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The Effects of Parental Incarceration on the Academic Success of College Students: The Influence of Social Support on Internal Motivation

Emily B. Goodwin
Oral Roberts University

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The Effects of Parental Incarceration on the Academic Success of College Students: The
Influence of Social Support on Internal Motivation

Emily B. Goodwin

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study observes the lives of individuals who have experienced parental incarceration. Common factors among the accounts of participants were analyzed to determine risks associated with parental incarceration and potential sources of intervention. Previous research indicates physical and psychological risks associated with parental incarceration and mentions academic resilience and social support as effective interventions in overcoming negative effects for children. The researcher conducted interviews with college students who had experienced parental incarceration at some point in their lives. The results of the study indicated that children have the ability to overcome past adversities through resilience and the pursuit of future aspirations. The study also showed the incorporation of social support to be a potential positive influencer and motivator for children of incarcerated parents. Recommendations for future research include obtaining a larger sample size of students, incorporating greater cultural diversity, including socioeconomic status and age of the participants as variables, and comparing the effects of paternal and maternal incarceration.

Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract	ii
Chapter	
I. Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem	
Research Questions	
Definitions of Terms	
Overview of Study	
II. Literature Review	7
Overview of Parental Incarceration	
Academic Consequences	
Social Support	
Resilience-Based Interventions	
III. Method	20
Design	
Participants	
Procedures	
Data Analysis Methodology	
IV. Results	26
Data Analysis	
V. Summary and Discussion	41
Conclusions	
Limitations	
Recommendations	
References	47
Vita	51

Chapter I

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the United States has experienced a continuous growth in the population of inmates, thus contributing to a paralleled growth in the population of children with incarcerated parents (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011a). Recent research denotes that approximately 1.7 million children in the United States have a parent who is currently incarcerated in either a state or a federal prison (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). As indicated by these statistics, a substantive segment of the population of the United States is affected by the lived experience of parental incarceration. There are a number of unique challenges faced by these children that can lead to both immediate and long-term dysfunction or distress. Parental incarceration has been found to be correlated with negative psychological, educational, physical, social, and economic outcomes for children and adolescents, indicating the significant need for research in this area (Foster & Hagan, 2016; Johnson, 2012; Johnson & Easterling, 2012; Swisher & Shaw-Smith, 2015). Moving forward, this paper will refer to children of incarcerated parents as simply “children” or “participants,” as appropriate to the context.

Accompanying the steady increase in incarceration rates over the past couple of decades, there has been an accumulative body of research analyzing the effects of incarceration in both individual and systemic contexts (Johnson & Easterling, 2012; Kautz, 2017). However, there is relatively little information available regarding the effects of parental incarceration on young adults and the factors that promote positive outcomes in this population (Kautz, 2017; Luther, 2015). As young adults pursuing quality education, college students often desire effective integration of academic

information in order to be successful in their careers and other forms of personal growth beyond the classroom. College students who have experienced parental incarceration face additional challenges in their pursuits of academic achievement and personal growth. It is important, therefore, to study the unique issues experienced by this specific population in order to adequately address their needs.

Educational attainment is one of the most significant interceding factors in the socioeconomic outcomes of adults who have experienced a parent's imprisonment. As such, a lack of education can lead to reduced personal income and perceived powerlessness for children. Foster and Hagan (2016) found that parental imprisonment statistically significantly influenced social exclusion, or socioeconomic inequality and powerlessness, at both an individual level and a school level. However, they also found that a college education reduced the effect of parental imprisonment on a child's income and perceived sense of socioeconomic power in young adulthood. As academic outcomes are primary contributors to socioeconomic status, the results of the study imply that children often experience inhibited social equality and mobility as a result of compromised educational consequences. Furthermore, Luther (2015) concludes that parental incarceration can instigate negative educational outcomes including "school suspension, school dropout, and fewer years of completed education" (p. 506). Findings from these studies demonstrate the potential negative impacts of parental incarceration and the necessity of understanding mediating variables to minimize the risks for the affected children and adolescents.

Although parental incarceration can inhibit educational outcomes, it can also lead to academic resilience. As a result of instability or the lack of parental guidance, children can develop a heightened independence and diligence that is manifested in educational settings. Furthermore, social support systems that highly encourage academic success can motivate children to pursue opportunities beyond what the parents exemplify and work toward a better future. For example, a qualitative study of adult children of incarcerated parents who were enrolled in college denoted that caring adults and other social support contributed to educational success and resilience among the population (Luther, 2015). In another study, researchers found that completion of college was statistically significant in reducing the negative effects of parental incarceration, and they cite educational attainment as a statistically significant mediator in children of incarcerated parents achieving upward mobility and social prosperity (Foster & Hagan, 2016). These studies suggest that educational attainment is important in avoiding social exclusion, and academic resilience can encourage the pursuit of future successes and accomplishments.

Furthermore, positive relational support can promote intrinsic motivation for growth among children. As parental incarceration is often associated with numerous challenges in psychosocial development, avenues of social support are generally helpful in guiding maturing individuals toward personal motivation and competence in various settings. Using concept-mapping, Johnson (2012) found that social support and psychological services provided by knowledgeable and competent individuals encourage personal growth and development of children of incarcerated parents. Likewise,

researchers studying the interaction of parental incarceration and other factors associated with the Social Interaction Learning Theory concluded that the influences of family, social advantage, and effective parenting play potentially protective roles in mediating the effect of parental incarceration on later externalizing behaviors in youth such as antisocialism or delinquency (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011a). Therefore, methods of social support allow children to grow in social prowess as a result of positive influences. Social support can be a promoter of internal motivation to impact the world, apply knowledge, and assign meaning to effort given.

The effects of parental incarceration and the factors that promote resilience in the affected population form a complex, multi-dimensional network of constructs. Therefore, studying these conditions provides numerous opportunities for discovery and understanding. The goal of this paper is to evaluate the impacts of parental incarceration in the lives of individuals and to determine the factors that heighten their competence and motivation to succeed. This qualitative phenomenological study examines parental incarceration as it relates to the essence of personal experiences and the shared qualities between the experiences.

Statement of the Problem

This study intends to emphasize the unique circumstances of individuals who have experienced parental incarceration and to analyze common mediating factors in the shared phenomena.

Research Questions

1. Is social support a mediating factor between the lack of parental guidance and the intrinsic motivation to work toward a successful future?

2. Does academic resilience promote individuals toward social mobility?
3. Are individuals who have experienced parental incarceration more motivated by their negative or positive influences? Are they primarily driven by a desire to deviate from the incarcerated parent or to mimic a socially dependable individual?
4. Do individuals who have experienced parental incarceration primarily describe internal or external motivating factors? Do varying types of motivation coincide with different amounts of social support?

