others…'* (Female, aged 25).

Poster's often reflected on their past experiences of parental imprisonment, which further suggested that some perceived their parent's recidivism as abandonment, for example:

'When I was 9 years old my dad went to prison for the first time, I was devastated…I vowed to myself, my husband, and especially my children, that I would NEVER desert them like we were deserted when we were kids. Now, I am 28 years old and my dad is back in prison for a much longer time…It's hard no matter what the age of the child…' (Female, aged 28).

Intermittent and repeated disruption of parenting further contributed to adult children's resignation to the belief that prison was simply a 'way of life' for their parent, leaving them with scarce childhood memories of their parent outside prison. Posters explained how emotionally weary they had become with repeated offending, repeated upheaval due to parental recidivism, including an expectation that their parent would reoffend, as illustrated in the following extracts:

'…she came out here for two weeks…She went home, as planned...and was arrested two days later.' (Female, aged 29).

'My mother has been in and out of prison throughout my entire life. I am now 18 going on 19. She is finally out, again…already violated.' (Female, aged 18).

Interestingly, withdrawal from an imprisoned parent might be precipitated by a reluctance to confide in their imprisoned parent out of fear of damaging already weakened parent/child bonds, or that they remained in contact through feelings of guilt, for example:

'I'm afraid if I write to him with everything I feel it will be too harsh.' (Female, aged 24).

'I know I have to tell him how I feel but it is really hard I can never get down on paper how I truly feel…I know that some of the things I NEED to say to him will hurt his feelings. I know that I shouldn't let that bother me, but it is hard for me to ignore that side of me.' (Female, aged 22).

Adult children discussed their disappointment and confusion when a parent was (re)imprisoned, particularly when in the process of (re)forming parent/child bonds, as illustrated by the following extracts:

'I felt like maybe we were finally starting to be a father and daughter and maybe he finally cared…then a year ago he went back in…I was mad because while he was out we talked every day on the phone and I got so close to him and then this happened. I was hurt and confused. Why didn't he want to be out? I didn't understand…I still don't have all the answers but I know I love him so much and I feel so terrible for him being in there. I miss him and every day it's so hard.'

'My dad has been in and out of prison my entire life…He is now in again and honestly I am not sure I am doing so well with it. I love him very much but I am tired of all the pain…The last time he was arrested he was out for a year and a half before he went back. We bonded and I was getting used to the fact that my dad was around. He was doing really well…It was great to have my dad back, but he got arrested again and it seems like I just stopped caring.' (Female, aged 22).

With repeated separations, disappointments and upheaval, the desire to bond with an imprisoned parent might weaken. The above extracts not only suggest weariness, but further suggest the emotional toll parental recidivism might have on adult children. This lack of consistent contact with an imprisoned parent, alongside the length of a parent's sentence and/or rate of recidivism, for example, were identified as factors that might have the potential to weaken and/or dissolve the parent-child bond entirely. As the preceding discussion illustrates, adult children might perceive their imprisoned parent's repeated imprisonment as their parent not taking responsibility for their actions, and thus might become angry and resentful. Posters constructed their imprisoned parents as selfish and unsympathetic to the impact and consequences of their actions. Strained relationships might result and lead to adult children withdrawing emotionally from their imprisoned parent, and in the extreme, eventual estrangement.

4.3.4 Parental Imprisonment and Parentification

Another significant sub-theme proposed that a large amount of posters (*n40*) experienced parentification, and thus a parent/child role reversal. Parentification, for the purposes of this study was broadly defined as children adopting adult parenting roles and responsibilities, caregiving for parents (imprisoned and non-imprisoned) and/or siblings, and becoming responsible for the running of the household and finances. A large amount of

previous research relating to the concept of parentification has focussed on children with an alcoholic parent (Kelley et al., 2007), or children of parents with mental health problems (Van Parys et al., 2015). Codd (2008) argues that children with a parent in prison might also be placed into a parentified position and take on extra responsibilities, household chores, and caregiving responsibilities for young siblings and emotional support for remaining caregivers, which is supported by this study. Parentification ranged from undertaking additional household chores, managing household finances, to adopting a caregiving role for parents (both imprisoned and non-imprisoned) and/or younger siblings. Posters in the following extracts expressed a belief that there had been a role reversal between their parents and themselves, where they were positioned as friend, protector, caregiver and provider:

> *'It's kind of frustrating. I mean, I love my mom...but I feel like all my life I have been taking care of her....and sometimes, I just get tired. I mean, I just want her to be a mom...a grandma...not my "buddy".'* (Female, aged 29).

> *'…I just want this nightmare over. The worst part about this whole thing is I feel so guilty because I am living my life...I feel like my father's protector…'* (Female, aged 26).

> *'I can really relate to feeling like you're taking care of the parents, not the other way around, and how confusing it is to love them and still not think of them as "parents" either…I really feel a lot of times like I'm the parent.'* (Female, aged 30).

> *'It's hard…in my mind they're more parents in name than true parents. When they write me, asking for envelopes, asking for money, asking for food, etc., I feel more like I'm taking care of them than the other way around.'* (Female, aged 18).

