The Emotional Experience of Parental Incarceration from the African-American Adolescent Perspective

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Abstract

The presented article reviews a research study on the lived experience of having a parent or parental figure incarcerated during one's adolescence. The research study was conducted to fill a gap in the literature about the adolescent experience of this phenomenon. This qualitative research study used transcendental phenomenology to access the experience of six urban residing African-American participants through 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews. The study used purposive sampling in which participants self-selected to participate in the study. The study yielded findings in five major areas: developmental impact of parental incarceration, emotional impact of parental incarceration, social impact of parental incarceration, spiritual impact of parental incarceration, and levels of adaptation. This article focuses specifically on one of the findings, the emotional experience of parental incarceration. Analogous to Kubler-Ross's research on the stages of grief, this study found that the participants experienced a distinct set of emotions connected to the phenomenon of parental incarceration. By understanding this distinct set of emotions, child welfare providers as well as social service providers will have a better insight into their patients' emotional experiences and how these influence behaviors. More research is needed on the adolescent experience of parental incarceration before this phenomenon is fully understood.

Keywords Parental incarceration · Emotions · Adolescence · Adolescent · Transcendental phenomenology

Between 1.7 million and 5 million children in the United States have had a parent imprisoned at some point in their lifetimes (Bright and Chong 2016; Glaze and Maruschak 2008). This is a staggering statistic when you realize that this number is a conservative estimate since there is no standardized mechanism at the state or federal level to account for the number of children affected by incarceration of a parent (Johnston 1995). African-American children compared to White children are seven and a half times more likely to have an incarcerated parent (Glaze and Maruschak 2008). Research to understand the effect of parental incarceration on the adolescent experience is minimal. The current literature is narrowly focused on clinical subpopulations (such as in-patient hospitalization) or specific program evaluations. To fill the gap in the literature on the adolescent's experience of parental incarceration, the presented study specifically explored the

following question: What is the lived experience of having a parent or parental figure incarcerated during one's adolescence? For the reader's ease going forward "parent" is used for both parent and parental figure, unless otherwise noted in the text.

This article describes the unique emotional experience of parental incarceration from the adolescent perspective. The literature review focuses on the emotional aspect of the adolescent experience. A more detailed literature review as well as the other major results and findings can be found in the author's dissertation manuscript (Kautz 2017b). The methods section demonstrates the transcendental phenomenology used to conduct the study. The results section focuses on the emotional experience shared by the participants. The discussion section presents a more dynamic understanding of the emotions and how one adapts to the experience. Lastly, limitations and future research areas are discussed.

Though the research literature on incarceration is vast, some aspects of incarceration have not been adequately studied. The dearth of literature on the impact of parental incarceration on the adolescent experience prompted the presented study, which attempts to rectify this particular issue. The

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following sections cover aspects of the overall literature pertinent to this particular article.

Adolescent Development

Adolescence is comprised of three subsections: early, middle, and late adolescence (Blos 1979a; Gilmore and Meersand 2014; Kaplan 1991; Lidz 1983; Woolfolk and Perry 2012). This article will focus on the developmental tasks of middle or mid-adolescence. For the expanded discussion on adolescence please refer to the author's dissertation (Kautz 2017b). Middle adolescence is a time of intrapsychic change. Many of the developmental tasks focus on the adolescent internalizing functions of their parents such as self-regulation of emotions and self-esteem, creation and management of identity and sense of self, increased reliance on self and of internalized morals, decreased dependence on parents yet creation of a new relationship with them, and increased importance of peer relationships and intimate partner relationships (Gilmore and Meersand 2014; Kaplan 1991; Kautz 2017b; Lidz 1983; Woolfolk and Perry 2012).

One of the main tasks in adolescence is the transfer of importance from parent relationships to peer relationships (McElhaney et al. 2009). This process of shifting affectual bonds from parents to peers is the adolescent's move towards a "goal-directed" partnership with parents (Allen and Land 1999). The success of this developmental task depends on both the adolescent's and the parent's ability to tolerate these changes (Allen and Hauser 1996; Gilmore and Meersand 2014). Fuligni and Eccles (1993) highlight that parents have to allow their adolescents to make their own decisions, which can be a very difficult task for parents. Inherent in this developmental stage is a mourning process for both the adolescent and parent as relationship ties to parents are reworked and reorganized (Blos 1962). Blos (1962) identifies that the adolescent taking over his or her own psychic functions occurs gradually over the course of adolescence through repetition in experiences. Thus, absence of a parent can disrupt this developmental task.

As the parent-child relationship changes, relationships with peers as well as other non-parent adults becomes increasingly important. Adolescents turn to relationships outside of themselves in search of models of guidance, behavior, and acceptance of standards (Gilmore and Meersand 2014; Lidz 1983; Woolfolk and Perry 2012). The internal changes for the adolescent can engender feelings of emptiness or closeness depending on whether the adolescent has found people they identify with as well as desires, longings, and fears about their dependency on parents (Blos 1979a, b; Gilmore and Meersand 2014; Kaplan 1991; Lidz 1983). The internal upheaval felt can impact the risk-taking nature of adolescents by pushing some into acting counterphobically to show themselves

they are ready to take on adulthood when they might not actually be prepared for the consequences (Gilmore and Meersand 2014; Woolfolk and Perry 2012).