Definitions of Terms

Academic Success: putting forth one's best effort to understand and integrate academic information, having both the ability and the desire to apply the learned information practically in the real world outside of the classroom; "a life trajectory of academic achievement and success" (Luther, 2015, p. 512)

Emotional Acknowledgment: the ability to identify and address emotions (feelings) that result from particular experiences and the implications of these emotions on subsequent perspectives and behaviors such as "aggression and externalizing behavior" or "internalizing outcomes such as depression or anxiety" (Swisher & Shaw-Smith, 2015, p. 934)

Future Aspirations: (a) hopes and plans for future achievements, possibly relating to family, career, or personal growth (b) "supporting a vision of a better life" (Luther, 2015, p. 511)

Internal Motivation: being driven in thought and behavior by personal satisfaction, enjoyment, or curiosity without the incentive of external rewards or reinforcements, the motivation of "personal development and future growth" (Johnson, 2012, p. 60)

Parental Incarceration: the experience of having one or both parents imprisoned either currently or in the past (Johnson, 2012; Kautz, 2017)

Resilience: the ability to overcome and "adapt in a positive manner" to adverse circumstances and achieve successful outcomes (Luther, 2015, p. 506)

Social Support: (a) care, encouragement, and assistance from other people (b) sources of emotional support, physical provisions, and social relationships such as family, friends, or educators (Luther, 2015)

Overview of Study

Chapter I includes the introduction, statement of the problem, research questions, definitions of terms, and an overview of the study. Chapter II will review the literature on risks associated with parental incarceration and the needs that arise as a result of those risks. Additionally, it will examine past research on educational inhibition and academic resilience, social support as a mediator in the relationship between parental incarceration and normative success, and resilience-based interventions for children of incarcerated parents. All of the aforementioned outcomes of parental incarceration in the lives of individuals will be further explored in the current study. Chapter III will include methods and materials utilized in the study. Chapter IV will include data analysis and results. Chapter V will include a summary and discussion of the study in addition to conclusions and recommendations for future research.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Overview of Parental Incarceration

The substantial increase in the number of incarcerated adults over the last several decades and the subsequent increase in the number of children experiencing parental incarceration is alarming. Particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, a rapid rise in incarceration rates stimulated a compilation of research addressing mass incarceration and its personal and societal effects (Foster & Hagan, 2016; Johnson & Easterling, 2012). In fact, “the number of imprisoned adults has quadrupled in the United States” since 1980, a rate even exceeding the 23% overall population growth (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011b, p. 19). Currently, more than 2.5 million children have a parent in prison, and the number would be much larger if it included all individuals who have previously experienced parental incarceration (Johnson & Easterling, 2012; Turney & Lanuza, 2017; Wakefield, 2015). This is an extremely sharp increase, for about 600,000 children were reported to have a parent in a state or federal prison in 1986, only two decades earlier (Johnson & Easterling, 2012). Reportedly, more than 1 in 100 adults are imprisoned in jails or prisons in the United States, a population large enough to be considered a “public health crisis” (Johnson, 2012, p. 46). The children of these incarcerated individuals experience the repercussions of their parents’ imprisonments, often resulting in their own deviations to delinquent behaviors if there are no interventions.

Numerous factors influence the specific experience of a child or adolescent who is undergoing the consequences of a parent’s imprisonment. Namely, a parental incarceration experience can be impacted by the level of the child’s knowledge of

information surrounding the incarceration incident, the severance or continuation of contact with the incarcerated parent, the exacerbation of preexisting familial or personal issues (e.g., poverty, abuse, mental health, community violence, etc.), and the conduct of the subsequent caregiver (Johnson, 2012; Johnson & Easterling, 2012; Kautz, 2017; Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011a; Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011b). The current study will attempt to synthesize the wide range of literature surrounding parental incarceration, exploring the associated risks, needs, motivating factors, and potential interventions.

Associated Risks. Recent literature has shown the experience of parental incarceration to be associated with a variety of negative outcomes including both immediate stress from the traumatic experience and long-term psychosocial malfunction (Arditti & Savla, 2015; Foster & Hagan, 2016; Gaston, 2016; Johnson, 2012; Luther, 2015; Turney, 2014). Often, the incident of parental incarceration is not the beginning of dysfunction in families; rather, it interacts with other challenges that are already occurring such as poverty, health problems, emotional detachment, or violence to catalyze additional burdens (Herrington, Barry, & Reiter, 2017; Johnson, 2012; Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011a; Turney, 2014). However, parental incarceration has been shown to be a particularly influential factor in disturbing the well-being of individuals, so it is important to address the associated risks. The experience of parental incarceration has even been shown to affect fundamental components of health in children such as eating and sleeping, leading to poor sleep qualities and unhealthy diets (Jackson & Vaughn, 2017). If left unaddressed, struggles with behavior and attainment experienced

by children can lead to maladaptive behaviors and negative life adjustment in their futures.

Research has indicated that parental incarceration is a particularly salient predictor of various negative outcomes, even in comparison with other risks such as economic instability or substance abuse. In fact, Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer, and Robbins (2002) found that adolescents who had experienced parental incarceration experienced a greater number of overall risk factors, including child abuse and negative school outcomes across their lifetimes, and they also found parental incarceration to be prevalent among youth in mental health counseling. Correspondingly, Casey, Schlafer, and Masten (2015) found that the children often share many of the same risk elements as homeless children such as instability, maladaptive family structures, and poor financial resources. Their data also reflected that homeless children who have also experienced parental incarceration experience more negative life events than those who have not, and it was a significant association even when accounting for other co-occurring risk factors. This indicates “that parental incarceration is a particularly salient life event for children’s internalizing symptoms” (Casey et al., 2015, p. 499).

Arditti and Savla (2015) also studied the interaction of several factors contributing to the well-being of children, including the prevalence of economic inadequacy, non-resident parent factors, caregiver risk factors, visitation experiences, and co-parenting in single caregiver homes. In studying the prediction of child trauma, they found parental incarceration to be particularly prominent as “a unique predictor” distinct from other influences (p. 557). Furthermore, Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper, and Mincy

(2009) found a statistically significant relationship between parental incarceration and “a number of economic and family instability outcomes” (p. 1198). Gaston (2016) also found that an earlier onset of the parental incarceration experience (i.e., before birth or age 1) can result in greater risks for depressive symptoms from respondents, for they have more time “to accumulate multiple parental incarceration events and incur more strains” (p. 1069). Clearly, recent literature frequently denotes the prominent influence of parental incarceration in mental, emotional, and physical well-being and life contingencies, so individuals experiencing a parent’s imprisonment potentially belong to a notably vulnerable population.

Additionally, research has demonstrated that parental incarceration is a risk factor for antisocial conduct later in life, frequently leading to externalizing behaviors such as delinquency and aggression and, less commonly, correlating with internalizing behaviors such as depression (Foster & Hagan, 2016; Herrington et al., 2017; Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011a; Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012; Swisher & Shaw-Smith, 2015). Researchers have studied the relationship between parental incarceration and social exclusionary behaviors, attempting to develop constructs to predict and prevent negative consequences of imprisonment for children. For instance, Kjellstrand and Eddy (2011a) studied 5th, 8th, and 10th graders, predominantly lower to middle class, and proposed a theoretical model that linked parental incarceration, social advantage, parent health, and effective parenting, delineating an association between parental incarceration and child externalizing behaviors that was mediated by the other three aforementioned domains. The researchers found a direct relationship between parental incarceration and later exclusionary

demeanors, citing that children who experience a parent's imprisonment are "twice as likely to exhibit antisocial behaviors as children without incarcerated parents" (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011a, p. 552). Similarly, Swisher and Shaw-Smith (2015) reported parental incarceration to have a consistently positive correlation with adolescent delinquency and aggressive behavior and a less apparent association with depression, measured using multivariate ordinary least squares regression models to analyze data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. The findings indicate that youth experiencing parental incarceration are susceptible to negative psychosocial adjustment, and studying the etiology of the antisocial behavior is valuable in methods of intervention. Although there is a "potentially protective role of paternal incarceration in cases of abuse," the typical experience of parental incarceration is associated with antisocial behavior or other forms of social exclusion (Swisher & Shaw-Smith, 2015, p. 957).

