'Overwhelmed and powerless': Staff perspectives on mother-infant separations in English prisons.

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TITLE: â€˜Overwhelmed and powerlessâ€™: Staff perspectives on mother-infant separations in English prisons.

ABSTRACT:

Imprisoned mothers are at increased risk for poor psychological health and psychological distress when separated from their children, so staff need to be highly skilled to support the women. However, there is a paucity of research focusing on staff experiences around sensitive issues such as mother-child separation. This study aimed to understand the challenges facing staff and how these might be addressed.

This qualitative interview study explored the views and experiences of 24 prison-based staff in England working with female prisoners separated from their infants.

Staff emphasised the challenges of working with separated mothers, specifically the emotional impact of this work, and the impact of the wider criminal justice system on their sense of agency.

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A focus on the experience of separation highlights the broader problem of incarcerating women in general. Reducing the number of mother-child separations would mitigate the impact on both women and staff.

'Overwhelmed and powerless': Staff perspectives on mother-infant separations in English prisons.

Introduction

The most recent government workforce statistics show that there are just short of of 2,000 staff working across the female prison estate in England (Ministry of Justice, 2020a). This includes officers, administrative and management staff, healthcare, chaplaincy and facilities staff. It does not include staff in private prisons, or additional workers employed by third sector organisations, so the true number is higher. Prisons are challenging places in which to work, and one of these challenges is working with imprisoned mothers separated from their young children.

There were 3,252 women in prison in England on 4th September 2020, with an average sentence length of 10 months (Ministry of Justice, 2020b). Whilst figures are kept on the number of women incarcerated, there are no official, centralised figures for the number of mothers nor are there clear figures on the number of children of female prisoners (Baldwin & Epstein, 2017). Thus in England and Wales (there is no women's prison in Wales so Welsh women are imprisoned in England; Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own jurisdictions), imprisoned mothers are separated from an estimated average of 17,000 children aged under 18 years old each year (Kincaid, Roberts & Kane, 2019) and approximately one-third of mothers in prison have a child under five years (Prison Reform Trust, 2014).

Currently there is scope for a small number of women to remain in prison with their babies until the child reaches 18 months. (individual prisons have some flexibility up to 24 months). Of the 12 women's prisons in England, six have Mother and Baby Units (MBUs), a separate wing of the prison with individual rooms for each mother-baby pair and a nursery. There are 64 places for mothers across the six MBUs (Sikand, 2015), and given annual estimates of up to 3,000 babies aged two years and under who have imprisoned mothers (Galloway, Haynes & Cuthbert, 2014), most mothers will not be able to access a place. As highlighted by Sikand (2015), under-occupancy of MBUs has been an issue as a result of a range of factors that prevent women applying. There are stringent criteria (particularly around substance use) for MBU access which

exclude a proportion of the female prison population (Dolan, Birmingham, Mullee & Gregoire, 2013). Once separated, mothers can only see their children if they are brought in by an adult at limited visiting hours, depending on the prison regime and the mother's prisoner status. Visits may not take place at all if the child is taken into care or if the MBU is far from the child's home. The latter is often the case given how few MBUs exist (see Booth, 2020, for further discussion on the impact of distances on family visits).

A mother can be separated initially at the point of custody, at the birth of her child if she is pregnant in prison (Abbott, 2014; Abbott, Scott, Thomas & Weston, 2020), or following a stay on an MBU if her sentence extends beyond the maximum 18-month MBU stay. The different trajectories to separation highlight the diversity of experiences mothers may have and the potential challenges for staff providing support. Unsurprisingly, separation and loss of children 'were the most commonly cited factors leading to the high risk of suicide and self-harm within prisons' in England and Wales (Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody, 2017, p.11). This is in addition to maternal suicide as a primary cause of death for all mothers within the first year postnatally, but in particular women at severe disadvantage (Knight et al., 2019); this includes many women in prison. Separation is another traumatic experience for women in prison who are already more likely to be severely disadvantaged (Carlen, 2013), and to have survived child sexual abuse and domestic violence (Albertson, O'Keefe, Burke et al., 2012).

When staff[1] are faced with imprisoned mothers separated from their children, they ~~will~~ are thus very likely to be working with distressed women. This may manifest itself through an exacerbation of mental health problems (Gregoire, Dolan, Birmingham, Mullee & Coulson, 2010), changes in behaviour as a result of the stress of separation (Raikes, 2009), and/or rule-breaking (Douglas, Plugge & Fitzpatrick, 2009). Prison inspectorate reports suggest that staff lack of understanding about the emotional effect of separation on mothers can result in a 'disciplinary response' (Hardwick, 2012, p.14), which can contribute to a breakdown in the crucial staff-prisoner relationships

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[1] For the purposes of this research, 'prison staff' refers to anyone working in a prison, whether they are employed directly by the prison or an external third sector agency.