Potential Effects of Parental Incarceration on Adolescents

Imprisonment of a parent can potentially have both negative and positive effects on a child. The parent-child relationship is one aspect affected by the parental incarceration. Arditti (2012) identifies the following factors that influence the parent-child relationship before, during, and after the incarceration: type of crime the parent was convicted of, how involved the parent was prior to the incarceration, the gender of the parent, and whether the parent resided with the adolescent prior to the incarceration. At the risk of stating the obvious, incarceration of a parent affects his or her ability to parent. Boudin and Zeller-Berkman (2010) highlight that when a parent is imprisoned, the roles of the parent and child become reversed, and the support, guidance, nurturance, and protection naturally given to the adolescent flow in the opposite direction. The natural progression of individuation during adolescence in relation to the incarcerated parent changes since the gradual decrease in reliance on the parent cannot occur. For some adolescents with an incarcerated parent, this individuation occurs rapidly and abruptly.

Developmentally, as noted above, adolescence is a time when the individual not only needs support from his or her parent but also looks for new sources of support in peers and other subsequent role models. Unfortunately, parental incarceration affects this developmental task. Boudin and Zeller-Berkman's (2010) study indicates that most children and adolescents feel as if they cannot talk to their peers because of the shame and stigma attached to having an incarcerated parent. The same study found that children and adolescents who are affected by parental incarceration and who do not have a supportive and accepting peer group have increased feelings of isolation, stigma, and shame (Boudin and Zeller-Berkman 2010).

The literature describes other potential effects beyond that of the parent-child relationship. For example, children and adolescents could suffer from the following negative effects of parental incarceration: dysfunctional subsequent caregiver and peer relationships; trauma-reactive behaviors; premature independence from the parent-child relationship; identification with the incarcerated parent, which could lead to intergenerational crime and incarceration; increases in maladaptive behaviors and cognitive thought processes; and deterioration of school performance and behavior (Johnston 1995; Reid and Eddy 2002; Shlafer and Poehlmann 2010).

In contrast, other studies indicate that potential positive factors can shield a child or adolescent from the negative

effects of parental incarceration. The protective factors include, but are not limited to, positive individual attributes (such as easy temperament and intelligence), the involvement of supportive people outside of the family (found through religion, peers, and school), ability to solve problems and control impulses, and a supportive family environment (Nesmith and Ruhland 2008; Shlafer and Poehlmann 2010; Todis et al. 2001; Werner 1993, 2000). These protective factors comprise resiliency. In an effort to explore the phenomenon without any preconceived notions, the presented study did not use these factors initially to understand the experience of the phenomenon.

Issues Facing Adolescents with Incarcerated Parents

The literature identifies a number of issues adolescents face when a parent is imprisoned. Studies indicate the issues could include premature sexual relationships, interpersonal problems, involvement in criminal activities, school delinquency, and substance use (Johnston 1995; Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2003; Shlafer and Poehlmann 2010). Another set of studies identify additional challenges that face adolescents with incarcerated parents, including increased potential for criminal activity as an adult, conduct problems, and internalizing problems such as depression (Huebner and Gustafson 2007; Kinner et al. 2007; Murray and Farrington 2008; Murray and Murray 2010; Murray 2010). These are far from understood and require deeper analysis and longitudinal study.

Emotional Experience of Children and Adolescents with Incarcerated Parents

Very little research literature focuses on the direct emotional experience of children and adolescents whose parents are incarcerated. Instead, much of the literature focuses on risk and protective factors, externalizing behaviors, internalizing behaviors, loss, trauma, and attachment reactions (Arditti 2012; Boudin and Zeller-Berkman 2010; Braman and Wood 2003; Dallaire and Aaron 2010; Johnston 1995; Naudeau 2010; Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2003; Shlafer and Poehlmann 2010; Travis and Waul 2003). The emotional experience of children and adolescents discussed in the literature so far focuses on emotions connected with trauma and separation from attachment figures (Arditti 2012; Johnston 1995; Naudeau 2010; Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2003). The Osborne Association, a criminal justice reform group that works with individuals and families, attempts to rectify this problem. In their series, *Stronger Together*, one volume focuses on the emotional experience of children. The following are just a few of the emotions experienced when a parent is

incarcerated: fear, anxiety, worry, stigma, shame, guilt, confusion, resentment, isolation, and sadness (Brooks et al. 2013).

The presented study attempts to fill the gap in the literature about the adolescent's emotional experience of parental incarceration. Much of the literature focuses on parent-child interactions or behaviors without much consideration of the emotions that underlie the behaviors seen in adolescents with incarcerated parents. The presented article focuses on denial/disbelief, confusion, fear/anxiety/worry, sadness, helplessness, anger, ambivalence, and acceptance.

Methods

This section outlines the methodology in the presented study. First is an introduction to the research study's participants. To ensure anonymity and privacy, the researcher changed any identifying information and used pseudonyms. Next, the sampling method is explored. Lastly, the data collection and analysis are explained.

Participants

All research participants had to meet the following requirements: be between the ages of 18 and 29; had a parent incarcerated during their adolescence (which was defined, for the purposes of the presented study, as between the ages of 15 and 17); the incarcerated parent had to be in prison for at least 2 years; the participant must have lived with the incarcerated parent for at least a month prior to the parent's incarceration; were willing to be interviewed up to four times; and were comfortable being digitally recorded during the interviews. Current literature defines incarceration as serving a sentence of 2 years or longer in a state or federal prison (Crayton et al. 2010).

