

Exploring Silences in Narrative Research with Mothers in Prison

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ABSTRACT

Researchers who have previously analyzed silence in interview data, have generally considered literal silences, such as the lack of the spoken word, and/or have taken a singular approach to understand silence. This paper moves beyond this literal and singular understandings of silence to explore narratives gaps, constraint and ambiguities, in the stories of mothers in prison. A feminist narrative approach, combined with the Listening Guide (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008; Mauthner et al., 1998) method of analysis is adopted to explore the stories of twenty mothers with experience of imprisonment. Silence is identified through three different types of stories; 'Unworthy' stories highlight where narration may be limited owing to a perceived sense that some stories are not worthy of narration or analytical consideration; 'Untellable' stories illustrate how contradictory gendered narratives converge to make some stories difficult to tell, or indeed untellable; 'Unbecoming' stories challenge Western storytelling formats that seek a clear resolution. Such stories speak to the ongoing challenges of finding a story to live with in the present. Utilising the Listening Guide with its multi-layered approach to narrative analysis, this article has identified the multifaceted way in which 'silence' is imposed, negotiated and utilised in competing and contrasting ways, in the stories of mothers in prison. In attending to these 'silences', this paper has enabled consideration of stories that lay outside the ideal of intensive mothering.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, listening guide, mothering, narrative, prison, silence

Narrative research is often informed by a commitment to social justice that is enacted by providing members of marginalized groups with opportunities to tell and to author their own stories. As a feminist criminologist, my own interest in, and understanding of, narrative derives from and is grounded in my interest in the lives of women in prison and the stories they (are able to) tell about those lives: specifically the stories of mothers in the context of imprisonment. Despite the existence of numerous narrative research approaches, prioritization is largely given to *what* is told and *how* it is told; yet not all social life is *tellable* (Fleetwood, 2014; Woodiwiss, 2017a). Indeed, the opportunities for self-representation in the stories of mothers in prison can be impeded owing to the highly gendered and often contradictory narratives available to them (Lockwood, 2017; Fleetwood, 2014). Consequently, some stories are harder to tell or remain untold (Lockwood, 2017, 2018, 2020; Fleetwood, 2014; Weaver et al., 2025; Woodiwiss, 2017a). Researchers too are constrained by dominant narrative structures often leading to the privileging of data that is "easily hearable, knowable and nameable" (Mazzei, 2007, p. 631).

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In researching women's lives we can contribute to a greater understanding of those lives (Woodiwiss, 2017a). However, recognising that the data we gather in the field is censored and disciplined before participants begin to tell their story, with further data being eliminated that is not easily heard (Mazzei, 2007), it is imperative that feminist narrative research equally attends to what is not said (or heard) or appears difficult to tell (or hear), to ensure the continued consideration of marginalised perspectives. Adopting the Listening Guide (LG) method of feminist narrative analysis (Mauthner et al., 1998; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003), the silence and constraint in the storytelling of twenty mothers with experience of imprisonment is the focal point of analysis in this paper. This LG expands on a relational approach to narrative inquiry and is characterised by its ability to reveal nuances and layers of storytelling, identified in four parallel listenings (Harel-Shalev & Daphna-Tekoah, 2021). Reflexive consideration is also provided in exploration of the stories that are difficult to hear. Three different stories are presented that illustrate the different ways in which silence is utilised and negotiated in the context of research with mothers in prison; the *Unworthy* story highlights where narration may be limited owing to a perceived sense that some stories are not worthy of narration or analytical consideration; *Untellable* stories illustrate how contradictory gendered narratives converge to make some stories difficult to tell, or indeed untellable; *Unbecoming* stories challenge Western storytelling formats that tend to have a clear resolution. These stories highlight the nuanced and multifaceted way in which silence is imposed, negotiated and utilised in competing and contrasting ways, in the stories of mothers in prison.

Silence and Silenced

Women's silence in research has historically been considered the result of academic androcentricity, women's lack of epistemological legitimacy, or methodological challenges (Lockwood, 2017, Corr, 2018; Graziano, 2024; Harlow, 2009; Luttrell, 2003; Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011; Van Damme, 2019); with feminist scholarship developing methodological approaches to enable women to tell and have their stories heard and their perspectives taken seriously (i.e. Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Graziano, 2024). However, this approach to understanding and exploring storytelling often relies on a romantic ideal of "self-narratives as artful self-expression" (Fleetwood, 2014, p. 53), that does not acknowledge the gendered constraints and cultural expectations placed on women's storytelling (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; Woodiwiss, 2017a). Indeed, Miller (2005, 2017) highlighted how the dominant narratives of women's "natural" and "instinctive" mothering capacities and the pervasive discourses bound within expert knowledge of contemporary Western mothering can impede women's ability to make sense of and narrate their own individual mothering experiences. Similarly, the incompatibility between narratives of womanhood and offending (Fleetwood, 2014; Rajan, 2012) limits the storytelling possibilities of women (particularly mothers) in prison. Penal power in prison is informed by a docile construction of middle-class femininity that leads to expressions of autonomy and resistance being treated as deviance (Bosworth, 1999). Consequently, the content of some stories defies articulation, with aspects of the lives of women in prison remaining absent (Lockwood, 2017, 2018, 2020; Fleetwood, 2014).