Although posters complained of having to financially support their imprisoned parent for quite small amounts of money to sustain their imprisoned parent (as illustrated above), there were extreme examples of financial parentification. A 20 year old male with a mother in prison explained how he had gained custody of his siblings (two brothers and a sister) after his mother's imprisonment. His mother, a single parent prior to her imprisonment,

received an eight year prison sentence and, as his father was absent he became responsible for his siblings at 19 years old. He became solely responsible for rehousing and the financial support of himself and his siblings, he went on to explain how he managed to maintain the family unit, as follows:

> *'So, I was 19, with no family, my two brothers and mildly autistic sister. I got custody of them. Found a house to rent big enough. My brothers are fine considering everything that's happened. My sister is reading, writing, and not far behind anymore. I had two jobs and was working seven days a week…All this and I was only 19 years old'* (Male, aged 20).

Similarly, a female poster explained how since her father's imprisonment, she had received very little support from extended family members. She explained how she was burdened with having to maintain the family unit, including the care of her younger siblings, but additionally feared homelessness:

> *'It has been really hard because I am trying to keep the family together. Our house and property has now been tied up with all of this…I'm afraid I will have nowhere to live. My mom's side of the family blows me off when I try to talk about my dad and how he is doing…my dad's side of the family acts like it shouldn't bother me...'* (Female, aged 31).

Posters explained how they were pressured and burdened with the responsibility to provide care for their imprisoned parent, which they felt was encroaching on their own lives and responsibilities as parents. Adult children can also feel pressured to care for their parent on release from prison, and discussed how this might adversely affect their closest relationships. Here, a female adult child with a parent in prison explains how her mother's imminent release from prison was responsible for tensions between her and her husband:

> *'He is very supportive and is okay with me writing her and sending the money. However, we have a difference of opinion about how I should handle her when she gets out…He does not have a good opinion of her having witnessed all of the heartache this situation has caused me. But I feel she is a person too and we should not give up on people. I want more than anything to be able to help her.'* (Female, aged 31).

Posters explained that they felt forced into caregiving responsibilities, especially for younger siblings, and how this had restricted their social lives and friendships. For example, a female poster raised a discussion about her father's imprisonment, her mother's mental health and substance misuse issues and how these meant that she was responsible for her siblings' caregiving:

> '…my dad is who he is, and my mom's an alcoholic with mental illness issues… so I am basically the "grownup" for myself, my parents, and my 4 siblings. Not easy when you're only 28 years old - most people my age are buying houses and having babies, or going out drinking and partying, none of which I can relate to because my time is spent taking care of my parents and siblings.' (Female, aged 30).

The above extracts highlight and suggest how restrictive providing care for imprisoned parents, remaining caregivers and/or siblings might be, and how adult children might miss out on age appropriate activities with their peers. Personal accounts also suggest that parentification of adult children was not limited to imprisonment, but might also extend to a parent's release from prison, for example:

> '...as much as I'd like to spend my time in a heroin-induced fog with no worries, I CAN'T. Sometimes I just feel like when is she going to grow up?…I feel like when she gets out, I need to "mother" her then as well…' (Female, aged 29).

It is clear that this woman resents and feels restricted by being pushed into a mothering role and being responsible for her imprisoned mother on her release. Although 'maintaining family ties' are argued as being conducive to potentially reducing reoffending rates, these findings support Codd's (2007) assertion that the burden of supporting prisoner resettlement and re-entry might fall disproportionately on families already struggling with imprisonment of a family member, especially women.

4.4 Findings and Analysis: Summary

The loss of consistent contact between adult children and their imprisoned parents is a crucial issue that is unavoidable when a parent is imprisoned. The importance of gaining insights from adult children is that it allows for an assessment of potential consequences for children who are unable to maintain consistent contact with an imprisoned parent. This study supports, and extends, current research findings regarding children's desire for more contact with an imprisoned parent. Evidently, once a parent is imprisoned they are likely to miss out on important milestones and life events of their children. Adult children are also likely to miss out on emotional and parental support, which can serve to weaken parent/child bonds and potentially lead to the development of an ambiguous relationship, particularly when they have been told mistruths as to their parent's offending/whereabouts.

Over extended periods of time and repeated separations, parent/child bonds might be compromised entirely; alongside long journeys, financial barriers and distressing experiences of visiting prisons which might weaken adult children's desire for more contact with their imprisoned parent. With more in-depth knowledge of prison estates, adult children might become too distressed to make visits with their parent in a prison environment, a potential contributory factor for adult children and imprisoned parents losing contact altogether.

Adult children can perceive parental recidivism as repeated abandonment, which can lead to eventual resentment for an imprisoned parent, especially where bonds were in the process of being developed prior to imprisonment. Repeated disruption to and intermittent parenting can be factors that might lead to a complete relationship breakdown and lead to imprisoned parent/adult child estrangement. Alternatively, adult children might become accustomed to their imprisoned parent's absence. Research involving children with a parent in prison tend to focus on those children who are already in contact with their imprisoned

parent and representations of children not in contact with their imprisoned parent are largely missing from research outputs (Glaze and Muruschak, 2010; Wolfe, 1999). These findings thus provide further insight into adult children's perspectives of parental imprisonment from those whose voices are largely unrepresented in research outputs.

As evidenced by previous studies, losing a parent to imprisonment can have serious negative financial consequences for families left behind (Aaron and Dallaire, 2009; Codd, 2008; Smith et al., 2007). An interesting finding from this study is that financial responsibilities might indeed eventually rest with adult children and lead to their parentification. Additionally, having to financially and/or emotionally support parents (imprisoned and non-imprisoned), pre and post release, can illicit distress and resentment from adult children. Posters explained that the burden of parentification might not be limited to the imprisoned parent, but could also be extended to the remaining parent/caregiver, especially where they might be finding it emotionally and financially difficult to cope with a spouse's imprisonment.