The presented study examined the lived experience of having a parent incarcerated during one's adolescence from a reflective stance. Thus, it was important for the participants to have completed adolescence prior to the interview process. By interviewing 18- to 29-year olds, the researcher was able to capture the lived experience more in-depth. Since they had a greater cognitive ability to reflect on the experience, participants were able to provide thoughtful and rich descriptions (Polkinghorne 1989). The rationale for defining adolescence as between 15 and 17 years was because most of the changes to the parent-child relationship occur during this developmental stage (Blos 1962; Kaplan 1991; Lidz 1983).

In an effort to better understand the adolescent experience, the researcher identified and interviewed participants from neighborhoods with high-crime and high-incarceration rates in Chicago. Thirty-nine potential participants self-selected to respond to a flyer about the study. Of the interested 39 potential participants, 18 fulfilled the study's criteria. Six of the 18

potential research participants reported their lived experience through a total of 15 in-person, in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

Prior to introducing the individual participants, the researcher presents a short synopsis of general demographic information. All participants were African-American, ranging in age from 19 to 29 years. Half of the participant sample was male and the other half was female. The participants' parents were convicted of the following crimes, which are listed in no particular order: murder, drug, gun, and conspiracy. All participants reported finishing high school, with one participant completing high school through a General Education Development (GED) program. At the time of the interviews, three of the research participants reported employment, and it was unclear whether the other three were employed. All participants at the time of the interviews were not married nor had children. Lastly, two of the participants reported having served jail time. One participant served jail time during adolescence and the other participant served jail time as an adult. Though the general public uses jail and prison interchangeably, these terms have distinct meanings. The literature defines jail as a place that holds people for short periods of time after an arrest for a crime but no conviction. Federal or state prison houses convicted criminals (Crayton et al. 2010). The presented study used this definition of jail and prison. The following are short introductions to each of the study's participants, all of whom have had an incarcerated family member.

Rashaun, a 29-year-old man, whose incarcerated father figure is serving a life sentence, lived with his mother, his subsequent caregiver. Rashaun was in early adolescence when his father figure went to prison. He maintained a relationship and communicated with his father figure during the incarceration.

Gabrielle, a 28-year-old woman, had a mother who was sentenced for at least 20 years. She was in preschool when her mother went to prison. Gabrielle lived with various family members as her primary caregivers during her childhood. She was a preteen when her father became her permanent subsequent caregiver. Her mother was not released until Gabrielle was a young adult. Because of restrictions imposed by her subsequent caregivers, Gabrielle did not have a relationship with her mother until she was an adult.

Kimani, a 26-year-old woman, had both a mother and father incarcerated. Kimani's father is currently serving a life sentence. Her mother has been in and out of prison from the very beginning of Kimani's life. Kimani's subsequent caregiver was her maternal grandmother. She has had a tenuous relationship with her mother from early childhood and has no relationship with her father at all.

Booker, a 19-year-old man, had a father who has been in and out of prison since Booker was in early adolescence. Booker lived with his mother for a short period of time after the incarceration until his grandmother became his permanent

subsequent caregiver. He reported not having much of a relationship with either of his parents.

Dajon, a 29-year-old man, had a father incarcerated for 3 years. Dajon was in middle adolescence when his father went to prison. While his father was incarcerated, Dajon lived with his mother, who was his subsequent caregiver. Dajon described having a relationship with his father before, during, and after the incarceration.

Fatema, a 29-year-old woman, had a father who was imprisoned before she was a teenager and was released when she was in her twenties. Fatema lived with her mother, who was her subsequent caregiver, during her father's incarceration. She described having a relationship with her father during his imprisonment and after his release.

Sampling

The study, which recruited participants in the city of Chicago during the first 6 months of 2015, used purposive sampling to identify individuals who experienced the studied phenomenon. Participants self-selected to participate in the study by responding to a recruitment flyer. The recruitment flyers were posted in public spaces, community centers, and public libraries in Chicago neighborhoods that were identified to have high-crime and high-incarceration rates. The assumption was that participants recruited in this manner might be more willing to talk about the experience since there was an increased incidence of the phenomenon in that area. Neighborhoods identified as high-crime areas were chosen using the Chicago Police Department (CPD) crime maps (Chicago Police Department 2014). The neighborhoods were identified using the following CPD CLEARmap categories with the timeframe of the year 2014: community areas, Index Crimes (serious crimes), and Non-Index Crimes (less serious crimes) (Chicago Police Department 2014). For a breakdown and definition of Index and Non-Index Crimes, please refer to the author's doctoral dissertation or published article (Kautz 2017a, b).

In an effort to understand the phenomenon in its entirety, the researcher did not turn away participants based on the developmental stage during which their parent was incarcerated nor did the researcher limit the type of convicted crimes. The researcher made it clear to participants that the study would examine the adolescent experience. For example, during the interview process, when the participant began to discuss his or her experience outside of the specified developmental stage, the researcher gently guided the participant back onto the topic.