(Liebling, 2011). This is a problem given that positive relationships between mothers, prison and staff can reduce the stress of separation from children (Chambers, 2009).

Thus prison work can be emotionally demanding on prison staff (Crawley, 2004), particularly when working with mothers separated from their children (Baldwin, 2015). Research around maternal imprisonment has highlighted the importance of staff support for mothers in custody (O'Malley & Devaney 2015; Baldwin 2017). However there is a paucity of work about the challenges and emotional demands on the staff providing that care. Tait (2011) and Garland (2004), provide insights into prison work related stress, burnout and attitudes towards prisoners. Research specifically exploring the effects of working with separated mothers is limited, although Abbott's (2018) work on the experiences of pregnant women in prison provides insights into staff reactions to mothers separated from their babies at birth. Staff report the emotional impact and their lack of training in relation to providing support.

In general, prison staff themselves are at a higher risk of psychological distress than the general population (Harvey, 2014; Kinman et al., 2017). In terms of protective factors, Harvey (2014) determined that staff accessing support in the prison was helpful. SimilarlyIn relation to emotional support, Kinman et al. (2017) found working relationships and role clarity were protectivehelpful for staff but managerial support was not (Kinman et al., 2016). Lack of support has been associated with prison officer stress and burnout (Finney et al., 2013; Holmes & MacInnes, 2003). Furthermore, Crewe (2008) suggests that staff working in health or education face additional role strain because of conflicts between their core professional standards, and the restrictions of the prison regime and environment (c.f. Arnold, 2016; Short et al., 2009).

It is evident that prison staff are working in difficult conditions, however the extent and usefulness of support in place for staff appears questionable. Beyond the immediate environment of the prison, the current president of the Prison Governors' Association describes an ever-changing system due to political manoeuvres; these result in overcrowded prisons, low staffing levels and high rates of staff attrition (Albutt, 2017). In this context staff-prisoner relationships (Liebling, 2011) are further put under strain.

As part of a larger research project focusing on imprisoned women separated from their infants (see Author, date; Author, date), we investigated the views of prison staff who support mothers separated from their children in prison, because there is such a

significant gap in the literature which translates into a lack of support for staff. Since there is provision for some women to stay in prison with their children aged under 18 months, our focus was on staff who had supported mothers separated from children aged under two years as this would include separations following an MBU stay. The research aimed to understand staff experiences and the challenges in their work in order to reflect on how to provide support for staff in this stressful environment.

Methods and analysis

Design

This was a qualitative exploratory study carried out from a critical realist perspective (Bhaskar, 1989; Rogers & Pilgrim, 2014). Critical realist research tends to be exploratory and is focused on explanation (Edwards, O'Mahoney & Vincent, 2014), thus it is appropriate given that the focus of this research is understanding the experience and support needs of prison staff. Whilst a critical realist perspective acknowledges multiple perspectives and accounts of reality, as Sims-Schouten and Riley (2014) explain, a critical realist perspective also acknowledges that 'people's actions will be influenced by personal and societal mechanisms that are independent of their thoughts or impressions' (p.47). This is an acceptance of the materiality of lives and this ontological emphasis means that the real impact of social structures, such as prison, on people's lives (both the imprisoned and those who work with them) is acknowledged. As such, critical realism offers scope to make practical practice suggestions (Willig, 1999), and to remain comprehensible to those coming from a more positivist standpoint (i.e. the Prison Service).

Along these critical realist lines, taking into account both the individual's perspective and the broader context, social domain theory (Layder, 1998) was used as a theoretical framework to analyse the findings. both to understand and explain the relationships between the themes. Social domain theory conceptualises social life as layered with multiple contexts that interact, bringing together psychological and sociological dimensions. Social domain theory was chosen due to its previous application in both prison research (Knight & Layder, 2016) and social work (Houston,

2015) and because during data collection and analysis the interweaving by participants of the individual emotions and the wider context was so strong.

Settings, participants and recruitment

Twenty-four prison staff from two women's prisons in England took part. The prisons served different geographical areas (North and South), and each held approximately 500 women serving both short and long sentences. They had similar numbers of women with drug and alcohol problems (30-40%) and both prisons had a range of third sector organisations (i.e. organisations that aim to have a social impact rather than being profit--focused; other terms include the voluntary sector or not-for-profits) providing services (e.g. counselling, family visits, housing support), either based inside the prison, or externally with staff visiting to provide support. In order to preserve anonymity, no further details (e.g. whether they had MBUs) can be given.

