

A LOOK AT HOW AFRICAN-AMERICAN MOTHERS ADAPT TO THE
IMPRISONMENT OF AN ADULT SON AND THE IMPACT ON
THEIR IDENTITIES AND RELATIONSHIPS

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A LOOK AT HOW AFRICAN-AMERICAN MOTHERS COPE WITH THE
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Throughout my life I have used as part of my mantra two sayings, one paraphrased from the Bible, “The Lord will not put more on my shoulders than I can bear,” and the other, from German Philosopher Nietzsche, “What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.” Raising four children for the most part as a single parent (widow, divorcee) made me realize that the foundation my parents instilled in me about the importance of spirituality was a blessing because I could not have done it alone.

So thank you to my mother, Marion Hartman Hayes, (now deceased, but I feel her presence every day) for teaching me how to balance femininity with hard work and who had the beauty of an angel and the heart of a saint; and my father, Elton Hayes, Sr., for showing me how a man sacrifices for his family and most importantly, for laying the foundation for my love of reading and walking. My *Dadee*, as we call him, was always reading something, and he thought nothing of leaving the Pontiac in the garage to go for a walk all over our small home town, Port Arthur, Texas. My parents raised my sister, Dianne Hayes Martin, and brother, Elton Hayes, Jr., and me to be a close knit family, to love the church, to value education and hard work, value kindness, to count our blessings always, and that no matter how little we had, we always had enough to share. I depend to this day on my family for their continued, unconditional love. I love them dearly.

Most importantly, I cherish and thank my four children, Stephen David Anderson; Angela Anderson Carollo, M.D.; Clinton Anderson, Jr.; and Anthony Alan Anderson. They give meaning to my life. I never heard them complain while I spent hours, years at

work and school as I tried to do all I could to improve my value so I could be the strong mother and guide that they needed. My grandchildren, Avery, Anthony, Noah, Nathalie, and Ava are the icing on the tip of my soul.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
LIST OF TABLES	x
LIST OF FIGURES	xi
ABSTRACT	xii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem.....	5
Purpose of the Study.....	8
Research Questions	8
Conceptual Framework.....	9
Assumptions.....	13
Summary	14
II. LITERATURE REVIEW	16
Plight of Adult Male Felons.....	18
Stigma and Imprisonment	23
Related Literature on Stigma	28
Mothers' Roles in Complex Parental Situations	29
Related Literature on Mothering of Children in Challenging Situations ..	34
Adult Learning	37
Summary	38
III. METHODOLOGY	40
Theoretical Framework Informing Research Design	41
Participant Selection	43
Recruitment.....	44
Data Collection.....	45

Data Analysis	48
Trustworthiness	50
Summary	52
IV. FINDINGS	53
Portraits of the Mothers	53
Emergent Themes	65
Adult Learning— <i>I Would Have Done Things Differently</i>	66
Expectations of Adult Motherhood	66
Roles Played.....	69
Support to Felon	69
Mother/grandmother	77
Learning That Took Place.....	82
Summary of Theme One	87
Adaptation— <i>I Became Stronger</i>	87
Change Happened	88
Self-perception.....	88
Participants' Perception of How	
Others Viewed Them	93
Relationships with Others	95
Stigma	99
Broadened Views of Felons and	
the Legal System.....	100
Sources of Strength	104
Lasting Impact.....	107
Needed Community Support.....	110
Summary of Theme Two.....	113
V. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS	116
Overview of the Study	116
Discussion of Key Findings	118
Roles.....	118
Identity	121
Relationships	122
Sources of Strength.....	123
Learning That Took Place	125
Conclusions	128
Recommendations	132
Practice	133
Role of the Community	133
Role of Educators.....	134
Role of Social Workers and Family Organizations.....	135
Role of the Government	136

Research	136
Researcher's Final Thoughts.....	138
APPENDIX A: DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS.....	140
APPENDIX B: SOLITATION FLYER	142
APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM.....	144
APPENDIX D: DEMOGRAPHICS	147
APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW GUIDES	149
REFERENCES.....	154

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Participants' Demographics	53
2. Themes and Subthemes: Learning Related to Son's Imprisonment.....	65

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Conceptual Map: Introduction to Literature Review	17
2. Revised Conceptual Map: Post Analysis	131

ABSTRACT

A LOOK AT HOW AFRICAN-AMERICAN MOTHERS ADAPT TO THE IMPRISONMENT OF AN ADULT SON AND THE IMPACT ON THEIR IDENTITIES AND RELATIONSHIPS

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Little is known about the effects of an adult son's imprisonment on the mother and how the mother's interpretation of roles during her son's imprisonment impacts personal, professional, and other relationships. Research on experiences of these mothers is lacking, and their voices need to be heard to help communities prepare to assist those mothers challenged by a family torn apart. The purposes of this study included: (1) adding to the knowledge base (e.g., incarceration and family life, correctional education, and adult education) by gaining a better understanding of the experiences of mothers of

sons who have been imprisoned as felons and how these women learn to adapt to the many challenges in their lives associated with this experience and (2) identifying implications for educational practices and social policies that affect the lives of families of felons. The main research question was, “What are the experiences of African-American mothers of adult sons who have been incarcerated as felons?” This phenomenological, qualitative study borrows heavily from theories of social integration and symbolic interactionism. The study engaged the participants through face-to-face interviews and conversations during individual interviews that lasted one to three hours. Purposeful selection identified African-American mothers coping with an adult son who has been imprisoned. Eight participants serving in maternal roles who resided in Texas were recruited. The average age of the participants was 60 and ranged from the mid-forties to 80 years. The small number of participants in the study allowed for specific information and insight.