Due to using purposive sampling and the self-selection of participants into the study, the researcher expected to have a skewed racial sample that was predominantly Hispanic and/or African-American. Others have reported that Hispanic children are almost twice as likely as their White counterparts to

have an incarcerated parent, and African-American children are about seven times more likely than their White counterparts to have an incarcerated parent (Glaze and Maruschak 2008). A 2015 Bureau of Justice Statistics study indicates that African-American women are 1.5–4 times more likely, and African-American men are 4–10.5 times more likely to be incarcerated across the United States compared to White men and White women (Carson 2015). The presented study's participant sample supports this assertion in the research.

The Institute for Clinical Social Work's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the research study that inspired this presented article. The study met all ethical standards and monitored the safety of its research participants and data set out by the IRB. Prior to setting up a first interview, the researcher asked the potential research participant not only about the criteria to be a part of the study but also about their understanding of the study. Before starting the research interviews, all participants received the study's consent form and had time to read through the document. To confirm that the individuals had a clear understanding of what they were consenting to and their rights as a human research subject, the researcher then reviewed the form with each and asked the individual to state his or her understanding of the study. The researcher also took measures to protect the research interview if any of the participants became emotional (such as displaying any significant changes in voice or body language) by checking in with the participant and evaluating his or her emotional state. If the evaluation determined that the participant was in significant emotional distress, the researcher would immediately end the formal research interview and debrief the participant to assess the participant's need for further professional help. The researcher had referrals for a number of local agencies where the research participant could receive additional professional mental health help. In the presented study, none of the participants needed any emotional debriefing, but it was available to them.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection The study used a multiple semi-structured interview protocol to collect data. The data consisted of participant interviews, audiovisual materials shared by the participants, and researcher observations from the field. The semi-structured interview used the following questions as a place to start the discussion: What was it like to find out about the parent's incarceration? What stood out for the participant in life after the parent went to prison? What was the experience like for the participant during the parent's incarceration? How did the participant carry on with life after the parent was incarcerated? What or who helped them make sense of the experience of having a parent incarcerated? The first, second, and third interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min each. The

fourth interview, which was optional, lasted no more than 30 min.

Prior to formally starting the research process, the researcher screened all potential participants to determine their eligibility through a pre-interview phone call. Once a participant was eligible to participate in the study, the researcher set up a first interview at a local community center or library. The first interview covered consent forms and included non-intrusive questions to ease the participant into the process. The second interview explored the participant's experience in more depth. The third interview allowed for further exploration of the experience as well as any follow up questions that surfaced from the interview process and initial data analysis. At the end of the interviews, the timing of which was determined by each participant, the individual received a \$30 Visa gift card in compensation for their participation. After the results were written up and read by the participants, the fourth interview was optional and was used for member checking (Creswell 2007). Four participants participated in the fourth interview and reported that the results were representative of their experience. Because they could not be reached to set up an interview, the other two did not participate in the fourth interview, even though they received the results.

Data Analysis The researcher conducted all of the research interviews and transcribed all interviews with the help of transcription software called ExpressScribe. This software allowed the researcher to start data analysis while transcribing the interviews. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the data, the researcher met with an expert in the field on a regular basis to discuss the data collection, interview, and data analysis processes. These discussions as well as the previously mentioned member checking increased validity, reliability, and accuracy of the data and understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell 2007; Smith et al. 2009).

The presented study analyzed the data collected using a method by Moustakas as modified by Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen (Moustakas 1994). This method has four basic steps. The first step engages the researcher in a reflective process before the research interviews begin. In this process, the researcher obtains her own description of her experience of the phenomenon in an effort to acknowledge assumptions, biases, and knowledge that might otherwise affect the data and analysis (Moustakas 1994). The second step in the analysis process is to gain descriptions of one participant's experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas 1994). Each transcript was analyzed in the following way (Moustakas 1994, p.122): each statement the participant made is scrutinized for its significance to the experience; all significant statements are identified; all non-overlapping, non-repetitive and meaningful statements (also called invariant horizons) are placed together in a list; these horizons are then examined for their meaning and placed into themes. The themes and meanings of the data are analyzed to

create a textual description, thus underscoring the “what” is experienced (Moustakas 1994). Next, a structural description is created through imaginative variation and reflection. Imaginative variation helps the researcher account for different situations that could have contributed to the experience of the phenomenon. The structural description illustrates “how” the phenomenon is experienced (Moustakas 1994). The researcher creates a composite textural-structural description from one participant’s set of interviews to create a universal description, which represents the essence of the phenomenon for that participant (Moustakas 1994). The third step of the analysis process is to repeat this process with each of the other participant’s interview sets (Moustakas 1994). The final step creates a composite textural-structural description from all participant interviews to create a universal description that represents the essence of the phenomenon from the group’s experience (Moustakas 1994).

Results

The results presented in this article are just one section of the extensive results and findings from a larger study (Kautz 2017b). Participant narratives led to the natural construction of the larger study’s categories and structure of the results and findings. Six invariant horizons in the textural description illuminate the lived experience of the phenomenon of parental incarceration: the influence on the developmental experience, the emotional influence, the social influence, the spiritual influence, practical aspects, and the external environmental aspects. The two imaginative variants that form the structural analysis of the lived experience are psychodynamic forces and assumptions about parents. The textural-structural description of the lived experiences involves three key variables: truth, the

kind of relationship the participant has with the incarcerated parent, and the availability of an attuned subsequent caregiver. The research study’s findings, on which this article is based, were explored from four theoretical lenses anchored in the literature: development, attachment, loss, and trauma. Although the broader research study had extensive findings and theoretical implications, this article focuses specifically on the emotional influence of parental incarceration.