Adult children's dissatisfaction with being placed into a parentified position included a resentment that they believed it was they who required support, and not their parents/caregivers. In contrast, adult children might become protective of their imprisoned and/or non-imprisoned parent/caregiver, especially if they were perceived as being unable to cope. Financial problems, parental alcoholism/substance abuse and mental health issues might be stressors that push adult children into a parentified position pre and/or post parental imprisonment, and over and above parental imprisonment.

Chapter 5: Stigma by Association, Stigma and Stigmatisation: Adult Children with a Parent in Prison

5.1 Introduction

The focus of this chapter is to present findings and analysis of the concepts of stigma by association, stigma and stigmatisation in the context of adult children with a parent in prison, and implications for this distinct social group of children. Stigma by association is a concept whereby people associated with stigmatised individuals, in this instance prisoners, might acquire a degree of stigma themselves (Phillips and Gates, 2011; Goffman, 1963). Goffman (1963, p.42) posited that where a (courtesy) stigma is not: 'immediately apparent, and is not known beforehand' by others, and where their (courtesy) stigma is discreditable, an individual might engage in information control and/or management. Link and Phelan's (2001) later reconceptualization of stigma and processes of stigmatisation was particularly important for this study, especially considering the nature of the social group to which children with a parent in prison are affiliated with.

Link and Phelan (2004; 2001) suggest that stigma is a multi-level construct, that stigmatisation is a social process and occurs within the context of social, cultural, political, and economic power. Embedded in this context, stigmatisation is a process that consists of four main elements. Firstly, dominant cultural groups distinguish and label differences of groups and/or individuals from those with or without a perceived stigma. Secondly, labelled differences become associated with negative attributes (dangerousness, moral ambiguity, trustworthiness, for example). Thirdly, based on labelled differences, a differentiation between "us" (those without a stigma) and "them" (those with a perceived stigma) is constructed. Finally, labelled groups and/or individuals are thus devalued, which potentially leads to discriminatory treatment.

Having adopted and incorporated the preceding concepts to inform the data analysis, this entire chapter presents a broad spectrum of findings from an analysis of data as found in the forum discussion thread. Potential effects of stigma by association and stigma from the perspective, and in the context, of adult children with a parent in prison (Research Aim 3) will be presented herein. This chapter will further present findings and analysis regarding specific methods adult children with a parent in prison might employ as means to limit potential negative effects of stigma by association (Research Aim 4) on their identity. An analysis and discussion of stigma by association, stigma and stigmatisation will be undertaken in the context of information management/control, self-censorship, concealment, stigmatising media attention, and social withdrawal.

5.2 Stigma by Association: Adult Children with a Parent in Prison

Incorporating the work of Link and Phelan (2001), Phillips and Gates (2011) suggest a conceptual framework based on an understanding of the potential stigma by association and stigmatisation children with a parent in prison might experience. They summarised that this framework:

> '…provides insight into why children and families may conceal the fact that a parent is in prison, the potentially protective function of social withdrawal, how the fear of stigmatization may impede help seeking, and the potential for helping efforts and research to contribute to the stigmatization of this group of children.' (Phillips and Gates, 2011, p. 291).

Phillips and Gates (2011) claim that children with a parent in prison might conceal the fact that their parent is in prison, this also appears to be the case with adult children. Posters to the forum discussion thread, however, provided examples of reactions of not concealing their parent's imprisonment. A female poster explicitly states an expectation, including an

example, of discriminatory treatment she had received as a result of revealing her father's imprisonment:

> '…everyone knows that families of criminals get criminalised themselves…I've had guys decide they didn't want to date me because they didn't want to someday have to have a criminal being their children's grandparent.' (Female, aged 30).

In this example, this poster highlights anticipation for discriminatory treatment, and how her father's actions and subsequent imprisonment have had a detrimental effect on her. The above poster indicates how stigma by association might manifest itself in adult children's daily lives and (potential) relationships. This was a common theme throughout discussions in the forum discussion thread. The following sections will address specific instances of manifestations of stigma by association, and begins with a presentation of findings detailing information management/control, self-censorship and concealment adult children might employ as a means to limit the effects of stigma by association on their identity.

5.2.1 Information Management, Self-censorship, Concealment and 'Convenient Lies'

A significant amount of posters (*n*33) to the forum thread discussed how they had kept their parent's imprisonment secret, managed information, used 'convenient lies' and/or concealed their parent's whereabouts. This was as a means to limit the potential negative effects of stigma by association and avoid being stigmatised and/or discriminated against. Goffman suggested that those who engage in information control and/or management might often be forced: 'to display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where' (Goffman, 1963, p. 42). Likewise, to minimise the potential of being stigmatised, Phillips and Gates (2011) propose that children might attempt to conceal their parent's imprisonment, or be selective to whom they disclose this information to. Philips and Gates (2011) claimed that children facing

questions about their parents' imprisonment in a school environment might become anxious. Parke and Clarke-Stewart's study (2001) argued that, in the extreme, children might avoid school altogether, to the point of developing school phobias.   In the following extract a female poster, reflecting on her childhood, explained how she found it uncomfortable sharing information about her father's whereabouts with fellow pupils at school:

> *'I never wanted to tell anyone at school that my dad was in prison. He was there for murder and I knew they would ask why he was in and tons of other questions. I just hated answering questions…'* (Female, aged 19).