Staff were eligible to take part if they self-identified as having supported women separated from their children under two years of age. The intention was to cover the main staff groups (e.g. prison officers, healthcare, child and family-related services). Sampling was pragmatic and aimed to be as broad as possible; however it was carried out according to prison resources which limited its representativeness because it depended on staff availability when the researcher was at the prison. Following approval of the research by the relevant prison governors, a key contact was nominated to liaise with the researcher. Key contacts provided advice about relevant staff to invite to take part and either actively helped with recruitment or set up an initial meeting with another member of staff who then advised on recruitment. Snowball sampling (Noy, 2008) was used to access staff, and a range of staff from a wide variety of backgrounds and professions were offered the opportunity to take part. Participants who expressed an interest in taking part but were unavailable for interviews were provided with an opportunity to respond electronically.

Instruments

The interview schedule design was influenced by an 'appreciative inquiry' approach (Liebling, Price & Elliott, 1999), which is a strengths-based approach and is a way to build alliances with prison staff who might otherwise experience the interview as critical of their practice. The focus on strengths or best practice does not mean that challenges are avoided; it just provides a different way into difficult conversations and renders visible aspects that might remain hidden (c.f. Robinson et al., 2013).

The interview covered three topics: 1) staff members' experiences of supporting separated mothers; 2) support they had received, and would have liked to receive; 3) broader views about parenting, MBUs and support in prison for mothers. This study will focus on the first two topics, the third will be addressed in future work.

A demographics questionnaire was designed to capture key information about the participants (e.g. age, sex, nationality and ethnicity), their careers and working histories (e.g. job role, length of time in post, positions in other prisons). Questions were open-ended so that every individual response could be captured, enabling results to be presented with as much detail as possible, whilst still maintaining participant and role anonymity.

Procedure

Following initial communication with key contacts (either face to face or by email), staff members who agreed to take part met with the lead researcher and were given a participant information sheet and consent form, with the opportunity to ask any questions. The interview either took place there and then in a private room or was arranged for a more convenient time. The face-to-face interviews were audio recorded and lasted from 15 minutes to 73 minutes. If staff were unable to find a time for an interview, information was emailed to them, along with the interview questions for completion in their own time. Most staff took part in face-to-face interviews (n=22), with few (n=2) answering the questions by email.

Ethics

This study was approved by the XXXX Psychology Department Ethics Committee and the National Offender Management Service National Research Committee. All participants gave written consent to take part. At the end of the interview participants were given a debrief sheet which included details of support available.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by the lead researcher. Ritchie & Lewis (2003)'s framework approach was carried out in NVivo 11 (QSR International) to ensure systematic data organisation before thematic analysis. The strengths of thematic analysis lie in its flexibility and applicability across different paradigms, including critical realism. The analysis involved line-by-line coding and then searching for thematic patterns across the codes (Boyatzis, 1988). Themes were analysed deductively and semantically in order to report the range of perspectives among staff. The analysis was primarily theory-driven (i.e. led by the questions), but some data-driven themes were constructed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytic process was recorded at each stage to ensure transparency (Ritchie et al., 2003), and a quality framework (Spencer et al., 2003) used to ensure credibility.

Findings

See Table I for a summary of demographics. Most participants were White British women, aged over 35 years with more than five years' experience in their current roles. In addition, over a third had worked in other women's prisons. The staff had worked in nine of the 12 women's prisons in England and in eight third sector organisations.

Table I – Staff demographics

Staff interviewed held a range of job positions (prison officer/offender supervisor/probation officer (n=7), health-related (n=7), children and family-related (n=10) at both front-line and managerial levels, see Table II for details. Staff described a range of roles in supporting women before, during and after separation from their infants. Roles included practical support, such as writing birth plans and liaising with

social services, in addition to providing emotional support and counselling after separations.

Table II – Staff roles

Staff quotations are reported according to whether they were prison employed (e.g. prison officer, health-related, family services) or third sector employed (health-related, counselling, family services) in order to highlight differences between these two types of employers and, most importantly, to preserve anonymity as the findings were reported back to the prisons. All staff who took part identified themselves as supporting separated mothers in some way so the focus was on this, rather than their role, because the numbers were so small.

The types of work role related to the support that staff received in relation to separations, and these have been categorised as low and high support. See Table III.

Table III – Support received by staff according to job sector

Staff discussed the main challenges in their work, and two key themes were identified. The first theme was 'Overwhelmed', describing an individual response in the face of their own and the mothers' emotions. This was mapped to Layder's (1998) social domains of 'psychobiography' and 'situated activity' because staff were discussing their individual emotional responses in response to the mothers they worked with. Staff emotions were intensified when they shared the experience of parenthood, a specific aspect of their biography and one shared by most of the participants. The strength of their own and the mothers' emotions left some staff feeling unable to support mothers – they were worried they might make things worse or that they just did not know what to do. Furthermore, some staff felt unsupported by their managers to cope with the level of distress in mothers.