Analogous to Kubler-Ross’s discovery of the stages of grief, the phenomenon of parental incarceration has its own specific and distinct series of emotions that needs to be acknowledged. The data collected and analyzed from participant narratives highlight a number of emotions experienced by the participants. This series of emotions, depicted in Fig. 1, include disbelief/denial, confusion, fear/anxiety/worry, sadness, helplessness, anger, ambivalence, and acceptance. Each emotion is explored below.

Disbelief/Denial

Many participants described a period of disbelief and denial as a part of their experience. Distinct from the psychological defense known as denial, this disbelief and denial occurred during the period in which participants felt the most uncertainty about what was going to happen. Gabrielle’s quote below is an example of the disbelief/denial she felt during the period of uncertainty:

Um, all during the process it was still like she’s going to be fine, she’s going to come home. You know the verdict would be in our favor. They’re not going to take away someone away from 5 you know kids, and um, leave us by ourselves.

Fig. 1 Emotional experience of parental incarceration

Gabrielle's experience of disbelief exemplifies how an individual can be of two minds, holding two opposing thoughts for a particular moment in time. For example, on some level Gabrielle knew her parent did something bad and there were consequences, but she also believed the criminal justice system would look after her by not taking her parent away from her. This example highlights the contrasting views of society and the children of prisoners. Society perceives prisoners as individuals who simply made bad choices whereas the child clings to the parent-child relationship and can experience disbelief or denial about the seriousness of the situation. Denial specifically occurred at the beginning of the participants' experiences. Dajon's statement below shows how he used denial to help him make sense of his experience:

Like you know, I looked at it like I don't know, I just felt like I could never, um, break down about the situation or...not in the same fact of being close with my father but I just felt like it was never a big deal for me just even, it never really affected my life. You know, even though the absence because he was gone, I like just feel like my life still had to go on and that you know he'll be okay and time is time going on you know, we got to talk to him and hearing him talking to him on the phone, going to see him but I felt like I still had duties to do in my life you know I still had to grow up.

Confusion

Participant narratives describe a period of confusion symbolic of the questions and doubts about what landed his or her parent in prison. Many participants either did not know or were told a lie about what was occurring when a parent first got entangled with the criminal justice system. Rashaun's quote below illustrates how this experience engenders a sense of confusion:

When I first heard of it, I was thinking like man, whoever did the guy deserve to get whatever they have coming but when I come to find out that he was in on it, aww...did I really just say what I just said? And...come to find out he got caught up in it so, now I was just telling him man, you know, I hope by what you're saying you ain't do it but he was there, he broke down and told me the story and I'm like man, it's going to be a rough fight. And throughout the years, you know, it was rough. He kept getting into it with people, like people from the street or people that had shorter time.

Many participants describe part of their confusion as connected with not having the truth about what led to imprisonment of their parent. Participants described overhearing subsequent

caregivers and family members discussing the real story, which added to the confusion and desire to find the truth.

Fear/Anxiety/Worry

Fear, anxiety, or worry came in different forms and from different places for every participant. Narratives highlight that it was felt internally and sometimes originated from something external. Participants worried about their subsequent caregivers, incarcerated parents, and/or themselves.

Yeah. And it would make you think like, I was saying like, when it first went, repercussions could be behind family member of the person that got killed, is they come after his family. When somebody knows that me and him was always together, would they try to take it out or earn some points by trying to hurt me? Think like yeah okay, we couldn't get him but we got a family member, all crazy stuff. So now I am with the keeping my head up, looking over my shoulders, if a car come by you know um, I am kind of getting far away from the street in case they get to shooting or something. So, it was really a traumatizing situation at first.

Rashaun's quote above highlights the tangible danger he and some participants experienced because of their parents' actions. Unfortunately, the fear of retaliation for their parents' actions and not their own actions is a legitimate concern for many participants and is just one of the external fears and anxieties particularly for individuals with parents incarcerated for certain crimes such as murder. Participants who visited their parent in prison described concern about their parent's safety. These worries and fears were not unfounded because participants shared stories about other prisoners' being stabbed or assaulted while in prison. Other worries and anxieties came from one's self. Kimani highlights how the anxiety manifested internally for her with the competing desires for answers and fear of the unknown: "If I constantly focus on my mother and make that my life, I would get lost. You just cannot...I refuse to; my grandmamma always told me, you have your own life." Kimani's conclusion is indicative of how participants struggled internally with their parent's actions and what those actions meant for their own identities.

Sadness

You know getting to that last door where the officer is like man um, time's up. You know he had to go and get his handcuffs put back on and carried off, and I get to leave free handed, like man. But every visit, I say I have shed a tear, I have to cry because it is like man, I wanted to go with him but I knew I couldn't but it hurted because just to see him have to go through that.

Rashaun's quote above illustrates the sadness he felt as he left his parent after visiting him in the prison. This is just one example of how sadness enters the lives of those who have an incarcerated parent. Sadness described by the participants showed up in the different phases of the parent's incarceration: during the incarceration, while leaving the prison after visiting the parent, and even after the parent was released. Others described the void they felt because of the parental incarceration and the experiences they missed out on because that parent was absent. Kimani's quote below exemplifies the sadness felt in her life because of what she felt she has missed out on during her parent's incarceration:

And stuff, and it's kind of it's kind of it hurts a little because I have a lot of friends that they got kids and their fathers are like granddaddies and their family you know, they are so family involved and stuff and it seems like their family is like almost perfect. And it's sometimes it hurts a little bit but then again, I just don't know, maybe it's just the way God had my life written.