The inherent risks of parental incarceration have even been shown to span across multiple generations. For instance, Will, Whalen, and Loper (2014) studied second-generation prisoners and found that they experienced disruptions in attachment early in life that resulted in later emotional and physical instability, thus leading to maladjustment and social exclusionary behaviors. Correspondingly, Aaron and Dallaire (2010) noted that a family history of incarceration can catalyze later youth delinquency or other victimizing behaviors. As parental incarceration is so prevalent in society and is accompanied by so many potential risks, it is important for the needs of children to be intelligently examined and adequately met.

Resultant needs. Although there is much research surrounding the potential negative effects of parental incarceration, there is somewhat of a lack in defining specific resultant needs of children or adolescents with incarcerated parents and how those needs can be fulfilled. However, Johnson (2012) found that youth who have experienced parental incarceration have needs and desires in several distinct categories: basic needs including food and shelter, professional and warm treatment by social service staff and others, specialized services and support (e.g., health care services, mental health counseling, alcohol and drug treatment), strong family or social support systems, individual development, and counseling support. This research implies that methods of addressing the needs of children are observable and attainable.

In addition, Lander (2012) found that those experiencing parental incarceration often need to address their emotions toward their incarcerated parents as well and to free themselves from “feelings of anger and hostility that may hinder their long term growth and functioning” (p. 14). Hindt, Davis, Schubert, Poehlmann-Tynan, and Shlafer (2016) reached a divergent, yet somewhat related conclusion, discovering that parental incarceration can affect children’s abilities to accurately recognize emotions. They found that the children had more tendencies toward negative emotion labeling biases, reporting more negative emotions (e.g., sadness, anger, fear) and less positive emotions (e.g., happiness, surprise) than children without incarcerated parents. Consequently, those experiencing parental incarceration may need to address perceptions and internalized emotions in addition to physiological and social needs.

Academic Consequences

In regard to academics, previous literature largely indicates that parental incarceration has negative effects on educational success due to a lack of parental involvement in the child's education and the resulting lack of internal motivation. Research generally maintains that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to be suspended or expelled from school, drop out, or engage in delinquent or problem behaviors that negatively affect educational attainment (Dallaire & Zeman, 2013; Foster & Hagan, 2016; Hyppolite, 2017; Luther, 2015; Phillips et al., 2002). Further, Miller and Barnes (2015) found that these children were more likely to engage in "academic underperformance and school failure" (p. 777). Johnson and Easterling (2012) also mention that children might have difficulties adjusting in schools due to inhibited cognitive functioning that is below average. However, despite the plethora of research on the negative effects of parental incarceration on educational attainment, there is also the potential for the development of resilience and positive adaptation in this vulnerable population of children that allows for their academic success in college and beyond.

Negative educational outcomes are not unavoidable for children whose parents are imprisoned, for the children can choose to be resilient in the midst of adversities and succeed in educationally challenging environments. In contrast to the aforementioned research, Murray et al.'s (2012) meta-analysis found that parental incarceration does not always statistically significantly relate to poor educational performance. Congruently, Luther (2015) conducted a qualitative study in which the majority of the participants supported a vision of a better future that was highly dependent upon educational success.

Additionally, although Nichols, Loper, and Meyer (2016) cited parental incarceration as an indicator of academic risk, they also found that several school and individual factors including school connectedness and acceptance and close family associations promoted higher levels of academic achievement and discouraged truancy. The diverse findings suggest that parental incarceration can, in fact, hinder the academic success of the children; however, educational attainment is conceivable, and it is important in avoiding social exclusion and developing resilience to pursue a superior future.

Social Support

Typically, the incarceration of parents abruptly disrupts the lives of the children, bringing difficult and rapid changes in guardianship, socioeconomic status, residence, education, how they are treated by the community, and other meaningful elements (Johnson, 2012; Kautz, 2017; Luther, 2015). In this threatening environment, the children and adolescents often seek positivity in people, services, and programs to meet their needs, guide them toward success, and strengthen them as individuals. Luther (2015) found that social support contributes to positive adaptation and resilience among children through providing conventional activities, a vision of a better life and education, and more positive trajectories. Through intervention in social support systems including families, teachers, friends, programs, even incarcerated parents, children can pursue motivation and success despite the negative influences of imprisonment.

Social support can include both emotional support which includes aspects like “comfort and advice,” and instrumental support which includes meeting more practical needs like “money and housing” (Luther, 2015, p. 507). Both the more social-emotional,

relational support and the more provision-oriented, instrumental support can play a role in building resilience in children. When Johnson (2012) utilized concept-mapping to determine the critical needs of children of incarcerated parents, almost all of the major clusters of needs voiced by the adolescents were related to social support. Specifically, interaction with mental health counseling and health care services, family relationships, and mentoring relationships with caring adults were mentioned. In another article, Makariev and Shaver (2010) propose an element of social support as an intervention technique through the utilization of attachment therapy. The relationship between a parent and a child is potentially one of the strongest known social connections. Therefore, if the attachment therapy is implemented effectively, the occurrence of parental incarceration could be an opportunity to develop a healthy attachment relationship between either the parent and the child or the alternative caregiver and the child. The intervention could help the parent and child become more aware of the social support they can have in one another and learn how to recognize and appropriately meet one another's needs.

Furthermore, the role of social support was demonstrated in a trial program for children of incarcerated parents called the Strengthening Families Program (SFP) proposed by Miller et al. (2013) that was composed of family skills training. In the trial, they found that the families who had social support available from the beginning at the pretest were more likely to traverse through the entire program and achieve the desired child and caregiver outcomes. Current literature continually delineates the prominent influence of social support in overcoming adversities; thus, social support can be

considered a valid potential mediator between any negative effects of parental incarceration and the development of an intrinsic motivation to aspire to success.

Resilience-Based Interventions

Individuals who experience parental incarceration are often disadvantaged academically, socially, emotionally, and physically due to a lack of parental support and an unstable family dynamic. They may also be forced to grow up faster than they normally would because they are given additional responsibilities at a young age to make up for the missing parental responsibilities (Kautz, 2017). Consequently, it is vital for them to form resilience and find coping mechanisms in order to move beyond their circumstances and pursue success. In their qualitative study, Johnson and Easterling (2015a) found that children coped with their circumstances in three primary ways: de-identification from the incarcerated parent, desensitization from the incarceration experience, and development of strength by maintaining control over the situation. Overall, the participants in the study seemed motivated by the desire to deviate from their incarcerated parents, distance themselves from their parents' influences, and normalize the incarceration experience, avoiding negative psychological responses that might inhibit them from personal achievements and growth. Furthermore, the results of the study indicate the formation of resilience, for the subjects adapted in a positive way, finding strength in "controlling the parental relationship" and "helping others" (Johnson & Easterling, 2015a, p. 257).