The second theme was 'Powerless'; this was due to staff feeling unable to do anything as a result of the broader context, both in the prison itself and in co-ordination between services. This theme was mapped on to two social domains – 'social setting' and 'contextual resources' – because staff described their powerlessness both in terms of

their immediate institutional context and the wider context of the criminal justice system. See Table IV. The themes will be discussed with an examination of the differences between staff receiving low and high support, as well as their relevant training suggestions.

Table IV – Key themes mapped on to social domains

Key theme 1: 'Overwhelmed'

Throughout the interviews staff discussed the emotional impact of working with separated mothers. The theme encompassed the psychological experience of supporting mothers and was related to personal history, hence the association with the domain of psychobiography. Separation was seen as something that one cannot be fully prepared for because each separation is different, as one third sector staff member described:

> *Yeah, nothing…I might cry actually, nothing can prepare you for the difficulty of working with women who've had their children removed…. There's actually nothing like it. And I know that now I've done lots of other roles. And talk about going in at the deep end is what I think now…. The level of pain, I mean… I've done bits of work with torture victims and quite a lot of work with people who've been sexually abused. Just the level of pain is so incredibly profound. It's… really like nothing else.   (Participant 14)*

This challenge and dealing with intense emotions, both their own and others', seemed to be epitomised in the final contact visits which were facilitated by some of the staff interviewed. The hardest part was 'watching somebody else break down' (Participant 7) whilst managing one's own emotions. This need to 'manage emotions' (c.f. Crawley, 2009) was repeated through the interviews, particularly when some staff acknowledged the guilt they felt at being part of the separation process. One prison-employed staff member pointed out:

You're actually involved in the process that is… detrimental to them in one way or another. It doesn't matter which, how you look at it. And, what you're trying to do is manage that on a daily basis until we get to the end of the process. (Participant 12)

One staff member described the challenge of building trusting relationships with mothers, then sitting on separation boards and sometimes deciding that separation was the best course of action. Even when mothers had understood the process and felt fairly treated, there was still a sense of personal guilt from being part of the process.

The process of separating mothers in prison from their children was related to personal biographical experiences. Staff felt they could relate if they were parents too (c.f. Baldwin, 2015), which appeared to make them more empathetic but meant the emotional impact was greater. Staff who worked with children described 'getting attached' and struggling with their own feelings of loss, particularly when children went into care. Staff described how loss tapped into their own past experiences, which if unsupported could have a negative impact. A third sector staff member reflected:

It's a hard one separation, you know, because you've got your bereavement and loss…and you know the implications of that. I think what comes up for you as an individual is it taps into your own stuff. And when you haven't got anything in place… it can make you quite ill, really. (Participant 18)

Staff who provided counselling found a loss and bereavement framework useful for making sense of their feelings and were aware that for separated mothers loss was present all the time.

Whilst guilt and loss were two specific feelings that were discussed in the interviews, even when participants did not name how they felt they did say that they had to 'manage emotions'. Staff acknowledged the range of emotions they experienced and discussed how this worked in their interactions with mothers. This seemed to involve remaining empathetic but having enough distance to not become overwhelmed. As one prison-employed staff member put forward:

So, it is hard to take that step back and because you can't be emotionally involved but actually to do this job you have to be a little bit because you

> *are, you know, I just think you need to show the women that you have got*
> *some empathy. (Participant 4)*

This description of balancing empathy and distance mirrors some staff concerns about wanting to support women but understanding their limits, both for themselves and the women. One manager pointed out the potential for abuse of power when staff believe they can rescue women. Other balancing acts included how not to be overwhelmed by colleagues' emotions and leaving their work-related emotions at work (Crawley, 2004) so home life was not affected. The sense of being overwhelmed by their own and mothers' emotions was apparent across all staff. However, it was those staff with low support (i.e. prison-employed and some third sector) who felt under-skilled for such emotional work with female prisoners.