Women's silence within research has, therefore, often been equated with their disempowerment (Corr, 2018). However, Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller (2011) argue that being unwilling or unable to speak is complex and multifaceted, and not always forced upon by external powers. For example, some researchers have interpreted silences as a form of resistance, and as part of the process through which women develop their sense of self and agency. Analyzing abortion narratives of Irish women, Delay & Sundstrom (2022) found that although silence was often in response to a lack of a satisfactory language for abortion, it was equally protective and agentic, affording women a method of disengaging with dominant patriarchal culture. Equally, silence has been explored as representing the 'unspeakable' owing to repression of personal

trauma (Maclure et al., 2010; Nairn et al., 2005). However, challenging this notion Kidron (2009) identified silence as a tool used to take forward past trauma into the present, held as part of the tellers' identity, without the need to vocalise. In addition, Morison and Macloed (2013) note how silence can also represent taken-for-granted assumptions. In research exploring male involvement in reproductive decision-making, Morison and Macloed (2013, p. 6) found that owing to the assumption that "childbearing is something that just happens and is generationally perpetuated," participants often indicated they did not have a story to tell.

The stories of women can also be silenced when researchers privilege data that is more easily "hearable, knowable, and nameable" (Mazzei, 2007, p. 632). As noted by Mauthner and Doucet (2003), there are various personal, political, and theoretical assumptions that impact the decisions made in the research process. The research encounter can therefore become a site where some stories are enhanced while others are silenced, negated, or misrepresented (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; Woodiwiss, 2017a). Mauthner and Doucet (2003, p.421) note how their personal and academic biographies led them to "particular ways of 'seeing' and 'hearing' during their data analysis processes". Researching parenting practices, home life, and employment informed by a feminist approach, the researchers note how participant stories that challenged mainstream models of parenting were afforded particular significance during data analysis as they resonated with the researchers' experiences and theoretical perspectives. Mauthner and Doucet (2003, p.420) go on to reflect on how their commitment to feminist standpoint epistemology and the principles of "giving voice" to marginalised women impeded their opportunity to go "beyond the women's spoken words to understand the psychological and cultural significance of their words". Smith and Waite (2018) also illustrate how the dominant narratives of 'vulnerability' framing refugee policy in the UK can be useful to certain individuals and groups but may equally deprive women of subjectivity and agency; accompanied with a feminist agenda to improve the lives of women, such narratives can potentially make other stories, such as those of resistance and resilience more difficult to tell and to hear. As feminist narrative researchers, it is imperative to respectfully ask questions about why and how women tell the stories they do, and why and how researchers hear and respond to the stories they do. In doing so, we hope to enable the possibilities for different stories to be told and heard, ones that may better serve the women who tell them, and for those who the stories are told about (Burkhard, 2024; Woodiwiss, 2017a).

Conceptual framework

The research from which this paper draws, adopted and adapted the analytical framework of biographical disruption; replacing *chronic illness* with imprisonment as a *critical event* (Bury, 1982). Biographical disruption understands chronic illness as rupturing individuals' everyday lives and the forms of knowledge underpinning them, in turn threatening identities (Bury, 1982). Interested in the diverse and nuanced ways in which mothering identities are impacted by imprisonment, this study recognized that for some women, imprisonment may also represent biographical *reinforcement* (Carricaburu & Pierret, 1995), *continuity* (Williams, 2000) or *flow* (Faircloth et al., 2004), in that imprisonment may be constructed as reinforcing or congruent with their sense of self as a mother.

The study was underpinned by a narrative methodology to focus upon the ways in which the stories of mothers in prison are constructed/ reconstructed and presented. The study assumes that telling stories and making meaning is something we do to construct a sense of our lives for ourselves and for others. The narrative approach adopted also assumes that in telling stories, we draw on dominant narratives (Smith & Waite, 2018; Woodiwiss et al., 2017b), which not only shape the stories we tell (and hear), but also sanction and constrain, enabling certain stories to be told and heard with others impeded or erased (Donnelly, 2021; Plummer, 2001; Smith & Waite, 2018). This paper builds on Mazzei's (2003, 2004, 2007) *problematic of silence* in

qualitative research to consider silence as more than the lack of the spoken word to also explore narrative gaps, avoidance, and taken for granted assumptions (of both the participant and the researcher) (Bloch, 2018; Morison & Macloed, 2013). The Listening Guide (LG) that framed the analysis privileges the voice of the narrator, whilst encouraging consideration of where they may be “emotionally or intellectually struggling to say something” (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008, p.408) and to recognize “how [the researcher is] socially, emotionally and intellectually located” (Mauthner et al., 1998, p. 127) in relation to the participants and the stories they tell. The layered readings of the LG also facilitates a more nuanced and multi-faceted exploration of silences in the storytelling of women in prison.