Helplessness

Yeah. It was like...I don't know. It was just like I felt like I didn't want to see him get locked up you know, I mean don't nobody want to see people get locked up so you know trying to talk to him and stuff like that. And when you just come to the realization that the person is not going to stop doing what they doing you got to be like you know, I can't I can't...keep telling you this if you not going to listen, you feel me? If you're not going to listen there's no reason for me to keep wasting my breath. I can go on about my business and do what I need to do because you not going do what...is that you supposed to be doing. So, I'm not going to let you stop me from doing what I need to be doing, you know. And that's just the only way I could think about it like you know. Like I don't know. It's like being young when it all happened it was just like I didn't know how to go about it but when I realized like you know, you can't change another person or what they do and stuff like that...

Booker's quote above highlights the sense of helplessness he felt when he noticed his father was making the same mistake over and over again. He even tried to help his father learn from the mistakes, but his father would not listen. Booker's experience was one of the many examples of helplessness felt by participants. Participants shared their experience of how other people's actions, their parents or the criminal justice system, had control over their lives when they were trying to gain some control over it themselves. For other participants,

helplessness was described through the changes that occurred after the parent went to prison, such as not having any input into who took care of them while the parent was in prison. Gabrielle's statement below shows how she felt helpless in relation to her subsequent caregivers, particularly how they made decisions about her life:

I always wanted to be somewhere else. It just felt like everything was being taken away from me when I moved with him. The life I was used to. The people I was used to. You're 9 years old, so...even my 8th grade year, we moved to a different state. So...you know, my friends that I had just been with for the past 4 years and I'm about to graduate, now I have to start all new, in this new city, like I see why my mom wanted to stay to ah, let me sisters graduate instead of, we would have moved to a different state.

Anger

Um...Yeah...it was really nothing I mean you know I was I had got um; I had got in trouble it all started from a fight in school. And it really escalated 'cause I had got on probation for the fight and they wanted me to start taking drops [i.e. drug test]. You know for the probation and stuff like that.

Booker's quote above highlights the anger about his father's incarceration that came out in an unconscious way while he was a teenager. His experience is just one example of the anger participants expressed through their actions without a conscious connection to it. Gabrielle struggled as a teenager to connect with her anger but finally did so as an adult:

Um...uh...Yeah. Cause it was too much going on. And then I, I never thought about it since I became an adult but I'm pretty sure like I really blamed her for all that... first it went from loving and missing my mom...

Many participants expressed anger in different ways such as the music they listened to and misbehavior in school or at home. According to the participant narratives, anger seemed to be readily felt but difficult to connect to consciously.

Ambivalence

Um, um...I have little issues with my mother you know um I got a lot of unanswered questions that a lot of questions that questions that I want to ask her but I know that I won't never ask her because if I ask her for her. Um, 'cause she is my mom and I think she owes me a lot

of answers. Questions to a lot of answers [sic]. Um, I think with me that maybe things with her that maybe she thinks that I'm not ready for, I don't really know.

Kimani's quote above is just one example of the ambivalence participants felt when trying to process parental incarceration. Participants described a tension between the desire to know the truth and a reluctance to bother the incarcerated parent or subsequent caregiver for the full true story. Participants who experienced the most ambivalence in connection to their incarcerated parents were those who still had many unanswered questions, a tenuous relationship or no relationship at all with the incarcerated parent, and unpredictable support from subsequent caregivers. The three previously mentioned key aspects play a big role in whether or not the participants were able to sort out their ambivalence within the experience.

Acceptance

How I understand things or how I help other people understand it but that [it] is pretty much me and my philosophy - watching my dad going in and out of jail and definitely not going to end up like him. I'm okay with having the experiences but as long as I come out with a different outlook.

Here Fatema indicated that she understood and came to accept the experience, learning a lesson and integrating it. Three important factors probably helped her: a relationship with her incarcerated parent, the truth about what landed him in prison, and an attuned subsequent caregiver who helped her gain her reflective capacity. Rashaun was also able to reach acceptance. His quote below illustrates how gaining the truth, having a relationship with the incarcerated parent, and having a supportive subsequent caregiver can help one process the experience:

And so, I had wrote him and told him to explain to me what really happened. Even though you know you paint a picture say you wasn't there or you didn't do it, just tell me what happened. That's when I really got the picture. I said if you really cared about me and meant all the things you told me coming up, you'll tell the truth and let me know what is going on.

This open dialogue and connection allowed him to gain the truth and rebuild trust with his incarcerated parent. He also integrated and built on what this experience meant to him and how he was going to move forward. Only two of the participants reached the emotional stage of acceptance. The other four lacked one or more of the aforementioned important factors.

Discussion

As illustrated above, this emotional experience is intertwined with developmental tasks, assumptions about relationships, and how one makes sense of his or her world. The three key variables mentioned earlier (truth, the kind of relationship the participant has with the incarcerated parent, and the availability of an attuned subsequent caregiver) play a large role in the emotional experience.