Several participants pointed out that there was no training specifically for dealing with issues arising from separation, its effects on women and how to manage this, and that they wanted this to feel more confident. What was particularly highlighted as a skill lacking in everyone who was not a counsellor was being able to adequately provide psychological support. All staff acknowledged that this was part of their role, but many lacked the confidence and skills to be able to do it 'properly'. There was a general sense of anxiety that they might make things worse for separated women and that they needed to refer on to professionals when women were distressed. One prison-employed participant vividly described the fear:

> *We know that there is the possibility that we're…going to open a can of*
> *worms that we're not going to be able to shut. (Participant 12)*

Yet, these were all front-line staff working regularly with separated women. The extent and intensity of mothers' emotions were vividly described by staff as a major challenge in their work with separated women. The emotional impact of separation was particularly profound shortly after the separation and at the beginning of the counselling process – this is when prison staff felt most concerned about risk. Mothers were described as having 'ups and downs' of guilt, anger and shame which became an 'incredibly toxic burden' (Participant 20). Staff identified that these feelings increased mothers' aggression, self-harm, suicide attempts and drug-taking following separation. Separation was seen as having an impact on drug and alcohol recovery in the long term. A third sector staff member explained the relationship with addiction:

11

I think it [separation] hinders their recovery.... If the children have been removed permanently then some women feel like there's no reason for them to become drug free. Their motivation has gone so I think we see increased drug use or steady drug use in custody. So, there's no real end point for them. (Participant 16)

This lack of motivation for change could result in women becoming stuck in addiction and grief. Staff reflected that this made supporting mothers even more challenging. Several participants highlighted how there is a particular trauma around children going into care. The children are 'gone but they're not dead' (Participant 20) (c.f. Boss & Greenberg, 1984) The impact of loss was seen to be part of an ongoing cycle of trauma and hopelessness for women, including domestic violence and abuse, from which it becomes increasingly difficult for them to escape. Whilst staff acknowledged the consequences of women's past and present situations, in some ways this awareness led to increasing feelings of not being capable or skilled enough to provide support. However, the staff interviewed made a range of suggestions for what might help with being emotionally overwhelmed, and these ideas came from both those who felt skilled and competent and those who did not.

In terms of training related to the 'psychobiographical' domain there were two suggestions: 1) training specific to separation including the emotional impact of separation on women and how to support them; however, it would include relevant information on policies and processes in prison; 2) general awareness-raising for prison officers in particular about the emotional impact of separation and possible ensuing depression for women, as one third sector staff member explained:

There are some really brilliant prison officers who get all of this stuff. But I feel like the education piece around the impact of this [separation] in staff training, for kind of uniformed staff and others, like non-psychotherapy staff is really, really important. And that would support the women in turn. Because who's there at two in the morning? Certainly not the non-uniformed civilians. It's …the prison officers. (Participant 14)

In terms of training related to prison-staff-situated activities, i.e. interacting with mothers, staff requested knowledge and skills relevant to separation, incorporating: counselling skills, mental health awareness, domestic violence awareness, knowledge

of social work and legal structures and processes, and child development. Having this knowledge was seen as key to reducing the anxiety of working with very distressed mothers.

Key theme 2: Powerless

Part of the challenge that staff identified when supporting mothers separated from their young children was feeling powerless as a result of both the prison and the wider context. Given the clear links with both the institution and the wider environment, this theme was mapped on to the domains of social setting and contextual resources.

Key practical issues that had a direct impact on how well staff felt able to support women were around staffing levels and information collection. Staff called attention to the constant staff changes and understaffing, resulting in women not having continuity of care or feeling able to talk to officers. A prison-employed staff member recalled:

> *When I first came here the prison service, you used to have an officer on every single house…The officer knew all the women on that house… So, they got to know the women, they got to know whether they was acting a bit different - they were able to pick that up. All that's gone now… The feedback from the women is they haven't got anyone there to listen to them. Nobody's got any time. It's so busy, it's so understaffed. (Participant 18)*

This opportunity to form trusting relationships was seen as particularly important for women separated from their children. Closely allied to this is the lack of centralised and systematic information collection about which women have children. Staff from the two prisons described different approaches, however staff in both prisons discussed women who were not supported as a result of a lack of information sharing.

Staff described 'patchy' good practice (Participant 14), where women would often lack support immediately following separation, particularly if they arrived in prison separated or following giving birth in prison (c.f. Abbott, 2020). For mothers separated after time on an MBU, the follow-up care was described as thorough, but staff voiced repeated concerns about the lack of continuity of care when mothers returned to the main prison following separation. A prison-employed staff member explained:

With the shifts…you're not always there for the difficult times. As much as you can, you want to be there for them but sometimes it's out of your control about having that continuity of care. (Participant 10)

Separations at birth were seen as often more challenging than separations on MBUs because there could be less planning involved, and these relied on the involvement of social services as well as co-ordinating prison staff. One third sector organisation worker highlighted concerns about the lack of support for officers following separations and reported that they were often left to offer this support:

I guess we've also really noticed how officers can be left feeling after being in a situation where a woman is separated from her baby…. And sometimes officers have told us… how…terrible they've been left feeling. And we have actually been in a situation where we've actually stayed and debriefed with them a bit…Talked them through what's happened…because I think it's not fair in the same way for them not to have emotional support or perhaps recognition of how emotionally challenging some of those situations are. (Participant 21)

In general, it was frequently repeated that the wider prison staff had little or no understanding of the impact of separation on women.