Methodology

This research draws on data from an ESRC funded study exploring the meaning of motherhood for women in prison and a follow-up study funded by University of Salford, focusing specifically on the stories of women in prison with adult children. Both studies were approved by the University Ethics² Committee and HMPPS³. Access was sought and granted at two prisons, a probation trust and a voluntary sector organization supporting women released from custody. Narrative interviews were carried out with twenty women, fourteen of whom at the time of interview were serving a prison sentence and six who had been released from prison within the preceding 12 months. All participants identified as mothers of biological children and had between 1 and 6 children each. The mothers’ sentences ranged from 2 weeks to seventeen years, for a range of offences.

Interviews were based on a series of prompts which served to elicit stories of before, during and beyond imprisonment. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and three hours and with the women’s consent were recorded and transcribed. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper, which participants chose themselves. The LG (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998) feminist narrative method of analysis, was adopted to explore the women’s stories. This approach ‘holds at its core the idea of a relational ontology’ that views ‘human beings as embedded in a complex web of intimate and larger social relations’ (Mauthner et al., 1998). This ontology is translated into a methodology and method of analysis through four separate readings. Having two stages, the first reading is a reflexive reading of plot. This first stage of this reading helps to gain an understanding of the who, what, when, where, and why of the story (Mauthner et al., 2017). The second stage encourages the researcher to focus on their own responses to the story told and to consider ‘how [they] are socially, emotionally and intellectually located’ (Mauthner et al., 1998) in relation to the participants. Actively listening for ‘I’ statements across the transcripts, the second reading attends to how the woman speaks of herself. This reading traces how “participants represent themselves in interviews through attention to personal statements” (Edwards & Weller, 2012, p. 203). The third reading recognizes narrated subjects as intrinsically relational and as part of networks of relations (Mauthner & Doucet, 2008) and therefore pays specific attention to how women talked about interpersonal relationships (Mauthner & Doucet, 2008); relationships with their children, partners, family, friends and broader social networks and institutions, including the prison. The fourth reading locates women’s stories “within broader social, political, cultural, and structural contexts” (Mauthner et al., 1998, p. 132), and attends to the link between “micro-level narratives [and] macro-level processes and structures” (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008, p. 406). Through the different individual readings, the listening guide provides a way into individual stories. However, as noted by Frank (2010), the scientific nature of prescriptive and formulaic narrative analysis can often close and control stories. Therefore, through an iterative process of

² HSR1617-13 – Ethics approval reference number

³ Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service

reflexivity, transcripts were repeatedly revisited, attending to the fragmentation, silences and narrative gaps, to consider not only what is told, but what is not told and what is difficult to tell.

Findings & Discussion

The unworthy story: *'everything's fine'*

Narrative approaches are often adopted to “provide access to the perspectives and experiences of members of oppressed groups who lack the power to make their voices heard” (Booth & Booth, 1996, p. 55); however, being able to narrate depends upon the narrators’ sense of being “worthy to speak and to be heard” (Hooks, 1992, p. 176). The Unworthy story highlights where narration may be limited owing to a perceived sense that some stories are not worthy of narration or analytical consideration in the research context; and equally, where creating the perception of having *nothing to say* is used as a protective strategy.

Research adopting narrative approaches often prioritise stories which tell of biographical disruptions and cultural preferences for “restitution narratives” encourage such disruptions to be constructed as “troubles turned into triumphs” (Frank, 1995, 2010; Stanley, 1992, p. 11). When mothering is disrupted, available Western narratives of motherhood that compel women to be preoccupied and physically and emotionally absorbed with their children and their children’s needs (Hays, 1996), encourage stories underpinned by a narrative of tragedy (Lockwood, 2017); such stories tend to tell of the pain of separation and the struggle to maintain the mothering role and identity (Lockwood, 2017, 2018, 2020). This narrative structure can impose a fractured identity upon the teller (Reeve, et al., 2010), deeming articulation and understanding of alternative stories *unworthy*.

For some participants in this study, imprisonment was not constructed as a disruptive event but rather as an expected consequence of their lives, as suggested by Louise (mother of two) “*it [imprisonment] was just mi lifestyle.*” For others with a history of multiple and complex disadvantages and crises, imprisonment was not the most disruptive event of their lives. With a history of addiction, homelessness, mental ill-health and abusive relationships, Lyndsey (mother of three) suggested that prison was a safe place for her and stated, “*I never want to leave.*” Lyndsey perceived that prison had a positive impact on her relationship with her children, “*I get to see ‘em, it’s the only time they know where I am*” and therefore facilitated a more positive sense of herself as a mother. Similarly, Suzette (mother of one) spoke of problems with addiction, mental ill health, bereavement, and fractured familial relationships prior to imprisonment and suggested that prison made her feel safe, going on to say, “*I love it [prison].*” Recognising their mothering stories did not fulfil the anticipated narrative framework of the ‘tragedy of separation’, some of the women’s mothering stories were short and constrained; some explicitly stating “*I don’t know what to say*” (Emma, mother of one).