Conversely, if a positive relationship with the incarcerated parent is, in fact, maintained, that could also be a form of constructive growth and resilience, particularly if

the incarcerated individual is the primary caregiver. Rollins (2012) discusses the benefits of maintaining the relationship between the child and the incarcerated parent, asserting that “children who maintain contact with their parent during incarceration exhibit fewer behavioral problems and have overall improved outcomes” (p. 196). Furthermore, the relationship between the parent and the child during the incarceration can be beneficial to the parent following his or her release. Cunningham (2001) asserts that “prisoners who maintain contact with their families are less likely to re-offend after release” (p. 37). In addition to maintaining contact while the parent is still in prison, children can sustain resilience and hope by looking toward the future with positive, yet realistic expectations for their parents’ release and reunification. In another study, Johnson and Easterling (2015b) studied the hopes and expectations of youth regarding their parents’ reentries from prison, and the researchers found that there was generally a discrepancy between the hopes of the youth surrounding their parents’ return and their actual expectations. If children can align their hopes with realistic expectations, they can not only maintain the resolve to move beyond their circumstances but also realistically hope for a better future with successful outcomes.

Furthermore, there are several practical models and methods that have developed in recent literature to intervene in potential negative effects of parental incarceration and encourage better futures for those affected. Arditti (2016) proposes a Family Stress-Proximal Process (FSPP) model that includes the involvement of both a non-incarcerated caregiver and the incarcerated parent. Additionally, the child of the imprisoned parent develops both personal coping skills and resilience within the familial context in line with

this model. The model involves the presence of social support, which is deemed “a primary resilience mechanism for youth exposed to adversity” (Arditti, 2016, p. 76). In another study, Denby (2012) found multiple practical needs and resources that can contribute to resilience-based interventions for children, including “medical insurance for the children, financial assistance, help accessing dental care, more living space, general information and referral, assistance securing emergency funds, recreational outlets for the children, food assistance, assistance with school supplies, and assistance accessing health care providers” (p. 122). Often, the subsequent caregivers for children of incarcerated parents are thrown into parental roles without the necessary supplies or capacity, so relieving stress by meeting service needs for both the caregiver and the child helps to promote resilience. Lastly, a pilot intervention program was introduced in Illinois by the Division of Mental Health (MH) to specifically address the emotional and behavioral needs of children with incarcerated parents and to disrupt developing risk factors (Phillips & O'Brien, 2012). Although only a small number of families participated in the pilot intervention program, Phillips and O'Brien (2012) found that it was possible to influence children's psychosocial outcomes through interventions such as addressing their feelings, helping with familial negotiations, addressing academic outcomes, and aiding the caregivers in providing more wholesome support. Further, they found that it was possible to transform already existing mental health programs to better meet the needs of these children.

The experience of parental incarceration is potentially extremely detrimental to an individual, and it is pervasive across physical, psychological, emotional, and social well-

being. As incarceration rates continue to rise at an astronomical rate, there is an increasing number of children with a lack of parental support. Thus, it is imperative that the needs of children be addressed and that effective intervention programs be implemented. Positive mediating factors can be introduced to support positive outcomes for those who have experienced parental incarceration.

Chapter III

Method

To study the effects of parental incarceration in the lives of college students who have faced the experience, the researcher conducted a qualitative study that examined individual experiences and perspectives. Research participants shared their personal experiences of parental incarceration and how those occurrences affected their lives. Topics of the interview questions included the following: a description of the incarceration incident, feelings that resulted from the initial separation from the parent and how those feelings may have evolved over time, the pervasiveness of the incarceration experience in other areas of life, plans for the future, sources of motivation, the subject's definition of academic success, and a description of the person or persons who have had the most influence in the subject's life.

This empirical study emphasizes unique individual experiences of parental incarceration, and it also provides an analysis of common themes in shared experiences with the goal of providing education concerning the risks experienced by children of incarcerated parents and maximizing positive outcomes for this population.

Design

This study was a qualitative phenomenological design that secured Institutional Review Board approval. Phenomenological research addresses a particular phenomenon as lived by individuals, distinguishing it as a recognizable human experience and also delineating the subjective meanings of the experience defined by specific circumstances of individuals (Adams & van Manen, 2017). The current study's data collection adhered to the guidelines of qualitative phenomenological research in exploring the participants'

perspectives on their individual experiences of parental incarceration. In a qualitative study, the participants' unique viewpoints are used to comprehend the reasons why certain thoughts and feelings occur and how they affect behavior (Sutton & Austin, 2015). To gain insight into the individual experiences and to generate shared themes among the participant responses in the current study, the circumstances, emotions, motivations, and behaviors surrounding the subjects' experiences of parental incarceration were addressed in the interview questions.

Data were collected in one-on-one semi-structured interviews with volunteer subjects sharing their responses to open-ended interview questions regarding their personal experiences of parental incarceration. Interviewing is one of the most common techniques employed by phenomenological researchers to gain insight into the meanings encompassed in individual experiences (Adams & van Manen, 2017). However, as the participants' responses are often retrospective, the research is somewhat limited by the accuracy of memories (Luther, 2015). For instance, the participants in this study might be unaware of specific aspects of their parental incarceration experiences or might remember occurrences inaccurately. Still, conducting interviews is an effective method for accurately representing the viewpoints of participants and emphasizing specific aspects of their unique experiences.

The data in this study were analyzed to discover trends in the responses of the participants, evaluating common themes resulting from an interaction between the variables of parental incarceration, academic success, social support, and internal motivation. Several of the interview questions were directed toward understanding the

perceived effectiveness of social support as a mediating factor between parental incarceration and intrinsic motivation to succeed. Other questions were directed toward exploring the prevalence of resilience and adaptiveness that results from parental incarceration. College enrollment alone can be considered an indicator of resilience, for parental incarceration has been shown to be associated with negative educational outcomes such as school suspension and dropping out (Luther, 2015).

Participants

Volunteers for this study were recruited from a private Christian university in the mid-western United States. Eligibility required that subjects were currently enrolled in college and had, at some point in their lives, experienced the incarceration of at least one parent. Data were collected in one-on-one interviews with each subject using a set of predetermined interview questions.

The participant sample was comprised of five 4-year university undergraduate students between the ages of 18-29. Three of the volunteers were female, and two were male. Three participants self-identified as White and two as Black. Two subjects were first year college students, one was in the third year, one was in the fourth year, and one indicated the fifth year or higher. Three participants described their employment statuses as part time, while two self-identified as unemployed. Three volunteers described themselves as politically moderate, one self-identified as liberal, and one as conservative.

Procedures

Following the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher recruited subjects using IRB-approved methods. The methods included placing fliers

around the college campus, announcing the study in classes and to professors, and posting about the study on the researcher's Facebook page. Due to the exceedingly selective requirements of the sample, the researcher utilized convenience sampling, as often occurs when analyzing populations that are not readily distinguishable (Luther, 2015). Before each interview, she first obtained informed consent from the participant, explaining the nature of the study and the requirements for participation. Additionally, she distributed a written questionnaire for the subject to fill out prior to the interview that delineated demographic information.

The researcher conducted comprehensive individual interviews with each subject in a secluded, quiet room in order to minimize external distractions and preserve privacy. Each interview was video-recorded for more in-depth future analysis. The average length of the interviews was approximately thirty minutes with the length of the shortest interview at 16:59 and the longest interview at 31:52. The researcher removed all identifiers from the data, and kept the recordings locked in the faculty advisor's office, to uphold confidentiality.