This lack of understanding was related to a general lack of awareness of mental health and acknowledgement of separations as traumatic. This was seen as a lack both of knowledge and skills from training, and of suitable spaces and privacy for counselling, as described by one third sector participant:

It's always a problem because…I barely get through a session without somebody bursting into the room…. And they're glass partitioned so… to try and get the client to sit with her back to the door because you think if she's going to bawl her head off she doesn't want to see everyone, to see her doing that….But it is tricky and it's deeply less than ideal. (Participant 20)

The problems of lack of space for and awareness of what is needed for counselling were seen in the context of prisons being a 'completely disempowering environment' (Participant 17, third sector) (c.f. De Viggiani, 2007), and the challenge this poses

14

when trying to support women through separation. One third sector staff member detailed:

> *But the main thing… is just there is such an uneven power dynamic in our prisons…That has obviously been exacerbated for women who've had their child temporarily or permanently removed… I think it's really difficult as professionals and working with women, how do you empower, how do you disrupt power dynamics? (Participant 14)*

There seemed to be an underlying question about the extent to which staff really can provide emotional support in contexts of incarceration; a question primarily asked by staff from the third sector in this study.

The sense of powerlessness in the prison context was further intensified by the challenges of services co-ordinating their work in a prison. Social services were a target of frustration amongst many of those working with separation. Staff explained that services within the prison were often not joined up, particularly mental health and substance misuse services, and work could often be duplicated, for example, in gathering information about a woman's family network.

There were challenges emphasised in terms of co-ordination between prison and third sector organisations – both inside and outside the prison. The main difficulties included: unclear lines of responsibility in terms of management and supervision, particularly of new staff; third sector staff felt their work was limited, for example by making access to women difficult; and a general difference of priorities between officers and third sector staff when it came to providing support.

Related to this, continuity of staff, as mentioned above, is often lacking when mothers return to the main prison from an MBU, or when they are released. Staff were immensely frustrated that mothers could be separated following release because of a lack of community support. One third sector participant recalled:

> *Women being separated can happen a few months after leaving here, even though they've done fantastically, because there is no support outside… and that can be because there's no mother and baby places outside or no supported living or not that kind of thing. So…they can go out… but it can be like shared parental responsibility with the local authority because…of*

the risk. They might be going back to the same man they were with before.
Or the same family, or the same area where the, all the associates are the
same…We do feel that, that, the support ends and then there's nothing
else. (Participant 17)

Within the prison it was noticed that there were difficulties co-ordinating services, such as drug and alcohol rehabilitation for women on MBUs.

Finally, some third sector staff considered the obstacle to different services and prisons working more effectively together stemmed from different underlying ways of working. One organisation with an explicit trauma-informed approach felt that their ethos was not understood by either the prison or social services and this resulted in mothers not being treated with respect:

I: What are the…challenges of being trauma-informed and then working
with other agencies and organisations that aren't trauma-informed?

P: Yeah, it's just not understanding that somebody can be so overwhelmed
by an experience and that they can be, um, I suppose in these situations it
would normally be social services that we were talking to and they are
completely coming from a child perspective with a lot of sort of other
judgements there about the mother. (Participant 3)

The last set of challenges identified how staff feel powerless about the wider system, which incorporates both the prison context and co-ordination with services, in particular social services and the wider legal system. Staff gave examples of inconsistent practice around which mothers retained custody of their children and those who did not. One third sector participant explained:

I find some of the laws just ridiculous that, that a father can come and take
a child…and not let them have contact with the mother they've lived with. I
find that it's bizarre. And how a woman can lose her children when she's
only been put on remand…and that her crime was nothing to do with
children…So, I find that very hard to understand sometimes. (Participant 6)

Even staff who had worked with separated mothers for a long time felt they were observing repeated inconsistent practice by social services and sentencers. This inconsistency continues in prison as some mothers are entitled to 'release on

temporary licence' (ROTL), and others are not, despite staff seeing the benefit for all mothers. One prison-employed participant described that:

> *Specific groups can have specific things. So, if you're a sole carer, you'll get all these ROTLs, you'll get everything, if you're behaving and engaging. People who've lost their children don't get an extra ROTL or extra visits from family to support them through the loss of their child. And if you've got a partner you don't get them either. So, this is where unless you fit into one pot, you're not entitled. (Participant 15)*