In not constructing imprisonment as a disruptive event the stories of some women often attended to the everyday occurrences of prison life, as illustrated by Lyndsey; “*I look forward to a letter me, letter that’s all me, letter, canteen, mi smokes, tea, everything.*” Similarly, reading three of the LG highlighted where Suzette spoke of navigating relationships within the prison, and of her successes in terms of prison-based employment, “*I’ve got a good job and it’s a trusted job.*” Where narrative approaches prioritise stories of disruption, underpinned by bold declarations or deep reflection, accounts that do not seemingly respond directly or substantively to the research questions can be considered *noise* (Morison & Macleod, 2013) and dismissed in the research process as unworthy of analytical exploration. During the interview, I often found myself steering the conversation back to mothering, with Suzette responding, “*Sorry, that’s what it’s all about innit?*” Through the first reading of the LG, encompassing a reflexive reading of plot, it became apparent that my feminist criminological biography and desire to challenge the structural and systemic barriers women involved in the criminal justice system

encounter, led me to approach the interviews in particular ways, affording significance to certain stories (i.e the disruption caused to mothering and maternal roles and relationships) whilst negating others. Hendry (2007) argues the research encounter should focus on being open and alert to the other. However, in responding to this non-mothering talk as ‘noise’ (Morison & Macleod, 2013), some stories (and consequently some identities) were foreclosed. It is imperative that this noise (Morison & Macleod, 2013) is given space to breathe (Frank, 1995, 2010) both in the interview setting and the analysis process. As noted by Morison & Macleod (2013) such exchanges help us as researchers to identify and consider our own assumptions about the research topic. In the context of this study, giving stories space to breathe that do not conform to gendered expectations of maternal preoccupation created space for alternative and perhaps more empowering narratives to emerge. As illustrated through the stories of Suzette and Lyndsey, more positive narrative identities are constructed through the smaller and more mundane continuities that sustain a sense of self during imprisonment (Reeve et al., 2010).

Other participants more purposively constructed their story as unworthy as a narrative device. Refuting narratives of tragedy and disruption associated with imprisonment and maternal separation, some women claimed that everything was ‘fine’. When telling of her arrest, Rita (mother of four) suggested, “*They (police) were actually okay,*” and of her children being told of her imprisonment, maintained, “*They were actually all right.*” The repeated use of the word *actually* indicates the positive outcome is not assumed and the story told does not have the culturally anticipated tragedy plot. Rita does not go on to narrate these events further. Morison & Macleod (2013) identify such narrative strategies as “veiled silences” where participants’ stories indicate an ‘inability or unwillingness to talk about a potentially sensitive’ subject (Morison & Macleod, 2013, p. 708). For mothers in prison, this strategy may at least in part be attributable to the dominance of the narrative of “turning troubles into triumphs” (Stanley, 1992, p. 11; Frank, 1995; 2010). Narrating the challenges of imprisonment can be perceived as a risky strategy for some mothers; aligning with the narrative of the autonomous and independent ‘coping’ mother can be crucial to maintaining or regaining contact with their children (Lockwood, 2017, 2018). Rita explicitly indicated this risk: “*There’s a constant threat.... you can’t get too emotional, or you can’t tell them [prison personnel] you feel depressed, you can’t tell them that you’re missing your kids too much, because there’s that constant thing [threat] that if you’re not stable.*” Storytelling of mothers in prison may therefore be impeded owing to fear of the consequences of telling. The relational ontology of the LG operationalised through the four separate readings enables the researcher to prioritize the participants stories, whilst simultaneously moving beyond a focus solely on their spoken words to iteratively and reflexively ask why and how those stories are told. Although storytelling of mothers in prison was constrained by normative expectations of narrative structures, it became apparent that a story remained to be told. Consequently, several women spoke of the disruptive impact of imprisonment for *other* women. Storytelling via an alternative protagonist responds to both the impossibility and the necessity of sharing one’s own story. This strategy served to minimise personal risk by portraying themselves as coping, whilst simultaneously communicating the pains of maternal imprisonment. Anne (mother of one) suggested, “*I’ve seen first-hand how other women in here are going through terrible times with their kids, they’re not as close [as me and my daughter].*” Penny (mother of three) also spoke of how *other* women did not have the same positive experience of prison visits as she did;

Every visit what I ever had with any of the children..., as soon as they saw me, they’d coming running up and shouting, “Mummy, Mummy,” and other girls [mothers in the prison] used to say, “God I wish my kids’d do that.”