Data Analysis Methodology

Immediately following the completion of each interview, the researcher took handwritten field notes to maintain the initial impressions of the spoken responses, environmental factors, and nonverbal communication of the participant. In qualitative research, field notes can specify the context of the interviews, remind the researcher of other environmental elements that were in place at the times of the interviews, and avoid bias in interpretation of the data. Following completion of the interviews, the researcher

transcribed each of the recordings verbatim, as required by the standards for acceptable qualitative research (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Each volunteer subject was assigned a pseudonym to insure the data would remain de-identified. Subsequently, the researcher composed a second set of handwritten field notes in order to record any new implicit impressions of the recordings that had been overlooked prior to the transcription process.

After the transcriptions were completed, the researcher coded the data for prominent themes. As it relates to qualitative research, coding is defined as “the identification of topics, issues, similarities, and differences that are revealed through the participants’ narratives and interpreted by the researcher” (Sutton & Austin, 2015, p. 228). The researcher first conducted open coding to look for distinct concepts common to the responses of the participants during the interviews. Six categories were identified that were continually mentioned in participants’ responses. The codes included the formation of resilience and independence (e.g., “we’re the most independent people”), the impact of social support (e.g., “when people really believed in me...social support is so important”), the presence of future aspirations and hopes (e.g., “made me see that my future was kind of bright”), intrinsic motivation (e.g., “my greatest motivating factor is just to succeed”), the pervasiveness of the incarceration experience (e.g., “it’s indirectly affected everything because the foundation was really messed with”), and a search for meaning (e.g., “What am I feeling? Why am I feeling it?”).

Following analysis by open coding, the researcher employed more focused axial coding to relate the codes to one another according to her interpretations. She generated themes to categorize the concepts produced by open coding, drawing together the

findings in a significant way relevant to the context. This process adhered to the appropriate procedure of theming in qualitative research that draws together codes “to present the findings of qualitative research in a coherent and meaningful way” (Sutton & Austin, 2015, p. 229). The methods of data collection and analysis employed in this study observed the guidelines of qualitative phenomenological research. The procedures also adhered to the requirements for validity in qualitative research, or “the degree to which researchers’ claims about knowledge correspond to the reality being studied,” by dictating clear steps “in the conducting of the research and in the process of analysis” (Tuval-Mashiach, 2017, p. 129). The researcher represented the experiences of participants, generated coded themes from their responses, and assured anonymity and confidentiality.

Chapter IV

Results

Data Analysis

The primary goal of this empirical study was to determine the effects of parental incarceration in the lives of individuals, specifically pertaining to the academic success and potential of college students. In addition, the study examined the effectiveness of social support in overcoming hardships associated with parental incarceration and in motivating individuals to pursue future goals and internal satisfaction. In conducting the interviews, the researcher noted several key concepts common among the lived experiences of the subjects in relation to parental incarceration, and these concepts can be defined in three overarching themes. Namely, the researcher found that (a) future potential is not restricted by past adversity, (b) satisfaction and motivation ultimately result from societal connection, and (c) significant past experiences shape perceptions of present reality.

Future potential is not restricted by past adversity. In reaction to the inherent difficulties associated with parental incarceration including the lack of parental guidance, disruption of living conditions, economic uncertainty, and caregiver instability, resilience was demonstrated in the accounts of participants. They were able to adapt in predominantly positive ways in reaction to circumstances beyond their control, assuming positions of responsibility, individuality, and strength. In particular, the participants expressed strong-willed plans for future achievements including educational attainment and application of knowledge to their personal lives in relation to families, careers, and personal development. As a result, it seems that past adversities such as parental

incarceration are not entirely deterministic in relation to the future prospects of individuals.

Resilience and independence. In the interviews, the participants demonstrated the ability not only to withstand their unideal situations, but also to push for autonomy and success not confined by those situations. Two primary forms of resilience and independence were observed in the accounts of the participants: adaptation to challenging circumstances and outcomes associated with academics.

Adaptation to challenging circumstances. The lives of the participants were often unpredictable, chaotic, or void of parental guidance as a result of parental incarceration. Therefore, they were compelled to positively adapt to overcome their challenging circumstances and develop social functionality. For instance, Carly came from an environment of instability with unreliable social support. Both of her parents were imprisoned, so there was a complete absence of parental support for the majority of her childhood. Additionally, her mother's presence in her life was erratic, as she continuously traversed in and out of prison. Carly articulated her mother's situation in the interview: "She went to jail when we were two months, and then got out when we were four years old, and then went back in when we were seven, and then got out again when we were twelve, so she was in and out." At seven years old, Carly was not even surprised at her mother's second arrest. She just viewed it as "normal, happened again...she's leaving us again." As a result of Carly's unstable familial environment, she and her twin sister were forced to assume independence and personal drive to succeed. Carly described her perspective on the resilience and independence of children of

incarcerated parents: “People don’t realize, but we’re the most independent people. We have to be. We have to persevere so hard because there are so many challenges that come our way.” For several participants, the ability to have a self-sufficient drive to combat adverse circumstances creates the potential for successful outcomes in the future in academics, careers, interpersonal relationships, and other areas.

Allison, whose father was incarcerated, explained that “[her] background has been really rough,” for she “just felt the lack of parental guidance at all.” Due to her father’s absence, she was “over five kids at a very young age,” taking care of her own two brothers and also her older sister’s three children. She was forced to grow up quickly to fill the void of parental support for other children when she was still a child herself. As a result, Allison became independent and self-sufficient, adapting positively with initiative rather than succumbing to defeatism. Although this was a very challenging environment with a largely forced maturity, she developed autonomy and is now learning to depend on other people. Allison described in her interview the reason behind her difficulty in relying on others: “It’s because I’ve had no one to depend on, so I’ve had to do it. You know, I had to, as soon as I turned eighteen, had to move forward, had to take in my brothers, had to get a job... Truthfully, I did not have a childhood, but looking back, I know my mom was just trying to do the best she could with what she had.”

Academic outcomes. Furthermore, parental incarceration can potentially have a negative impact on educational results by generating a lack of motivation or a disorganization in schoolwork. However, if one can overcome the educational challenges associated with parental incarceration and form academic resilience, it is more likely that

future potential will be realized, as demonstrated by several participants. Allison dictated that “there’s a lot that [she] had to overcome, especially [her] major being so tough. It’s one of the toughest at the school and one of the highest...credit required.” In overcoming those challenges, however, she is now striving for academic success, “really grasping the information for what it is” and planning to move to California following graduation “where biomedical engineering is really high.” In doing so, Allison demonstrates positive adaptation to difficult educational conditions and an independence in planning her future.

Jasmine also demonstrated a strong drive for academic success, for she is a biomedical chemistry major who clearly puts forth her best effort to understand the material with the intention of applying it in the real world following graduation. She expressed that “[she wants] to go to PA [physician assistant] school for emergency medicine.” Although she maintained that “[her] grades are not where [she wants] them to be,” Jasmine strives to positively adapt to the difficulty of academic work, integrating the academic information with the goal of effectively applying it in the field. The participants’ pursuits of academic success further demonstrate their independence from the negative influences of parental incarceration and their resilience in pursuing future aspirations.