Several staff (both third sector and prison-employed) expressed their anger at the impact of short prison sentences resulting in permanent child loss (c.f. Baldwin & Epstein, 2017; Masson, 2019). Community-based staff pointed out how mothers were often left in an impossible situation on release – housed far away from their children and then penalised for not maintaining contact. Stigma was highlighted both in the general population and in other agencies. The staff interviewed felt that women are being judged and badly treated as a result of general perceptions about the rights of women with a conviction. The perceptions of inconsistency and injustice were further aspects of the situation for separated mothers that front-line staff were unable to address. One third sector participant explained:

> *One woman that I was with…was told that she would actually meet the foster parents and they'd come and meet her, and she'd say goodbye to the baby in hospital. But… that arrangement broke down…In the end, she had to be taken back to prison and say goodbye to her baby and just leave the baby in the neonatal unit at the hospital. Not being able to hand the baby over to someone, which she'd been told would be what happened… That was really devastating to her. (Participant 21).*

This theme has provided an overview of the multiple ways in which staff, whether they received high or low levels of support, felt the prison context and wider social context constrain the provision of support for imprisoned mothers separated from their infants. Prisons do not exist in isolation and staff explained how the interrelationships with external agencies and services appeared to function in a way that prevented compassionate, continuous support for mothers. In general, the key to overcoming powerlessness was seen to be knowledge, rather than support. Whilst there were a

couple of members of staff who felt that no training could help them in their work as every separation scenario is different, many staff felt that training would enable them to manage the challenges of mother-infant separations more effectively. Staff proposed training related to wider services and suggestions included both training about and training with these services. There was a focus on joint working, particularly with social services and including all relevant in-prison services, in order to share knowledge from expert teams and clarify referral pathways. Training was viewed as a way to encourage cross-team working and thus perhaps reduce the sense of powerlessness. These suggestions were very much in line with the recommendations made in Baldwin's (2015) important collection for those working with mothers in the criminal justice system, in particular those addressing partnership working with social services and third sector agencies.

Discussion

Separation from children is one of the 'gendered pains of imprisonment' for women (Crewe et al., 2017), and this study has shown the impact on the staff who work with them (c.f. Abbott, 2018). Staff openly discussed the challenges they faced in supporting separated mothers, and these included both the emotional impact and the impact of the wider system on their capacities to support mothers in prison.

Focusing on the experience of separation has highlighted the broader problems of incarcerating women in general. Staff offered critiques of: short sentences; the use of prison for remand; challenges for women on release; and the stigma towards mothers in prison. These critiques have been addressed extensively in the wider literature for years, and of course are key to the Corston (2007) report. Through the theme of 'powerlessness', this study shows how these systemic issues directly affect staff and their sense of agency in their work.

In terms of the emotional impact, conveyed through the theme of feeling 'overwhelmed', what stood out is the extent to which staff emotions reflect those of the mothers in prison: in particular around guilt and loss (c.f. Baldwin, 2015; Baldwin, 2017; Morriss, 2018). Staff were sensitive to the specificity of the loss (whether temporary or permanent as a result of adoption) of a child through imprisonment. This is not the same as a bereavement and has been termed an 'ambiguous loss' (Boss &

Greenberg, 1984) because of the psychological presence of imprisoned mothers' children, despite their physical absence (c.f. Arditti, 2012). This causes emotional pain because of the lack of clarity about the future. It appears that empathy with the mothers' ambiguous loss causes prison staff to feel overwhelmed and guilty about being part of a harmful process.

This guilt as a result of the ambiguous loss experienced by the mothers appears to lead to 'moral distress' for staff. Epstein and Delgado (2010) describe this as when a professional knows what is ethically appropriate, but feels powerless to take action as a result of their work environment or the broader context. This resonates with the staff descriptions of powerlessness given the constraints of the prison, service co-ordination and problems with the justice system.

Staff concerns around supporting distressed women prisoners are highlighted in the literature, particularly in relation to self-harm (Walsh & Freshwater, 2009; Short et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2017), but more recently in the context of motherhood and the criminal justice system (Baldwin, 2015). This study showed that the staff who felt more confident about working with mothers when they were distressed by separation were those from third sector organisations with an explicit gender- and trauma-informed approach. This was the case even when they were directly involved in the separation process. Given the recent roll-out of trauma-informed training in the women's estate (Covington, 2018), which has built on the aims and ethos of the Corston (2007) report, this is worth noting.

However it is important to highlight the growing critiques of trauma-informed practice: the core ideas are potentially impossible in prison contexts (Kilty, 2012); being trauma-informed (i.e. knowledge or awareness) does not always translate into the relevant work skills (Tseris, 2013; Berliner & Kolko, 2016); when embedded in unsuitable environments, trauma-informed practice makes no difference (Jewkes et al., 2019); and finally, a change in work practice is not sufficient – what is needed is a paradigm shift across the entire organisation (Sweeney et al., 2016).