Rita also suggested;

One of the women I met, she cried for two days..., she had four kids and they’d gone to three different foster carers because there was no one to

look after them. She'd lost her house, and she'd lost her job...she said they were all completely traumatized.

The expectation of the culturally preferred restitution narrative (Frank, 1995) that tells of resiliency, strength and determination when faced with disruption was discernible within many of the women's stories yet manifested in different ways. The stories of those that may not fit this dominant narrative template may be dismissed by the researcher in the analytical process as unworthy of further consideration. For others the sense of their story being unworthy was a narrative strategy adopted to protect themselves from the consequences of being seen to not cope; consequently, the challenges of imprisonment were narrated via an alternative protagonist.

The untellable story: “I don't want to go into that”

Whilst some stories were constructed as unworthy of narration, others remained untellable in the context of mothering and imprisonment. Women in prison are some of the most marginalized women in society, sharing characteristics that are often devalued by society (Lockwood, 2017, 2018, 2020). Yet, women in prison often subscribe to “fairly rigid traditional [gender] order[s],” attaching great significance to the “role and responsibilities of motherhood” and “womanhood” (Bosworth, 1999, p. 44). Women's compliance to these gendered norms can inform what then becomes both tellable and untellable (Goldstein & Shuman, 2012).

Although not specifically asked to speak of the offence of which they had been sentenced, many women appeared to welcome the opportunity to tell of the reasons why they had been sentenced to prison. Such stories served a vital function, to explain, excuse, lay blame or justify their imprisonment and consequent separation from their children. In turn, narrating enabled women to re-story their lives, construct a coherent narrative of a moral self and reclaim good mothering in the context of imprisonment (Lockwood, 2017, 2018, 2020). Yet, for some women, stories of the offences for which they had been sentenced appeared untellable within existing gendered narrative frameworks, with some women struggling to narrate or avoiding narration of these events.

Anne had been in prison for nearly fourteen years at the time of interview: she explained in her interview how, through her engagement in a “*therapeutic community*,”⁴ she had been able to make sense of her offence, take responsibility for it and had become accustomed to telling it;

I've done a lot of the personal development programs..., you've got to really be open..., you've got to be open and honest..., if you commit to it you've got to take full responsibility for your offence, you can't be in denial of your offence, you got to be prepared to work.

Despite declaring her ability to take responsibility for her offence and talk openly about it, in the context of the interview that was linked to motherhood, Anne requested not to discuss her offence, “*I don't really want to go into anything to do with my arrest or my offence.*” Similarly, on agreeing to participate in the research, Amy (mother of one) requested prior to her interview not to discuss her offence; and Clare (mother of one) identified the offence of which she had been sentenced, however, her narration lacked continuity or coherence as she narrated around it.

As feminist researchers, creating a space for participants to tell their story in their own way is essential, with their choice not to disclose or narrate events respected; yet understanding the significance of events for narrators and the way in which such events are storied (or not) is

⁴ Therapeutic communities provide group-based therapy within a social climate which promotes positive relationships, personal responsibility and social participation. Therapeutic Communities address a range of offender needs including interpersonal relationships, emotional regulation, self-management and psychological wellbeing (Stevens, 2015).

crucial to narrativity (Polkinghorne, 2007). Narrating can enable individuals to re-story their lives and construct a story to live with in the present; however, as noted by McKendy (2006, p. 497), “developing new understandings of past actions depends upon the person being afforded new positionings.” Therefore, whilst respecting individuals’ choice not to narrate, it is important to understand what impedes this narration.

Despite their requests, and without prompting, both Amy and Anne went on to speak ambiguously about their offences, alluding to committing violent offences; “*I didn’t know what made me commit my crime, I didn’t know what made me snap, I’m not an angry person, I’ve never been a fighter..., I didn’t understand what made me snap*” (Anne) and; “*Usually, I’m a laid back person, really laid back but if someone does come near me, that’s it, I just flip out*” (Amy). Similarly, although naming that she had been found guilty of *murder*, Clare narrated elusively around her offence, as she only told of doing something “*really, really stupid*,” hinting at her involvement “*I didn’t want what happened to happen.*”

Violence is often considered in opposition to womanhood and, particularly, to motherhood (Rajan, 2012). Violent acts committed by women challenge the narratives on which gender hierarchies are based and stories of such acts generate anxieties in the teller and the listener (Rajan, 2012). For some women, violence appeared ‘*untellable*’ in any explicit way. Whilst many scholars have explored untellable stories (Jaworska, 2018; Peyghambarzadeh et al., 2021), little attention has been paid to the way in which untellable events and situations can obscure further narration and sense making. Although not wanting to discuss their offences, some women appeared to struggle to tell their story in isolation from it. Through reading two of the LG, Anne’s evaluation of her offence and perceived sense of reform owing to her “*hard work*” appears central to the [re]construction of her sense of self, “*I could not accept the enormity of what I’d done, I couldn’t, I couldn’t live with it,*” “*I did a lot of work around my offence and victim empathy*” and “*I do feel very equipped to be able to manage now.*” Anne’s story implicitly yet repeatedly brought attention to her offence and the implications of it, whilst simultaneously narrating away from it; “*I don’t want to go into it.*” Therefore, although Anne claimed to be comfortable with telling her story, in an interview that was so explicitly linked to mothering it appeared that her offence remained untellable as she spoke only of “*that kind of offence.*”