Future aspirations. Participants demonstrated high hopes for their future achievements beyond the influence of their parents’ incarcerations. Three subjects mentioned desires to attend graduate schools for specializations including “Conflict Resolution or Foreign Policy Relations (Carly),” “a goal of J.D. to pursue maybe

becoming a judge or an attorney (Jackson),” and “PA school for emergency medicine (Jasmine).” Additionally, Carly described that she might “work for the Peace Corps or maybe do an internship with the U.S. Department of State...and then, [she hopes] to one day be Secretary General or Secretary of State.” She went on to say that she sees herself “getting some awesome internship out of the country in the Middle East...or working with Syrian refugees...networking with major people.” According to Carly, she realized that her “future was kind of bright.” She sees “a grand future ahead” with a “good internship, grad school, and then a great career.” Jackson was also envisioning a seemingly hopeful future, “contemplating and researching law schools,” traveling, and starting a family. Jackson explained that he has “lots of interests, so [he has] a lot of avenues to pursue.” He is not bound by the unfortunate experience of his mother’s incarceration, but he continues to pursue his dreams and aspirations for the future.

For some participants, future aspirations took the form of pursuing passions. For instance, Joseph dictated that “prison ministry is what [he is] passionate about,” and music is his form of support, so he wants to work toward a future where he can give to an area of personal meaning and growth, integrating prison ministry with music.

Furthermore, four of the participants mentioned their desires for the future to start a family, to get married, and to have children. In doing so, they propose the possibility of creating better, more stable lives for their children than they were, unfortunately, given themselves. Carly mentioned that she “didn’t want to be a forty-year-old bitter woman and pass [her] bitter feelings on to [her] kids because that’s essentially what [her] mom did.” Similarly, Jasmine said of her future children, “I want to show them, this is not

how a man treats a woman, and just kind of how to stand up for themselves.” She also stated, “I don’t want anyone to ever, number one, feel like they can’t...like they have no control in a situation because I felt that way for so long.” Seemingly, participants were motivated by a desire to deviate from the behavior of the incarcerated parent. In looking toward the future with hope and expectation, the potentiality of the participants was not restricted by their past oppositional circumstances.

Satisfaction and motivation ultimately result from societal connection. In addition to the development of resilience and future potentiality, social support and its interaction with internal motivation was one of the most prominent themes in this study. As demonstrated in the responses of the participants, the establishment of interpersonal relationships can be a significantly influential factor in generating positive outcomes and developing a sense of motivation for children of incarcerated parents. As dictated by participants, even just one caring individual can make a difference in one’s motivation to succeed. Further, the development of internal motivation can lead to higher levels of growth both personally and relationally.

Social support. Every participant interviewed capitalized on the importance of social support whether it be through family, friends, educators, or even the incarcerated parents. Carly gave an account of a principal that she had who deeply influenced her: “My principal was so driven, and he really cared about our, the students’, outcomes. He knew every student by name...He kind of mentored us. I ended up graduating number two in my class, my sister number four...He just motivated us. He gave us incentive to work hard which we never had in our lives...He gave us a purpose.” An educator, a

source of social support, motivated Carly toward academic effort and prestige, gave her a reason to aspire to more, and assigned meaning to her efforts.

Jackson, on the other hand, sought social support from his family. He thought that his mother's imprisonment was unjustified, stating that he "obviously thought she didn't deserve it," and he looks forward to each time he gets to see her and his siblings. He expressed that he is "really motivated to see them next and write to them next and then see [his] mom next." Jackson reflected on how his mother was "transferred to a minimum-security facility" where "visitation is once a week," so he was able to see her more often. Jackson stated, "As we got to regularly see her, it got better and easier to...to cope with." Although the effects of the incarceration experience did not go away entirely, social interaction was an effective way for Jackson to cope, or manage, the turmoil associated with his experience of parental incarceration.

Jasmine also emphasized social support, delineating that "as humans, we are made for connection. We are made to have emotions, to be in community." In the interview, she stated, "When people really believed in me...that's so incredible. Social support is so important, so important...If you don't have someone to talk to, you're going to go crazy." Jasmine emphasized the vitality of social support for both motivation and emotional stability. She dictated examples of social support with family (e.g., "my family is really close because of it now"), with friends (e.g., "I sought shelter with a really close-knit group of friends...me talking about [the incarceration experience] with them completely changed the way that I saw the entire situation"), and with an educator (e.g., "he cared individually for each one of us...seeing him be so invested in us...").

She maintained that she traversed positively through the experience of parental incarceration with all of its repercussions due to a social support system: “It always comes back to my church family, and my actual family, and my friends that pulled me through all of this.”

Social support was also mentioned in Joseph’s account, demonstrating a strong benefit from interpersonal relationships. Joseph worked with adolescent children at a juvenile detention center, and he found a form of personal satisfaction in those relationships. He explained, “Those experiences being around those kids really helped me out, helped me understand that I wasn’t the only one that felt this way... I was there to teach them and to grow, but actually, they were teaching me to learn and grow.” Joseph experienced personal development through investing in relationships, and he was able to relate to the situations of the children through his own personal experience. He said, “People are my motivators, just to see their stories, and their searching, and they’re trying to connect with something, but they don’t know how. You know, I want to be the voice for the voiceless...There’s some that just need to...hear that someone loves them.” Social support is both encouraging to Joseph and motivates him toward action.

Lastly, Allison reflected on the influence of social support in her interview, saying, “Those really hard, life-changing decisions...I’ve had friends through all of that...A smile every day, or a teacher and you sitting down and just explaining what’s going on, and they’re like, ‘Don’t worry about it. We’ll get through this.’ Those are the things that you remember when you look back, like, wow, I wouldn’t have made it had they not been there.” Each participant portrayed social support as a prominent factor in

some form of personal growth or motivation. The subjects communicated that when people invested in relationships with them or encouraged them to be diligent in learning and growing, they were edified and were better able to face the outcomes of parental incarceration.

Internal motivation. Several of the participants also asserted mindsets of internal motivation, participating in opportunities for enjoyment, learning, or growth without the necessity of external incentives such as money, grades, or other rewards. They often derived senses of meaning from these experiences, being motivated to relate to others in societal relationships without expecting any recompense in return. For example, Joseph stated, “One of my goals is to go into the facilities [prison]...to go into the facilities and just talk to them, to give them comedy, to laugh with them, to let them know that, you know, there’s still people out here that care about you guys.” Joseph does not desire to seek personal gain from that opportunity; rather, he is internally motivated by the concept of encouraging the growth and potential in others and also seeking personal development and enjoyment. Additionally, Jasmine, in talking about the effects of parental incarceration in her life, said, “Now I know how it’s affected me, and I’m still learning, but now, I’m just seeing that that is my greatest motivator to be....to be even a good person, just genuinely kind.” Jasmine is not motivated to be a kind person due to the incentive of external rewards; rather, she is caring and compassionate toward others out of an internal compulsion to build trust, rapport, and relationships with others.