She clearly expresses how uncomfortable she became when pressed for information about her father's imprisonment, and the reason for his imprisonment, by those at her school. Phillips and Gates (2011) suggest that children can become aware of stigmatised groups from a very young age, even when not directly discriminated against. Nesmith and Ruhland (2008) also suggested that fears of being discriminated against were given as reasons why children with a parent in prison might become secretive. Schlafer et al. (2012) also found that children were teased at school due to the social stigma of having a parent in prison.

An example of concealment and information control, as found in the following extract, details how a female adult child of a prisoner was unwilling to share any information about her father's imprisonment, and how she found it necessary to lie to members of the community where she lived:

> *'We live in a community where no one knows anyone who's ever been in prison; criminals are people we see on TV from the bad parts of town and on Law and Order. So it's not like I can tell too many people about it, but it's hard to think of convenient lies to explain why no one in our town never sees my dad around anymore.'* (Female, aged 30).

People's knowledge of imprisonment in her community is constructed as rudimentary. This implies that she perceives that social and/or media representations of those in prison might

not sufficiently reflect the complexities of parental imprisonment, and thus largely stereotypical. This implies that she finds media representations stigmatising for those in, or connected to people in prison, and that people in her community perceive imprisoned people (or their associates) as being from the '*bad parts of town*', as the other, hence her reluctance to share details of her father's imprisonment for fear of a stigmatising and/or discriminatory response. Research suggests her fear of discrimination might be well-founded, and that children with a parent in prison are more likely to receive an unsympathetic response from those in wider society due, in part, to a lack of information and insight into the lives of prisoners and/or their families (Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008; Salmon, 2004).

It is argued that media representations do not adequately represent real life experiences of imprisonment and can be largely stigmatising. Mason (2006, p.251), for example, argues that as a result of the UK government's increased punitiveness media representations of prisons and imprisonment: 'as an institution full of murderers, rapists and paedophiles'. Similarly, Harper and Hogue (2014) suggest a nine fold overrepresentation of sex crime in the UK's media. Previous research highlighted that media attention can have negative impacts on children with a parent in prison, especially where media depictions construct offending parents as especially villainous, which might consequently serve as a conduit to increase children's secrecy and shame (Myers, 1999). Illustrating how negative media attention had increased feelings of shame and secrecy surrounding her father's imprisonment, in a retrospective account a female poster explained how her father's high profile crime had been widely reported in both local and national media, which included her father's widely publicised arrest. She describes how the event was particularly traumatic and how it continues to have a negative emotional impact nine years later:

> '*When I was 12, my dad was very publicly arrested…which basically shattered my life as I knew it…Recently, I heard of someone whose husband was arrested…and it was like I was reliving the entire situation from when my dad was arrested. The massive news coverage, the shame and betrayal, the*

constant looks and stares. And mostly, the moment of fear and panic when someone asks about my dad or what he does for a living. It is like I have to relive that moment constantly, and while I am not embarrassed by it because it is not my fault, I still cringe at having to tell someone else that my dad is in prison.' (Female, aged 21).

Importantly, the act of concealing her father's whereabouts effectively serves as a protective function, and thus distances her from any potential stigmatisation and/or discriminatory treatment as a result of her association with her father. It is often reported that children find it difficult to tell people about their parent's imprisonment, particularly neighbours, peers and extended family members (Brown, 2001). Posters highlighted that information control/management and concealment were not necessarily restricted to those positioned and perceived as outsiders, those lacking the experience of having a parent or a close family member in prison, for example. A surprising finding was that information management was also employed with those people closest to adult children, as illustrated in the following extract:

'Still to this day I haven't really talked about it with anyone in detail - most of my friends know that my father is in prison but I never go into detail.' (Female, aged 21).

The above poster stated that she self-censored and concealed information about her imprisoned father from people who she had '*serious relationships*' with, where a certain level of openness and intimacy might usually be expected. Reflecting on her childhood experience, she discussed attempts to conceal her feelings about her father's imprisonment during her time at school, and how she: '*…pretty much ignored what was happening and repressed any kinds of feelings'.* Adult children shared a belief that their mental health had deteriorated through the process of 'holding it all in', and a feeling of being unable to share their experiences of parental imprisonment for fear of being stigmatised or pitied. For example, in the following extract a female poster explained how her reluctance to share her experiences of parental imprisonment, or seek support, had had a negative effect on her:

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> *'I've realised just recently that although I have lived my life, and tried to move on, I was never really happy. I was in prison too with my grief and anger…I refuse to be known as "that poor girl whose father is in jail" and I want to be happy for my husband and my children, so I am starting to trust people and starting to let people in slowly...'* (Female, aged 26).

As illustrated, self-censorship, concealment and information management and suppression of emotions regarding parental imprisonment appear to have a detrimental emotional effect. Posters discussed struggles with emotional problems that had become detrimental to their mental health. Emotional problems included bouts of sadness, depression and, in the extreme, suicide ideation, for example:

> *'I cry all the time, at the littlest thing…I just want this nightmare over.'* (Female, aged 26).

> *'Sometimes I just cry for no reason, but it all has to get better someday. It's a cliché, but when you hit rock bottom, there's only one place to go.'* (Female, aged 18).

> *'I was in a much deeper depression than I ever was even directly after my parents were incarcerated. I remember not being able to focus on life, not wanting to get up in the morning, not simply because I was tired, but simply because I did not want to live.'*

Consistent with these findings, Dawson et al. (2013, p. 4) assert that: '…the labelling of these children as different can be accompanied by stereotyping and discrimination that causes stress, lowers children's self-esteem and confidence and can potentially affect mental and physical health'. Philips and Gates (2011) claim that self-stigma and an internalisation of negative societal beliefs about the social group to which children with a parent in prison are associated with, might lead to a reluctance to seek support. One of the few male posters explained how he believed that the suppression of his emotions was beneficial to his emotional stability, as follows:

> *'I have been a remarkably stable individual considering the circumstances… I have a feeling it is because I have been successful at blocking everything out.'* (Male, aged 30).