The absence in Amy’s story was more pronounced with limited reference throughout her interview. In telling of preparing for her pre-sentence report with her probation officer, Amy alluded to a violent offence. Telling of her probation officer’s response to photographs of the outcome of her offence, Amy suggested: “*He just looked at the pictures and then..., he looked at me and then he looked at the pictures, he was shocked..., it was worse [than he had anticipated].*” Although never explicitly naming her offence, Amy continued to allude to the ongoing impact of it. Amy’s participation in the research occurred after her release from prison and she hinted at an exclusionary zone⁵ as a condition of her license, impacting her ability to see her family as much as she would like. Indicating ongoing social service intervention with her son who was born during her time in custody, Amy also implied that she continued to feel judged and protested, “*I’m a better person now.*” The challenges that Amy spoke of were intrinsically linked to the ongoing impact of her violent offence. However, in not narrating her offence, her ability to explicitly story, evaluate, make sense of, and construct a story to live with in the present was impeded.

Although Clare named her violent offence, her story remained inconsistent and incomprehensible;

After about three hours of getting really stupidly drunk..., next thing I remember is, I ended up handing myself into the police, cos I’d been

⁵ Exclusionary zone prevents an offender from entering or visiting a specific area whilst under supervision. Exclusion zones are normally used to prevent further offending or to address an identified threat to a victim or other person identified as being at risk (Ministry of Justice, 2025).

drinking, still carried on drinking that full night, all I remember is walking by a river, I'd got another four cans of lager, still drinking.

Seemingly lacking continuity and coherence, Clare's story shifted erratically. Although narration of her offence is broken and interrupted, the impact of her offence continues to be a significant part of her ongoing story;

I've done something really, really stupid..., I was writing a letter, I was actually trying to write a goodbye letter..., I remember thinking how bad I wanted to end it, I really didn't give a shit anymore, I'd lost all will.

The offence itself fails to become an explicit part of these women's stories (and consequently impedes other stories being told or made tellable). Yet, narration implicitly, but repeatedly, draws attention to it and its significance to their overall story, whilst at the same time absenting it (Fleetwood, 2014). Cultural scripts of masculinity, converge and facilitate stories of men's violent behavior (Rajan, 2012), yet, cultural scripts of femininity often inhibit women's storytelling possibilities, particularly in relation to violence, and more specifically where this converges with stories of motherhood. The imprisoned mother will potentially gain little from either narrating violence, (which in many contexts is in opposition to narratives of good mothering), or equally by excluding it (which is in opposition to anticipated narratives of reform in the context of criminal justice). With conflicting and contradictory gendered cultural scripts, these stories were fragmented and strewn with absences, ambiguities, and gendered silences. The offence for which the participants were sentenced was not the focal interest of the original research, and therefore, these narrative gaps were initially negated during analysis. However, through the iterative reflexive analysis, the implication of these omissions became apparent as women's ability to narrate beyond these events and situations appeared constrained. In turn, this also impedes women's ability to make sense of their lives, tell different stories and therefore live different lives (Woodiwiss, 2017a) and plays a crucial role in sustaining gendered inequalities (Fleetwood, 2014).

The unbecoming story: “I know I've been a bad mum”

Orientating both the teller and the listener to more positive futures, existing linear narrative frameworks responding to biographical disruption (Bury, 1982) often encourage stories that begin “with conflict and end with resolution/recovery and reflection” (Donnelly, 2021, p.3). For those in prison, such stories tend to illustrate a shift from a criminal identity in the past to a morally decent identity in the present (Brookman, 2015; Presser, 2008). In relation to mothering, such narrative structures can encourage women to tell stories of overcoming obstacles to stay or become good mothers (Lockwood, 2017, 2018, 2020). In contrast, ‘unbecoming’ stories actively reject dominant narratives that seek to define the narrator or their situations in particular ways whilst simultaneously challenging many of the cultural and social expectations of storytelling. Here, mothers do not tell of stoicism or of superseding and transcending their experience, and their stories do not typically have resolution or closure (Donnelly, 2021; Frank, 1995). The silence in Unbecoming stories is represented through ‘narrative shipwreck’ (Frank, 1995); the rejection of available dominant narratives can leave (some women) without a story to live with in the present. Women's struggle to reconcile imprisonment and mothering in any meaningful way is highlighted, with some women telling of suspending the mothering role in order to manage the distress and emotional pain for both them and their children; these stories therefore tell of the literal act of unbecoming a mother (if only temporarily). Often disjointed, without a recognisable narrative structure, these stories can also be difficult to hear, and therefore, can be expelled from the analytical process, inevitably further rendering the narrator mute (Donnelly, 2021). The four different readings of the LG with attention to the incomplete and

chaotic stories of mothers in prison, facilitate an exploration and legitimisation of chaos stories, enabling them to be written and spoken, as well as read and heard.