The aforementioned emotions are not experienced in a linear fashion but are fluid, meaning individuals can return to different emotional states. However, one exception to this bi-directional motion is that disbelief/denial were activated only at the beginning of the experience. Disbelief/denial seemed to serve as a protective mechanism during the time of uncertainty, allowing the individual to marshal internal and external resources to face the phenomenon after the arrest and sentencing phases. Narratives also indicated that participants operated under assumptions about parents that influenced this initial denial and disbelief. For example, the parent would not willingly leave them, or it was not their parent who had made the mistake that landed them in prison. Nevertheless, participants indicated that once they moved out of this initial stage they did not go back to it.

Confusion was a feeling connected to having doubts and unanswered questions. Participants indicated that these doubts and unanswered questions impeded their ability to understand and integrate the experience of the phenomenon. Some participants described circumstances where they were not told the truth about the incarcerated parent and instead found out by overhearing conversations. These participants shared that finding out the truth about the incarcerated parent in this manner added to the level of confusion they felt and created a breach of trust. Participants who did not have a chance to talk with their incarcerated parent to get answers and/or discuss this new information with an attuned subsequent caregiver felt as if someone lied to them on purpose. This experience is evidence to support the assertion in the literature about how caregivers lie about where the incarcerated parent actually resides (Hairston 2003, 2007; Nesmith and Ruhland 2008, 2011). This feeling not only added to the mistrust in others and to the confusion about what to think about the experience but also led to questions about what this phenomenon meant for their identity. Adolescence, developmentally, is a time of reorganization and confusion in one's identity and relationships (Gilmore and Meersand 2014; Woolfolk and Perry 2012). Therefore, when caregivers and adults are not truthful about the incarcerated parent this adds an extra layer of complexity and mistrust to the reorganization of relationships for these adolescents.

Following the confusion, participants described the fear/anxiety/worry they experienced as a part of the phenomenon. This fear/anxiety/worry was unique for every

participant, though a few anxieties were experienced by all. Children and adolescents of incarcerated parents have to manage unintended consequences of a parent's action. Moreover, all participants described having the knowledge at a young age about what areas of the city or which neighborhoods they could or could not safely walk through based on their families or their incarcerated parent's actions. All participants explained feeling anxious about what it meant to them to have a parent or parents incarcerated. Therefore, the anxiety and fear affected identity formation and how to reconcile the parent's actions and society's message that people in prison are bad people and that the apple does not fall far from the tree. This experience is evidence to support the previous assertion in the developmental literature about fearing the regressive nature of dependency longings and desires that all adolescents experience (Blos 1979a, b; Gilmore and Meersand 2014; Kaplan 1991; Lidz 1983). Participants also shared their worry about the incarcerated parent and how they were faring in prison both physically and mentally. Participants acknowledged that prison is not an entirely safe place to be and that they worried about the parent's safety. This worry takes psychological energy away from the adolescent's developmental tasks of individuation and places it on other people. Lastly, some participants worried about their subsequent caregiver and his or her health and safety. This fear comes from what it would mean to them to lose another attachment figure and be left in the world by him- or herself. This worry about caregivers is evidence to support that children and adolescents are aware of the caregiver's stress level (Nesmith and Ruhland 2008).

The emotion of sadness was prevalent in all participant narratives of the experience of having an incarcerated parent. At each stage of the criminal justice process such as the arrest, sentencing, incarceration, and release of the parent, sadness appeared for different reasons. As the reader might guess, sadness was present during the arrest, sentencing, and incarceration stages partly because of the loss of that parent and the functions that the parent provided. Participants described the loss not only in terms of the physical presence of tangible items but also intangible aspects such as security, love, and protection and the presence of parents at life events such as prom or graduation. For some participants, the release of the parent from prison evoked sadness connected to the disappointment of who the parent was or became while in prison. These experiences are evidence that parental incarceration is a loss that needs to be acknowledged as an ambiguous loss and to be mourned (Boss 2007). The developmentally occurring mourning process Blos (1962) identified is heightened due to this phenomenon. Since the author has a forthcoming article about loss, trauma, and parental incarceration, loss and trauma will not be explored any further in this paper.

Helplessness was part of the emotional experience of having an incarcerated parent because this phenomenon is

completely outside the control of the participants. One of the most important, but easily forgotten, aspects of this phenomenon is that it is imposed on the participants, and their actions have no effect on the outcome. Helplessness is experienced because they have no control over the parent's actions nor the actions of the systems they are a part of, such as the criminal justice system or the caretaking network. During this especially difficult developmental period, adolescents are increasing their autonomy over their thought process, goals, and actions (Gilmore and Meersand 2014; Woolfolk and Perry 2012). Having an imprisoned parent creates obstacles the adolescent has to deal with to achieve this developmental task. When a parent is incarcerated, even before the trial, imprisonment sets off a cascade of mandated changes in the child's life such as changes in caretakers, potential moves to a new neighborhood and/or school, and potential loss of friendship. Some participants described the helplessness they felt around the desire to influence the incarcerated parent, having a desire to help the parent learn lessons or to gain perspective from this forced separation from them. Some incarcerated parents responded to this desire and others did not, thus causing pain and helplessness in participants who were trying to make their lives better but had their efforts stymied.