This claim, however, was not borne out by his later admission that he was struggling emotionally and had come to the forum discussion thread for support. Not all posters were reluctant to seek emotional support, for example, a female poster shared that she had accessed professional mental health support services. She explained that overwhelming concerns for the well-being of her frail and aging imprisoned father (73 years old), had led her to be: '*…currently in therapy and on anti-depressants because I just can't seem to get a grip…*' (Female, aged 43). Similarly, a female poster whose father had recently received a fifteen year prison sentence explained how this had an impact on her emotional well-being:

> '*I am just now having a lot of anger surfacing about my dad. For the last couple of years it was just sympathy & depression, but now it is noticeably anger. I am seeing a counsellor and was put on anti-depressants 4 months ago. I just can't wrap my mind around what he did…*' (Female, aged 26).

A cautious interpretation ought to be adopted when considering these particular findings, as evidence is limited by the small amount of posters who declared they had sought professional help and support. This highlights the lack of control the researcher has when analysing archival data, in that the ability to confirm or question anything outside of what is presented in the text is not possible. Having illustrated findings in relation to information management/control, self-censorship and concealment adult children might employ as a means to limit the effects of stigma by association on their identity, the following section will now move on to present findings and analysis in relation to self-stigma, social withdrawal and isolation.

5.2.2 Self-stigma, Social Withdrawal and Isolation

Goffman (1963) posited that strategies employed to manage (associative) stigmas could include social withdrawal and limiting one's participation in society. Although social withdrawal might be identified as a protective factor and strategy to combat potential stigmatising effects of parental imprisonment, this however, proves problematic. For

example, the subsequent isolation and loneliness posters claimed they experienced as a result of social withdrawal were presented as particularly distressing, as illustrated by the following extracts:

> *'We dread every day because something bothers us that we can't explain. We feel lonely or depressed…'* (Male, aged 25).

> *'…and while sometimes I feel I can cope, sometimes the loneliness just feels overwhelming.'* (Female, aged 18).

> *'I understand about being lonely...but sometimes it feels that even if someone is there, they don't understand.'* (Female, aged 21).

> *'I feel like people don't understand what it's like for an adult child of an offender. When you think "children with a parent in prison" you think little kids, but adult children hurt too.'* (Female, aged 30).

In the process of protecting themselves from stigmatisation, where some adult children might not believe they have people to confide in, others might feel forced to withdraw and limit their participation in society and in the process lose close friends and social connections. The following extract highlights the extremes some children with a parent in prison might face after a parent has been imprisoned:

> *'…my dad was arrested…it was big news in a well-to-do town…we had such a "normal" family…and then this happened…I basically pushed all my old friends away…I just didn't want to explain what happened or why we were moving…I lost a lot of good friends because of it and I regret that. But at the time I just felt like the spotlight was on my family…and I just couldn't deal with it...I never told anyone…I mean it's a small town so I know that they know…but I have never told them.'* (Female, aged 26).

The poster implies that she no longer believes that she belongs to a 'normal' family and thus constructs her family as abnormal since her father's imprisonment. Furthermore, she highlights unintended consequences of protecting herself from stigma as losing friends and social connections. Posters also explained how they felt like outsiders in their communities, for example:

> *'I too have been feeling sad depressed, I basically cannot cope. I can't sleep, eat, think, and even have a normal conversation with people. I feel like an outsider.'* (Female, aged 36).

Shame and self-stigma appeared to be a contributory factor and precursor for adult children's social withdrawal. Fear and anxiety of belonging to an outsider social group further contributed to this. Consequently, withdrawing socially led to isolation and loneliness, which might explain why adult children seek out representations of themselves online to combat such difficulties. The following section will now go on to address how connecting online might serve to combat isolation and loneliness.

5.2.3 Virtual Communities: Combating Social Withdrawal and Isolation

The most repeatedly mentioned theme (*n*52, just over half) was an appreciation of the forum discussion thread, of having an online site where adult children could connect with others who had experience of parental imprisonment. Adult children and children with experience of parental imprisonment can be dispersed widely geographically and may have very little knowledge of, or chance to meet other children in the same situation; not least because they can be reluctant to share their parents' imprisonment with their peers, neighbours, and so on (Brown, 2001). The most prevalent reason given for joining the forum discussion thread was that posters believed they might find people who could identify with their situation, provide information, gain understanding and support, for example:

> *'It's nice to have a place to talk with people who understand.'* (Female, aged 29).

> *'I think it will be a good place for me to come for information and to talk to people dealing with similar things.'* (Female, aged 26).

> *It's good to have somewhere to vent my frustrations to people who understand.* (Female, aged 25).

> *'I just want to get to know people who know what I am going through and get more information!'* (Female, aged 23).

One poster claimed that through feelings of isolation and loneliness they had searched for reflections of themselves on the Internet for years without success, as follows:

> *'It is a great feeling knowing I am not alone in my struggles. I wish I would have done this sooner. I have felt so alone for too many years!'* (Female, aged 24).