These critiques highlight the challenges of embedding individual or team-work practices within a challenging environment and echo the frustrations that third sector staff in particular expressed. Thus, what needs to be asked is whether the harms caused to imprisoned mothers and children (Chambers, 2009; Fawcett Commission,

2009; Author, date; Dallaire, Zeman & Thrash, 2015; Scharff Smith, 2014; Women's Breakout, 2016) and the related stress on staff as a result of separations can really be justified.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. Whilst the strength of qualitative research is in its detail and nuance, the limitation is its generalisability beyond the context in which it was carried out. The research took place in two prisons (and between them staff had worked in nine different women's prisons) however, it would have been preferable to have interviewed staff from more prisons. Whilst the main staff groups were represented at different levels of seniority, certain groups of healthcare staff (e.g. nursing) and prison officers (e.g. those without a particular interest or role associated with mothers and children) were under-represented. The lead researcher's role with two voluntary sector organisations and regular presence in one of the prisons meant some staff were perhaps more open and willing to talk to her. A researcher based in the prison or a former officer or healthcare staff might have been able to access these groups more effectively. A team of researchers (rather than a single PhD researcher) with more time and resources would be able to reach a more representative group of staff.

The findings are affected by those staff who did take part and, given that most staff interviewed were experienced and worked directly with or had an interest in supporting separated mothers, perhaps some of the more punitive views were not reflected (c.f. Kelly, 2014). Nevertheless, there does not appear to be any other research that addresses the concerns of staff supporting imprisoned mothers separated from their children. Finally, the small-scale nature of this study means that further research is needed to capture any gender differences in attitudes towards separation and to explore in more detail the variations in experience by staff group.

Conclusion

It is clear that the trauma of separation from children affects both imprisoned mothers and the staff who work with them. Focusing on the specific experience of maternal separation has emphasised the impact of the wider context of the criminal justice system on staff experiences. Whilst staff suggestions for training and support could be useful if implemented, they are unlikely to resolve the moral distress engendered

through this work. Ultimately, staff as well as imprisoned mothers would be best served if Corston's (2007) ever-relevant recommendations were implemented. If solely women with serious and violent offences were imprisoned, this would automatically reduce the number of mother-child separations. and mitigate the impact on staff.

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Table I – Staff demographics

Demographics	Number of participants (N=24)
Sex	
Female	n=23
Male	n=1
Ethnicity (participant-defined responses)	
White British	n=20
White Other	n=3
Black British	n=1
Age	
Under 35 years	n=5
Over 35 years	n=19
Experience in this prison	
Under 3 years experience	n=6 (*of whom n=4 had previously worked in another prison for between 3-12 years*)
3 to 5 years experience	n=4
5 to 10 years experience	n=7
Over 10 years experience	n=7
Have children (including biological, step, adopted, fostered etc.)	
Yes	n=16
No	n=5
Not asked (due to to time constraints)	n=3

Table

Staff category	Specific area of work	Seniority	Employer	Total (N=24)
Prison	Prison officer, offender supervisor, probation officer	Administrator, Senior officer, Manager	Prison Agency	n=7
Children & Families	Pregnancy, young children, families	Senior practitioner, Manager	Prison 3rd Sector	n=10
Health	Counselling, drugs and alcohol, holistic support	Senior practitioner, Manager	3rd Sector	n=7

Table III – Support received by staff according to job sector

Low support received	High support received
1) Prison-employed • No formal support specifically around separation, mainly colleagues • Management support varied from informal to strong support • Not everyone appeared to know what was available • Some knowledge of broader support available but not how to access.	**3) Third sector – high support** • Systematic support structures to discuss separation: team meetings, individual, group and line manager supervision • Managers consistently available • Some gaps in provision for managers • Not always enough support from the prison
2) Third sector – low support • Mainly other colleagues in their own or other organisations • Managers infrequently available • Occasional psychological support	**4) Counselling/trauma-informed** • Structured and systemic support systems • Regular individual and group supervision for front-line and management staff • Supportive colleagues and structured support e.g. peer supervision • Some organisations received additional support from the prison (e.g. psychology team) • Reported supporting staff in other organisations

Table IV – Key themes mapped on to social domains

Social domains	As applied to staff in prisons	Key theme
Psychobiography	Experience of previous losses	**Overwhelmed**
	Experience of motherhood	
Situated activity	Interactions with separated mothers	
	Interactions with managers	
Social setting	Women's prison	**Powerless**
Contextual resources	Education and professional training e.g. counselling	
	Criminal Justice system	
	Family Justice system (including Social Services)	