Furthermore, several participants communicated intrinsic concepts of academic success. In defining academic success, Carly postulated, “How can you apply what you

learned? How can you take it to the world?” She maintained that true academic success is a drive for real achievement beyond external motivations such as grades. In other words, a practical application of knowledge in its associated context indicates that information has been truly grasped and is being used to better the world. Jackson gave a similar analysis, stating that academic success is “more of an observable success than a written success.” He implied that the hands-on application of knowledge is a more useful measurement of academic achievement than a standardized graded test. Jasmine explained that she applies an intrinsic concept of academic motivation in her own studies: “I was just like a sponge. I just wanted to learn all of the things because...my greatest motivating factor is just to succeed.” She considers it a success “if [she’s] putting work into something, if [she’s] really trying to do well.” In the interview, Jasmine dictated, “You’re not always supposed to get an A on everything, because if you’re always getting an A on everything, you’re not being challenged.” Relatedly, Joseph postulated that there is a growing lack of focus on academic challenge in modern American society. He stated that “today’s society is motivated by money instead of academics.” He maintained that society is moving toward more external rewards, such as money, and away from the concept of learning for the sake of learning. The participants’ concepts of internal motivation as it relates to academic success seem to be based upon personal satisfaction and growth without the incentives of extrinsic rewards or reinforcements. They seem to consider successful academics as challenging their abilities, satisfying their curiosities, desiring to learn, and deriving personal satisfaction.

Significant past experiences shape perceptions of present reality. As it is an impactful, potent life event, parental incarceration can significantly affect many areas of life for individuals who experience it. According to the interviews in this study, multiple other areas of the participants' lives have been notably affected by their parental incarceration experiences. Additionally, they have had to face resultant emotions and perceptions of situations that affect their behaviors and interactions with people in their current lives. Although some participants experienced parental incarceration when they were small children (i.e., five or seven years old), there are still consecutive occurrences of that experience affecting their current perceptions of reality and relationships.

Pervasiveness of incarceration. When asked if other areas of her life have been affected by her experience of parental incarceration, Carly stated, "I would probably say the relationships in my life, especially when it comes to professors, mentors, and older people who want to get close to me...I kind of put this shield up...I just feel like they're going to leave me like my parents did." Carly has had a tendency to generalize feelings of abandonment and rejection that she experienced in relation to parental incarceration to other relationships in her life. Similarly, Jasmine said of her parent's imprisonment and the associated consequences, "It just completely affected my relationship with other people as a whole, just because for some time, I just really was untrusting of people. I just assumed the worst intentions of people." Jasmine also added that "it was wholly affecting the way that [she] perceived [herself], that [she] perceived other men." Allison asserted that she is "learning to trust" again, for "there are just a lot of tender places in life every day." Relationships, both intrapersonal and interpersonal, seem to be one of

the most prominent areas affected by the pervasiveness of incarceration. The responses of participants in this study indicate that the experience of parental incarceration can affect both perceptions of self and perceptions of the characteristics and intentions of other people.

In addition, several participants referenced the pervasiveness of their incarceration experiences as a constant intimidation, even beyond the aspects of relationships. Jackson stated, “The circumstance is hard to get past, just because it’s always looming over. I feel like it’s always looming over my head...It’s affected school...my sleep, mainly...The way I interact with my family now has changed, both in positive and negative ways. Overall, most areas of my life have been affected by it.” Jackson’s parental incarceration experience is more recent than the other subjects, for his occurred while he was already in college, while it occurred for the others at younger ages. However, Jackson was not the only participant to mention a continuous impact. Jasmine explained, “I still feel myself get a little bit anxious just thinking about it, but that’s always going to happen, I think.” Also, Allison said, “It’s indirectly affected everything because the foundation was really messed with...because it does affect every area, truthfully.” The participants have experienced the effects of parental incarceration in their perceptions and behaviors in many different areas.

Search for meaning. In addition to describing the areas of their lives that have been negatively affected by parental incarceration, the subjects also described their active inquiries into how these effects are manifested in their lives now. They explored why and how they are experiencing certain emotions and perceptions and how they can

experience positive growth from them. In this way, they are searching for relevant meanings, or insight, regarding the consequences of parental incarceration that can shape who they are in present reality.

One of the most prominent ways that the participants analyzed the current effects and meanings of their incarceration experiences was by focusing on emotional acknowledgment, or identifying emotions that result from particular experiences and the implications of these emotions on subsequent perspectives and behaviors. For example, Carly said of a recent occurrence, “God reminded me of that memory, and it was an emotion that I didn’t deal with...One word I could use was rejection. I was rejected again by poor decisions that my mom decided to make...not good enough...not good enough for my mom to make good decisions to be in my life.” Carly had a feeling of rejection that she had never fully dealt with, so she is now realizing the meaning that it has in her current perceptions and behavior. She also asked relevant questions: “What am I feeling? Why am I feeling it? Who should I forgive? What should I forgive them for?” Carly stated, “I need to feel what I’m feeling and not be afraid to feel it.” The questions began to help her analyze her resulting emotions, how they were affecting her and how to address them.

Jackson gave a similar statement, “Yeah, emotionally I was a wreck...not dealing with things well I guess...I tried different avenues of dealing with it that weren’t healthy.” Jackson had unresolved feelings, or emotions, that he was addressing in an unhealthy way, and he recognized that. Therefore, he was able to analyze how they were affecting his life and make a change. Furthermore, Jasmine stated, “I never had to deal

with the emotions. I never had to deal with the entire situation, really, until it came out.” Until her father was arrested and she was forced to talk to law enforcement and others, Jasmine’s emotions were somewhat stifled. However, when the information came out, she was able to eventually realize the implications her emotions had in her life and search for healthy ways to address them. Jasmine went on to share a very similar statement to the aforementioned statement of Carly’s: “Let yourself feel the feelings because that’s a big deal.”

In addition to addressing emotions, participants mentioned other ways of searching for the meaning, or influence, of their incarceration experiences in their current lives. Several subjects discussed the importance of being knowledgeable of the ways incarceration has affected them so that they can learn and grow from it. For example, Jasmine emphasized the importance of asking, “What does this look like in our lives now? How do I need to be aware of how this has changed me, the way I see things?” She also stated, “I want insight on this because now that it’s happened, I want to know everything that I can about that...what I can do, what I can do to learn to grow from it.” Joseph was able to see his own search for meaning reflected in the adolescents he worked with at the juvenile detention center. Joseph explained, “I can see myself in them because all of them are searching for something, some sort of answer.” Lastly, Allison later “realized the covering that [she] didn’t have and how much [she] was exposed to.” She mentioned, “You know, that support, not having that support...I felt that throughout.” The participants were able to recognize what they had been exposed to and what they had lacked and analyze the effects of these circumstances in their current

perceptions of reality. As a result, they were able to address negative aspects of parental incarceration that they have experienced and begin to heal and recover from their impacts. Overall, aspiring for future successes, the involvement of social support, an internally motivated mindset, and addressing the relevance of past issues appear to promote positive outcomes in the lives of children of incarcerated parents.

Chapter V

Summary and Discussion

Parental incarceration can result in the occurrence of multiple physical, intellectual, and psychological risk factors, but potential negative outcomes can be overcome and even avoided through effective means of intervention. As the repercussions of a parent's imprisonment can be pervasive across many facets of life and indices of well-being, it is important for individuals who have experienced parental incarceration to promptly and effectively address both resultant physical needs and emotional reactions. The experience of parental incarceration often influences how an individual perceives the reality of relationships, thoughts, behaviors, and other factors. Therefore, it is necessary to incorporate intervention techniques that encourage awareness for children regarding how their parental incarceration experiences are affecting the ways that they behave and view the world in the present. The responses of the participants in the current study indicate that the lack of parental guidance and unstable living conditions that occur as a result of parental incarceration can be combatted by developing resilience, adapting to difficult circumstances, and aspiring to a successful, better future. This study was enacted to advance knowledge on the experience of parental incarceration and to determine mediating factors that encourage positive adaptation in the midst of adverse circumstances for children of incarcerated parents.