Unlike the stories of many women who participated in the research, the unbecoming story rejects the usual suspects (such as disrupted childhood, mental illness, substance misuse) (Presser, 2008) of contemporary narratives about the causes of crime. Although Rita tells of being diagnosed with bi-polar, she argues that her bi-polar was “*not an excuse*” and “*hates*” it when “*they [officials] say that [her offence] was because I’m bi-polar.*” Rejecting mitigation in relation to her offence of fraud, she argues, “*It was as serious as, I took money from her bank account.*” Consequently, limited mitigations are offered, and imprisonment was constructed as a direct result of their own actions, as suggested by Kelly (mother of two) “*I know I’m a criminal,*” and Clare who suggested “*I’m paying for what I did.*” In addition, Unbecoming stories also reject the rehabilitative purpose of imprisonment. In relation to contemporary understandings of rehabilitation in the context of criminal justice, restitution narratives respond to cultural expectations for positive change, orientating both the teller and the listener to a more positive future (Presser, 2008; Stevens, 2012). Consistent with contemporary understandings of rehabilitation, narratives of restitution rely on expert help to construct a positive future (Fisher & Goodley, 2007; Frank, 1995). In relation to mothers in prison, some women tell of a life and motherhood fractured prior to sentence and of the consequent attempts to repair the self and motherhood through imprisonment (Lockwood, 2017, 2018, 2020). However, challenging the assumptions underpinning these expectations, stories of the rehabilitative benefits of prison were actively rejected. Fi (mother of four) spoke of being “*forced*” into education at the prison, suggesting, “*She [the Governor] makes you do education..., I don’t wanna go into education.*” Kelly explicitly illustrated her rejection of the rehabilitative purpose of prison, “*There’s nothing good about coming to prison, it’s fucking horrible.*” Anita’s (mother of two) story illustrates how she was actively encouraged to develop a narrative of rehabilitation via the prison mechanisms of surveillance. “*They like to think that they help you, you know, and they like to watch you grow and change.*” However, in rejecting this trajectory, Anita told of being labelled as “*in denial*” by her probation worker. Owing to the expectations of those meetings, Anita spoke of “*struggl[ing] to answer*” the probation worker’s questions, suggesting, “*What am I going to say?*” and is therefore silenced by institutional narratives. As noted by Crewe (2011), the psychological discourse integral to the mechanisms of social control within the prison context force prisoners to address, if not accept, narratives that may be at odds with their self-perceptions. As with Anita’s account, those who dispute the prevailing institutional narrative of restitution may be considered in denial; consequently, some prisoners are encouraged to contrive self-narratives and construct stories that satisfy the expectations of prison professionals (Crewe, 2011). Consequently, their individual stories remain untold. For some mothers in prison, the construction of this narrative comes with an additional cost; accepting and responding to the purpose and process of rehabilitation also requires accepting the purpose and process of being separated from their children and the additional challenges faced by their children owing to their imprisonment. This is fiercely rejected by Kelly, who suggests, “*Jail, it’s not benefited me, not benefited my kids..., it’s not done nothing, it’s not benefited nothing, if anything, it’s destroyed everything.*”

The primary focus of the storied accounts of imprisonment for many of the women who participated in the research was to defend against a bad mother label. These stories were consistent with Presser’s (2008) stability narrative (essentially consistently good) or return narrative (returning to the good person they once were). However, the unbecoming story indicates that a coherent narrative of good mothering was sometimes difficult to claim in the past or the present. In contrast to Presser’s stability narrative, such stories construct a sense of self as being *essentially consistently bad*, constructed via the narration of repeated unsuccessful attempts at repairing motherhood that serve to continually castigate the narrator through negative evaluations of the self as a mother. Clare told of having “*bollocked up*” repeated

“fresh starts” owing to her continued substance misuse; and Lyndsey told of being largely absent from her children’s lives owing to “*drinking all [her] life.*” Kelly also told of repeated failed attempts to address her substance misuse and draws on her continued addiction to berate herself as a mother. “*I had crack, or I had a bit of coke, which as a Mum, yeah it is bad.*” The unbecoming story therefore evolves into a painful self-scrutiny incorporating negative self-evaluations and feelings of worthlessness, leading to an increased sense of deviant mothering in the present, as illustrated by Kelly;

*I feel useless sat in mi cell and I’m a mum, and I’m just sat on a bed
smoking a cigarette not doing nought..., it’s really, really hard on the
kids, you know really, really hard [and] its cos Mum’s come to prison.*

Similarly, Lyndsey suggests ‘*I know I’ve been a bad mum..., I hate myself*’; and Clare explains, ‘*I [feel] like the worst mother in the world*’.