Online research studies highlight the potential for the Internet to be a source of social support, especially for those from stigmatised, marginalised and/or hard-to-reach groups (Suh, 2013; McDermott et al., 2012). Suh (2013) posits that those who share usually hidden aspects of marginalised and/or stigmatised identities online might experience this as catharsis. Posters described how the forum discussion thread gave them a sense of security and comfort, a place where they could express mostly hidden parts of their identity and their experiences of parental imprisonment. The following extracts illustrate and are consistent with findings from previous research:

> *'…it's good to know I'm not alone. Some of the stories on here are so similar to mine, that's comforting. It's nice to not be alone.'* (Male, aged 24).

> *'It makes me happy knowing I'm not alone and that others, too, are finding comfort here.'* (Female, aged 18).

> *'…it's great to have support and vent with people who get it.'* (Female, aged 26).

Goffman claimed that an alternative stigma management technique might involve joining and/or creating a social movement to subvert and contest negative stereotypes attached to a given stigma. As above, there was a real sense from the data that adult children found it particularly difficult sharing their experiences of parental imprisonment with perceived outgroups (those without an association to a stigmatised individual), which led them to search for those who might identify with them. Posters explained how they believed those

posting on the forum discussion thread might have more in-depth knowledge of parental imprisonment, and were thus less likely to judge them negatively. Posters were also comfortable in expressing contempt for being pitied in offline environments, as illustrated in the following extracts:

> *'I guess what I am looking for is someone to relate to about this…someone who will not pity me when I voice my feeling about my dad when I get to missing him, but identify because they know where I am coming from.'* (Female, aged 22).

> *'It feels good to have a support system where people don't judge or pity you.'* (Female, aged 33).

> *'…I got old enough to know what pity looked like, people that grew up with my dad or knew my family, even my own cousins would all give me the pity look, it got so old I stopped going up there…I don't need anyone saying "oh look, there goes so-and-so's daughter, I feel so sorry for her."* (Female, aged 21).

Pity is mentioned pejoratively suggesting an expectation of an unequal power relation to arise should they reveal their parent's imprisonment (Stramondo, 2010). Adult children's perception of being pitied, rather than being perceived as empathic or justified, might be perceived as a form of stigma and/or prejudice. Pity is fleetingly mentioned by Phillips and Gates (2011), however, Stramondo (2010, p. 121) argues that pity might be perceived as a form of social harm to stigmatised individuals, and that:

> '…pity is not only an emotion, but also a power relation…pity is understood as
>
> harmful by the one pitied because he is acutely aware of how it obscures his
>
> unequal power relation to the pitier and denies the pitier's role in creating this
>
> domination.'

Pity appears especially contested and rejected if it might position adult children with a parent in prison as powerless. The reluctance to share information of their father's imprisonment likewise suggests they believe that they have very few impartial, non-

judgemental people to confide in about their parent's imprisonment and how it might have affected them in offline environments. This, again, proposes an expectation and/or fear of a discriminatory response from those with a lack of knowledge or experience of parental imprisonment.

5.2.4 Parental Imprisonment during Adulthood

An interesting finding was that adult children whose parents had been imprisoned later in an adult child's life might lead to the social rejection of an imprisoned parent. In contrast, adult children who experienced parental imprisonment during childhood might be more sympathetic toward their imprisoned parent. For example, the following poster expresses contempt and disappointment of their recently imprisoned father:

> *'My dad has never been to jail, never arrested, a military veteran and the most wonderful man I know. I'm a military brat and have been through change and I pretty much know how to adapt but I wasn't prepared for this…Instead of my dad the hero, it's now my dad the liar. The man I admired, loved and relied on is now a sick liar. How do you cope? What do you do? How do you forgive? What do I do now?' (Female, aged 25).*

The above poster explained how she re-adjusted her perception of a once 'heroic' military father who she now conceptualised and constructed as a: 'sick liar'. This implies that she no longer fully accepts and now devalues her father due to his imprisonment. Link and Phelan (2014) propose that stigmatisation occurs when social actors who suffer status loss are thus devalued. Goffman (1963, p.35) posits that those who knew an individual pre-stigma as more likely: '…attached to a conception of what he once was, may be unable to treat him with either formal tact or with familiar full acceptance'. Both Goffman (1963) and Link and Phelan (2014) identify status loss and social rejection as major consequences of stigma. This is illustrated in the following extract, where a poster explains his father's status loss and how he socially rejected him:

> *'My dad was my hero. He was my superman…I idolised him. I wanted to be like him in every way…I loved him more than anything… I hate my father for causing this permanent pain my family has. I feel like he abandoned me… dad is dead in a way…He isn't the same father I knew… I can't believe my hero has fallen so far.'* (Male, aged 26).

In contrast, a female poster whose father was a recidivist throughout her childhood dismisses the idea of rejecting her father, as follows:

> *'We have to wrestle every day with the fact that our parents are our parents, and we love them for that, but our parents are also criminals - especially in my community, criminals are hated and ostracised. But how could I ever do that to one of my parents…'* (Female, aged 30).

When a parent is imprisoned during childhood, an adult child might be more likely to identify with the stigmatised group they associate with. In contrast, where a parent is imprisoned during adulthood, the adult child might be more likely to identify with the dominant cultural/social group.

5.3 Findings and Analysis: Summary

Methods employed by adult children as a means to avoid being stigmatised might include information management/control, self-censorship and/or concealment of their parent's imprisonment. Adult children with a parent in prison may anticipate an unsympathetic or pitying response from people without an association to a stigmatised individual and/or experience of parental imprisonment. Adult children might also decide to withdraw socially out of self-stigma, feelings of shame, and fears of being pitied, thus potentially discriminated against. These factors might also contribute to adult children's reluctance to seek out support, professional or otherwise.