One of the challenges often associated with parental incarceration is negative educational outcomes. However, the results of this study indicate that if one can achieve educational resilience, academic success can be one of the most prominent and effective tools in pursuing a better future. Several participants in the current study demonstrated

the ability to positively adapt to academic challenges and the desire to apply classroom knowledge to their real-world experiences. The undergraduate majors of the participants included difficult fields such as biomedical engineering and biomedical chemistry that require them to be diligent in their pursuits of academic excellence. Further, several participants shared their desires to attend graduate schools for various fields and specializations and to obtain prestigious internships, indicating their future aspirations and high standards for their own achievements.

In congruence with recent literature (Johnson, 2012; Luther, 2015; Makariev & Shaver, 2010), the researcher found that social support systems and the formation of healthy relational attachments can be mediating factors for children between negative effects resulting from parental incarceration and the intrinsic motivation to work hard and pursue a better future. Social support can potentially play a positive role in motivating individuals who have experienced parental incarceration to strive for success in academics and other areas of life and to cope with adverse physical and emotional circumstances. Participants in this study distinctly placed high value in caregivers, friends, educators, church members, and other supportive relations who demonstrated their care by providing assistance and encouragement, giving incentive to work hard, and assigning value and purpose to the lives of the participants. This study reveals that social support can lead to positive adaptation for children by providing a needed sense of stability and comfort and encouraging resilient outcomes in physical, intellectual, and emotional contexts. These findings delineate the importance of strategically providing education opportunities for the general population regarding how to effectively support

children of incarcerated parents. This education would be particularly beneficial to caregivers, educators, church members, coaches, and others who are in environments where influential relationships can be formed with the children and adolescents who have experienced parental incarceration.

Overall, the participants described primarily internal motivating factors in relation to academic success, relationships, and other areas. Several participants shared that they considered academic achievement to be based upon the ability to apply learned knowledge and make a difference in the real world outside of school rather than based upon external rewards such as grades. Internal motivation was also indicated by multiple participants in the contexts of relationships. For example, several subjects desired to form caring relationships with people and to be “genuinely kind” to others merely for the sake of being kind, not to receive a reward or another form of recognition. As all participants indicated having both clear sources of social support and internal motivation tendencies, this study cannot determine whether there is an established relationship between social support and internal motivation. Although there is a correlation between the two variables demonstrated in this study, the sample’s generalizability is limited, and it cannot imply an associated causation.

Furthermore, the responses of participants in this study who have experienced parental incarceration indicated that individuals can be motivated by both negative and positive influences. In other words, those who have experienced parental incarceration can be motivated to pursue success, academic and otherwise, by desiring to either deviate from the incarcerated parent’s behaviors or to mimic a socially dependable individual.

Several participants indicated that they wanted to avoid passing on bitter feelings in their relationships with their future spouses and children and to teach their children that there is hope for the future and that they have a degree of control over their life trajectories. The responses of the participants indicated that they did not want to mimic their incarcerated parents' behaviors or allow their future children to experience the same hardships that they themselves were forced to navigate. This finding was somewhat different for Jackson, however, for he believed that his mother was wrongly imprisoned, and his mother remains a socially dependable individual for him and a positive influence in his life. Several other participants also described motivation resulting from the encouragement or the examples of socially dependable individuals. As indicated by this study, the investments of people such as subsequent caregivers, close friends, teachers, or church members can be positive influences and motivators for children and adolescents. Summarily, the results of this empirical study demonstrate the ability of those who have experienced parental incarceration to overcome adverse circumstances or negative influences through the development of resilience and the involvement of social support. As a result, the implementation of resilience-based interventions is important in the avoidance of risks that are often associated with the experience of parental incarceration.

Conclusions

1. Social support systems often encourage personal motivation and have overall positive impacts on growth and development. Sources of social support such as family, friends, and educators can be positive influences that encourage personal growth and motivation in children. All participants in the current study mentioned both social support and internal motivation tendencies. The stability and encouragement of social support systems can motivate individuals to pursue better visions for their futures.

2. Although there are generally risks associated with having imprisoned parents, individuals who experience parental incarceration often become resilient and independent, striving for academic success and future achievements beyond their challenging circumstances. As a result of unstable environments and the absence of parental guidance, they are often forced to mature quickly and develop social aptitude. Consequently, risks and resultant needs accompanying parental incarceration do not have to prevent individuals from achieving future successes and social mobility.
3. Individuals who have experienced parental incarceration can be motivated by both negative and positive influences. Often, children desire to deviate from the behaviors of incarcerated parents to avoid negative influences in their future relationships, families, professions, and other areas. However, children also frequently mimic socially dependable individuals by following influential examples of both occupational and relational success.
4. Participants described predominantly internal motivating factors in multiple contexts including academics and relationships. They ascribed value to learning for the sake of learning in academic settings and being kind for the sake of being kind in relational situations. As all individuals in the current study described both strong social support systems and internal motivating factors, the relationships between varying types of motivation and different amounts of social support cannot be determined.

Limitations

1. As this empirical study is based upon qualitative research, the results of the study are not generalizable. The convenience sampling method inhibits the generalizability that results from randomization, and the sample size of the study was relatively small, representing a minimal portion of the population.
2. The current study lacked a range of demographic diversity. All of the participants resided in the United States, were within a similar age range, and were undergraduate college students attending the same private university. As a result, the research addressed a very specific sample and cannot be applied to other cultures.
3. All five of the participants in this study have experienced some tangible form of social support. Therefore, the effect of social support on internal motivation in children of incarcerated parents cannot entirely be measured. It would be necessary to examine participants without sources of social support in order to analyze better the influence of that variable on internal motivation.

4. The researcher's participant sample included one individual whose experience of parental incarceration occurred during college, one whose experience occurred during high school, and three whose experiences occurred when they were young children. The differences in age during the parental incarceration experience could be an outlying variable that confounds the results of this study.

Recommendations

1. Future research could include a larger sample size of students and incorporate greater cultural diversity, sampling from college students of varying beliefs, ethnicities, and societal backgrounds.
2. Further research could examine the effects of parental incarceration in relation to the socioeconomic statuses of individuals, determining whether the parental incarceration experience varies between high-income and low-income households.
3. It would be beneficial for an additional study to compare the effects of paternal incarceration and maternal incarceration. The researcher could study whether there are differences in risks associated with a father's incarceration as opposed to a mother's incarceration and whether the effectiveness of intervention techniques varies.
4. A future study could analyze the differences in the experience of parental incarceration based upon the age of the child or adolescent when the incarceration experience occurs. The researcher could compare the specific lived experiences of parental incarceration in children to the experiences of adolescents, determining whether the associated risks, needs, and effective interventions are influenced by the age of the child.

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Vita

Emily Goodwin was born on November 25, 1996, in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She attended Broken Arrow High School where she graduated in May of 2015. Emily currently attends Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma where she anticipates graduating in May of 2018. Following graduation, Emily plans to attend graduate school, potentially a master's program in Forensic Psychology or a doctoral program in Clinical Psychology. After spending several years in graduate school and obtaining her Ph.D., she plans to pursue a career in the more specified field of Forensic Psychology.