The last aspect of helplessness was described by the participants who had contact with the incarcerated parent either via prison visits or phone calls. Participants felt a sense of helplessness when the prison went on lockdown and they could not see or talk to the incarcerated parent since all communications with the outside world stop until the lockdown was lifted. Lockdowns were particularly difficult for participants because they looked forward to these brief times when they could communicate with their loved one. Although adolescence is a time of reorganization to the parent-child relationship, the adolescent still needs the parent for this process (Allen and Hauser 1996; Allen and Land 1999; Gilmore and Meersand 2014; McElhaney et al. 2009).

Anger was another emotion participants identified in their experience of this phenomenon. It became clear through narratives that participants strongly resisted this emotion for a myriad of reasons. When participants described their frustration or anger with the experience, it was never directed towards the incarcerated parent. It was as if the participants were unconsciously trying to protect their tenuous relationship with the incarcerated parent and that it was too threatening to unleash the frustration at this incarcerated parent for placing them in this position. The experience of anger is derived from thwarted attempts to fulfill developmental tasks such as the previously mentioned task of mourning the loss of childhood (Blos 1962). Lacking the support and protection of either the incarcerated parent or subsequent parent exacerbates the frustration (Boudin and Zeller-Berkman 2010; Woolfolk and Perry 2012). Although the participants did not connect with the anger outright, the narratives indicated it was expressed in

other ways. In agreement with other research literature, the participants expressed anger in two ways, externalizing behaviors and internalizing the feeling. One participant struggled with self-injurious behavior since he internalized the anger and directed it towards himself. He got treatment and now has better coping skills and the ability to share what is bothering him. Other participants let it come out through the music with angry lyrics they listened to or what they wrote in their journal. Others' narratives indicated that some participants externalized their anger and misbehaved at home or in school. Whether or not participants internalized or externalized their anger had no effect on the outcome of the parent's incarceration.

The ambivalence described in participant narratives identified another emotional stage in the distinct series of emotions one experiences while having an incarcerated parent. Participant narratives indicated that this part of the emotional experience was connected to what it meant to have an incarcerated parent and how this experience was processed. This ambivalence boils down to two factors: the information the participant has in relation to why, how, and what landed the parent in prison and how supportive the different relationships the participant has in his or her life. Participant narratives indicated that when participants had unanswered questions and could not get the answers from the incarcerated parent or other people within the family, they were left with a sense of unease, wondering what the lack of answers meant to them. Ambivalence makes identity formation more difficult (Woolfolk and Perry 2012).

Acceptance is the last emotion in the distinct series of emotions that occur when a parent becomes incarcerated. However, not all participants indicated they reached this point. The participants who did shared three aspects that made their experience different from the other participants': they received the truth, they had an attuned subsequent caregiver, and they had an unencumbered, open, and honest relationship with the incarcerated parent. These three aspects helped the participants integrate the experience and make sense of it with support. The subsequent caregiver's ability to parent was crucial, since this person was present on a daily basis and helped the participants make sense of their experience without being overwhelmed by it themselves. Both the subsequent caregiver's ability to help facilitate processing and a relationship with the incarcerated parent allowed trust to be rebuilt and the truth to emerge. These three aspects allowed the participants who reached acceptance to focus on adolescence and the many aforementioned developmental tasks of this stage of life.

It is important to understand the emotions that adolescents with incarcerated parents are dealing with since the emotions provide more information than behaviors identified in the literature. Many different developmental processes occur during adolescence such as identity formation, individuation, and

consideration of future education and employment (Gilmore and Meersand 2014; Kaplan 1991; Lidz 1983; Woolfolk and Perry 2012). Parental incarceration can disrupt this process and makes it more difficult. Participants indicated they were already judged for their parent's actions and not their own. So why continue to perpetuate these issues by just classifying them based on their actions or symptoms? The presented study identified a distinct emotional experience that should be acknowledged. This acknowledgement would help not only adolescents but also the child welfare providers and social service providers working with this population.

Limitations and Future Research

The presented study adds to the general knowledge. However due to the smaller number of participants, the results are not generalizable in the same way quantitative studies are since these have a larger number of participants (Creswell 2007; Moustakas 1994). The scope of the study was small since it was part of a doctoral program requirement. The results, although based on only one urban racial group's experience of the phenomenon of parental incarceration, adds to the literature by filling a gap in the knowledge of the non-clinical adolescent population's experience. This particular perspective is strikingly missing from the literature. Outlining this distinct set of emotions in the literature will help child welfare workers, social service providers, teachers, and subsequent caregivers gain an understanding of the underlying emotional experience that can fuel the thoughts and behaviors of children and adolescents of incarcerated parents.

More research with a larger sample size is needed to understand the lived experience of not only adolescents affected by incarceration but also caregivers. Two potential areas of research are exploring this experience and the relationship between the adolescent and incarcerated parent dyad or the adolescent and subsequent caregiver dyad. These two relationships are important for adolescents dealing with incarcerated parents so it is prudent to have a better understanding of their experience. More research on the emotional experience of adolescents with an incarcerated parent would help give a clearer understanding of the experience during this vulnerable developmental stage.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Disclosure of Interest There is no conflict of interest since the first author is the sole author. The author is an independent researcher.

Ethical Standards and Informed Consent All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation [institutional and national] and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000. Informed consent was obtained from all patients for being included in the study.

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