Although social withdrawal was identified as a potential protective factor from stigmatising effects of parental imprisonment, this proved problematic. Social isolation and loneliness as a result of social withdrawal was consistently found to be detrimental to the well-being of

adult children with a parent in prison. The potential for adult children who experience parental imprisonment to communicate with those in a same/similar situation to their own 'virtually' online might moderate social isolation and loneliness. VC's have the potential to allow adult children experiencing parental imprisonment to combat isolation as a consequence of social withdrawal through connecting with those in a similar situation online.

This chapter concludes the presentation of the main findings for this study. A presentation of conclusions to be drawn from this study will be provided in the following and final chapter. This will include a section that will address limitations of this study and opportunities for further research on this topic.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Existing literature tends to focus on children's perspectives, leading to a dearth of research that specifically addresses adult children's experiences of parental imprisonment. Gaining current and retrospective accounts from adult children with, or who had, a parent in prison goes some way to overcome a dearth of longitudinal data available on this social group. Adult children's accounts, for example, can offer insights into the longevity of potentially harmful and distressing effects of parental imprisonment not apparent during childhood. This study set out to explore experiences and perceptions of parental imprisonment specifically from the perspective of adult children as a means to add to existing knowledge of this social group. As a means to overcome the hard-to-reach aspect of this social group, this study adopted a non-traditional and innovative online research method of archival data collection and analysis.

Effects, perspectives and experiences of parental imprisonment particular to adult children (Research Aim 1) uncovered adult children's desire for more contact with their parent. Evident from adult children's personal accounts imprisoned parents are likely to miss out on important milestones in their children's lives, and children are likely to miss out on emotional and parental support, which might lead to compromised parent-child bonds. Adult children's desire for more contact, both during childhood and adulthood, was problematized by long journeys and distressing experiences of prison visits. These factors were identified as contributory to adult children and imprisoned parents losing contact altogether, particularly over extended periods of time. Additionally, adult children might perceive parental recidivism and subsequent disruption to parenting as repeated abandonment. A parent's rate of recidivism was identified as a factor which might lead to eventual resentment of an imprisoned parent and/or adult children becoming accustomed to their parent's absence. In the extreme, a parent's recidivism might lead to a complete relationship breakdown and eventual parent/child estrangement.

A second aim of this study was to examine and explore adult children's perceptions and experiences of imprisoned parent/s and parenting (Research Aim 2). Adult children might be placed into a parentified position, where financial and/or emotional support of parents (imprisoned and non-imprisoned, pre and post release) and younger siblings might occur. Parentification was shown to illicit distress and resentment from adult children and included a resentment that adult children believed it was they who required support. Adult children might adopt a protective role for their imprisoned and/or non-imprisoned parent, especially if parents were perceived as being unable to cope. Over and above parental imprisonment, financial problems, parental alcoholism/substance abuse and mental health issues were identified as factors that might push children into a parentified position.

A third aim of this study was to undertake an analysis of the effects of stigma by association from the perspective of adult children with a parent in prison. Adult children with a parent in prison might anticipate unsympathetic, discriminatory and/or pitying responses from people in wider society as a result of their parent's imprisonment. Fears of being stigmatised and thus discriminated against were identified as factors that might contribute to them being less likely to seek help for emotional difficulties.

The final aim of this study was to identify, examine and explore potential methods employed by adult children with a parent in prison to limit potential effects of stigma by association. Methods employed by adult children as a means to avoid being stigmatised might include information management/control, self-censorship and/or concealment of their parent's imprisonment. Social withdrawal was found to be another such method to limit potential effects of stigma by association, however, this method proved problematic for adult children and could lead to further social isolation and loneliness. Although social withdrawal was identified as a potential protective factor from stigmatising effects of parental imprisonment, this proved problematic. Isolation and loneliness as a result of social withdrawal was consistently found to be detrimental to the well-being of adult

children with a parent in prison. Connecting online, however, with fellow adult children with experience of parental imprisonment appeared to alleviate and moderate loneliness and isolation as a result of social withdrawal somewhat.

The overall intention of this study was to add to current knowledge of this social group, which might also inform debate about empowerment and how policy makers and practitioners might empower children who experience parental imprisonment. This study's findings strongly suggest that adult children with a parent in prison desired contact with children in the same/a similar situation to their own, particularly when reflecting on their childhood. Informal suggestions from mentoring staff involved in a study conducted by Bocknek et al. (2008) claimed that mentoring children with a parent in prison could be a useful supplementary tool to support these children. Findings from this study support this recommendation and indicated that peer mentoring might be beneficial as a means to empower children and potentially lessen stigmatising effects of parental imprisonment.

This social group of children can find it difficult to locate representations of themselves in offline spaces, which might lead to feelings of outsiderness, isolation and loneliness. However, a quick search of the Internet uncovers a wealth of web sites targeted at children with a parent in prison. These include personal (visual and audio) accounts of parental imprisonment from children, online support groups and user generated artwork and literature. For younger children, there is also age appropriate content available. Advocates and/or practitioners might, therefore, incorporate such material to support these children. The use of technology and computer mediated communication might help alleviate anxiety, loneliness and social isolation children with a parent in prison experience.