Accepting responsibility for their sentence whilst equally rejecting the rehabilitative purpose of prison leads to difficulty in making sense of their situation, compounded by an incessant sense of guilt and shame, motherhood is often constructed as irreconcilable with imprisonment with women often ‘suspending’ motherhood (Lockwood, 2017) during their sentence. Clare told of not pursuing contact with her daughter, instead suggesting she agreed to ‘*leave it until she’s old enough to decide for herself*’. Similarly, Kelly told how she purposely minimised contact with her children as a means of managing her distress;

*I can have ‘em [visits] every two weeks, but..., it was killing me, it was
just too much..., it were just hurting me too much, seeing ‘em, the more
you see ‘em, it’s just hard..., they were coming all the time and it were
doing my head in.*

As I go on to describe the benefits of the open prison (to where Kelly was soon to be transferred) for maintaining maternal contact, the prevalence of dominant mothering narratives (promoting closeness of the mother-child dyad) and expectation of preferred narrative structures (telling of restitution) was palpable. However, Kelly responded “*I don’t think I’d wanna do that..., me personally, no I wouldn’t want to bring my kids to the prison..., I just wanna go home, I just wanna go home.*”

The unbecoming story actively contests the expectation to prioritise proximity of mothers to their children. Although such stories may help to diversify understandings of mothering and motherhood, they are often told from a position of relative powerlessness in which the mother has limited autonomy over their mothering.

Conclusion

Adopting a feminist narrative approach to explore the stories of mothers in prison, this article has moved beyond consideration of *what* is told and *how* it is told, prioritising the silence and constraint in women’s storytelling. This article has equally explored silence as more than the lack of the spoken word, to analyse narrative constraint, gaps, avoidance, and taken for granted assumptions (of both the participant and the researcher). It has equally moved beyond singular understandings of silence in storytelling, to explore the multifaceted way in which silence is adopted and adapted in the stories of mothers in prison. It reflexively considers what is not said (or heard) or what appears difficult to tell (or hear), to present Unworthy, Untellable and Unbecoming stories.

Utilising the Listening Guide (Mauthner & Doucet, 2008), this study privileges the voice of mothers in prison; whilst asking questions sensitively and respectfully, to consider the silences, gaps and ambiguities in their stories. Silence in the stories of mothers in prison is multifaceted and is imposed, negotiated and utilised in competing and contrasting ways, during different moments of telling. As highlighted in Unbecoming stories, silence can be an agentic means of disengaging with the mechanisms of penal power that encourage stories that do not

resonate with the mothers' self-perceptions. Similarly, as with Untellable stories, silence can be utilised to protect and retain aspects of the narrators' story that are difficult to tell. However, silence more often emerges within these stories from a position of powerlessness. As highlighted in Unworthy stories, silence can represent the least harmful option, where the perceived cost of telling of the challenges of maternal separation, is too high. Similarly, Untellable stories illustrate the impossibility of storytelling for some women; highlighting how competing and contradictory cultural scripts can converge to render elements of some women's story 'untellable'. Unbecoming stories initially present as empowering and courageous, telling stories that are incompatible with dominant narratives. However, these stories often present chaotically; they are peppered with flagellation of self and others (including prison policies and procedures), illustrating the internalisation and power of, yet inaccessibility to, these dominant narratives. In addition, women's stories are further muted when they are not warranted analytical attention. This is seen in unworthy and unbecoming stories, where the theoretical assumptions of the research can lead to the privileging of some stories, with others initially negated.

Understanding the implications of the 'silences' in the stories of mothers in prison, is imperative. Mothers in prison inhabit a context in which they are expected to strive for redemption or restitution by complying with dominant norms of motherhood with determination whilst simultaneously acknowledging their 'brokenness'. The silence in women's stories often reflects the paucity of narrative resources available to mothers who are in prison, which in turn impedes their ability to make sense of their lives, tell different stories and live different lives. The unique contribution of the Listening Guide is facilitating a multi-layered approach to 'listening' to and understanding the 'silences' in women's stories. The Guide informs how we 'listen', with the different readings revealing different elements of their stories; stories that may otherwise have been 'silenced' in a multitude of ways. This in turn enables a deeper exploration of the way in which mothers understand their lives, and the way in which they represent themselves (and others). The illumination (and further consideration) of stories that lay outside the ideal of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) is then facilitated, creating space for more empowering narratives to emerge, that may better serve the women who tell them, and for those who the stories are told about (Woodiwiss, 2017a).

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