In light of the separation from a parent due to imprisonment, which can be unexpected, traumatic and often times violent, and where behaviour/s of children with a parent in prison are contextualised, rather than pathologized, an appreciation might arise that behavioural

and emotional reactions can be entirely justifiable. Mental health professionals and/or researchers might wish to employ a certain amount of caution in applying diagnostic labels to children with a parent in prison as being at risk of, or of having mental health problems, which they could potentially internalise and may serve to exacerbate their legitimate distress at genuinely distressful experiences and situations. To reiterate Worley's (2014) contention, it is more likely those who do not display distress at legitimately distressing events who would be more likely found disordered.

6.1 Limitations of the Study

This research had a number of limitations and caution must be applied in any attempt to generalise results to a wider population. The approach chosen for this study, as with other research, has a number of limitations inherent in its methodology (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2010). Inherent limitations of qualitative research are well documented, in particular, the potential risk of researcher error and bias. Although the author's insiderness was declared in this study, insider knowledge might still have had an effect on the interpretation, analysis and discussion of data. Nevertheless, the author kept in mind throughout the research process by way of critical reflection and writing that primacy was to be given to participant (poster) accounts of parental imprisonment.

Conducting an online ethnography essentially meant that the researcher/author had no control over participants (posters) and/or had the ability to ask for clarification or contextualisation of points made. There was also a lack of control the researcher had over the direction of the study, which proved problematic. For example, no warning was provided by site owners that the forum discussion thread was going to be archived. Although the forum discussion thread appeared to be mostly cordial and supportive, without moderation/administrative rights, the researcher remains unaware of any posts that might have been deleted or removed due to Terms of Service infringements.

Despite the Internet's ability to provide researchers access to incredibly large samples, when compared to more traditional forms of research, the sheer volume of data that can be accessed online can be overwhelmingly large, difficult to navigate, contextualise and manage. In a similar vein, due to the sheer number of participants (posters), not all can be equally involved and/or could be given equal analytical attention. Again, the lack of control over recruitment for participants (posters) proved problematic and there was a clear gender bias evident in the sample for this study, i.e., mainly female.

6.2 Future Research

This topic is an important issue for future research, despite recent increasing volumes of research with regard to children with a parent in prison, it remains that relatively little is known about this diverse and hard-to-reach social group. The heterogeneity and complexities inherent within this social group, for example age, gender (of both child and imprisoned parent), ethnicity, length of a parents sentence, type of sentence, recidivism, and so on, ensure that research on this topic can be problematic considering the amount of variables needed to be accounted for. Nevertheless, in light of the findings from this study, future investigations might wish to focus attention on accounts of parental imprisonment directly from children, and be less reliant on observational accounts from parents, guardians and/or others involved in the children's lives.

Gaining retrospective accounts from adults with greater referential life experience and maturity allows for potentially deeper insights into parental imprisonment, and thus enriches existing knowledge surrounding children with parents in prison. For example, research involving children with a parent in prison tend to focus on those children who are already in contact with their imprisoned parent and representations of children not in contact with their imprisoned parent are largely missing from research outputs (Glaze and Muruschak, 2010; Wolfe, 1999). This study's findings provide further insight into adult

children's perspectives of parental imprisonment, especially from those whose voices are largely unrepresented in research outputs and/or not in contact with an imprisoned parent.

As far as is feasible, research that separates children with a parent in prison from their parent's imprisonment and/or offences, that avoids superimposing their parent's actions on to them, whilst considering their innocence of committing any crime or criminal offence might be a way forward. In accordance with suggestions from Philips and Gates (2011), future research surrounding children with a parent in prison might consider further assessments of the impacts of stigma by association and the potential stigmatisation of this group of children. To develop a fuller picture of how stigma by association might impact children with a parent in prison, additional studies could also account for differences in age, gender, ethnicity, and so on. Importantly, future studies could consider how adopting a deficit based research model might contribute to the stigmatisation, and in some instances, the criminalisation of this already vulnerable group of children.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Key Words in Context: Adult Children with a Parent in Prison 'Alone'

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Appendix 1

Key Words in Context: Adult Children with a Parent in Prison 'Alone'

'It is a great feeling knowing I am not alone in my struggles. I wish I would have done this sooner. I have felt so alone for too many years!' (Female, aged 24).

'I realised several weeks ago that I have never been alone with my dad…Even if you don't count the guards or the other inmates and visitors' (Female, aged 19).

'No one would ever believe me (they all saw him a couple of times) that he was in prison, and I used to be called a liar and all types of stuff. I felt so alone and left out…' (Female, aged 23).

'…it's good to know I'm not alone. Some of the stories on here are so similar to mine, that's really comforting. It's nice to not be alone' (Male, aged 24).

'My brother has washed his hands clean of my father, but I know it hurts him. He just won't talk to me about it. So I am alone in my battle with all this' (Female, aged 24).

'…even though these are not the circumstances I would like to have met you all in, it is comforting in a way to know that I am not alone' (Female, aged 23).

'Anyway, just wanting to introduce myself and see that I'm not alone...' (Female, aged 29).

'My dad is dead to me. Just a hollow shell. I feel alone and lost' (Male, aged 26).

'I am glad to be able to meet others in my situation! I'm glad I'm not alone! (Female, aged 23).

'I pretty much have no one to talk to about all this stuff because everyone thinks, "well she gave you up, and now she's stressing you, so leave her alone and get her out of your life…"' (Female, aged 31).

'It makes me happy knowing I'm not alone and that others, too, are finding comfort here' (Female, aged 18).

'I felt even more alone…I sank into a depression that worsened with time…' (Female, aged 18).