Data analysis revealed two main themes. The first theme, *Adult Learning—I Would Have Done Things Differently*, focused on the experiences the mothers had and what if anything they would have done differently given their expectations and the reality of their sons’ imprisonment. The second theme, *Adaptation—I Became Stronger*, reflected the mothers’ relationships and the resources they employed to adapt to the challenges of having sons involved in the penal system. The study includes recommendations and implications for community and educator involvement.

Key words: adult learning, identity, imprisonment, mothering, relationship, roles, stigma.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Years ago I was in search of who I was, why I acted the way I did, and who was I going to be when I matured. As a young adult, I remember reading the book, *My Mother/My Self: The Daughter's Search for Identity* (Friday, 1977). I wondered secretly if I had the characteristics of my mother, if I was going to be like her when I grew up, and whether the book could provide answers to questions about some of the conflicts that my mother and I were experiencing. As I advanced through different stages of maturity, I recalled Friday's words, "my mother's life does not look like her mother's, but the emotions beneath the surface are hauntingly familiar" (p. 28). One notable difference between my mother and me emerged—my mother never had to raise a son involved in the penal system.

I am a mother of four children, three sons and one daughter. I am a grandmother of five—three grandsons and two granddaughters. Consequently, my interest remains strong in the outcome of adult males of color. Years ago after being widowed by my children's father, I recognized a sequence of problems involving my son and chose to marry a man that I thought was a disciplinarian who would help my son stay on the right track; that did not work out. I later reached out very guardedly to one of my friends by asking general questions that did not enable her to realize that I was having some serious problems with my son. Retrospectively, I viewed his problems as a direct reflection on

me. I have always been a guarded person, protective of my feelings; that is how I grew up. My parents did not allow a lot of people to visit our household. That became my norm and I grew up very concerned about letting others into my inner circle. I am the mother of an ex-felon and chose to reveal that identity in small, measured doses. It was not until decades later when my son was incarcerated in the “big house” for an 18-month stretch that I shared with my closest friend some of the details about what I was going through, but only a glimpse of the situation. It was not until I approached my 60th birthday and the subject of male incarceration was discussed in an open forum that I stood before my peers and revealed that I had a son who continues to battle the after effects of incarceration. I expressed to the audience that the overall penal and social systems need to be changed to allow ex-felons better opportunities to secure employment and housing. I felt empowered at the time, a burden seemed lifted off my shoulders; but noticeable was the fact that not one of my friends approached me afterwards to discuss the issue after my public revelation.

It is rare to find a family unaffected by the penal system, including mine. My own son began his involvement in the penal system while still a young teenager in middle school. I can remember taking him to the juvenile probation officer feeling embarrassed and wondering if anyone I knew saw us walking among the delinquents. I remember the juvenile officer asking about my other children and then questioning my son, “You came from a good family. What happened to you?” Later, when my son was sent to a juvenile facility for a year, I would make the eight-hour (one-way) drive once a month to visit him. Because he was incarcerated such a long distance from his home, I was allowed four-hour visits and would leave before day break to arrive in time for a Saturday visit

and leave after a second four-hour visit on Sunday. The long drive, which I made alone, provided lots of hours for self-reflection and developing strategies to help me cope through such a daunting experience.

As a result of having a son involved in the penal system, my views revealed my own interpretation, which offered both advantages and limitations for conducting this study. Having this experience provided me with insight into the experiences other mothers may share. Yet, at the same time, I had to guard against letting my experience get in the way of listening to and understanding the participants' stories. I acknowledge having lived through the heartbreak and frustrations of trying to help my son make more mainstream decisions in order to avoid incarceration. I have seen in my adult son's eyes the loss of self-esteem and hope as he attempted to find housing and employment upon release from prison, and have heard his frustrations as he expressed below and which are valid even today:

I am an ex-felon. I have no job, no place of my own, and few true friends to help me avoid the pitfalls. I have paid my dues to society, or so I thought. I cannot rent an apartment because the property owner does not rent to ex-felons. If it were not for my Mom, who owns the house, my family would not have a stable home. Access to jobs is severely limited because of my prison record. When hired after long stretches of unemployment, the job is only temporary and pays minimum wages, not enough to provide for myself and definitely not for my family. I no longer am considered a young ex-felon, which means I do not have access to most programs in Texas that are designed to assist ex-felons find jobs

and housing. My sentence may have been four years, but I feel that my retribution to society will never end, only upon my death.

Mothers serve sometimes-daunting roles in the life of the felon. Research indicates that felons released from prison who return to a positive, supportive social network experience a lower percentage of recidivism and higher level of successful reintegration into communities (Coley & Barton, 2006). Oftentimes, ex-felons depend on families and friends to help them while they seek employment, housing, and tend to other physical and social needs (Holzer, Raphael, & Stoll, 2004).

In a rare study of mothers of adult sons who have been involved in the penal system, Green, Ensminger, Robertson, and Juon (2006) indicate that the family members who are called on most heavily are the women, most commonly, mothers. They suggest that the parents' well being is affected by their adult children's behavior and problems. Before imprisonment, the felon depends especially on his mother to stand by him emotionally and financially as he navigates the legal challenges (Green et al., 2006). From personal experience, I know that during imprisonment, the felon depends on his mother to write to him—and most importantly, visit him—to keep him informed of the outside world and to lend moral support. Mothers are called on to deposit funds in the prisoners' account so they can purchase basic hygienic supplies and food stuff to supplement the customary prison menu. When my son was incarcerated, he indicated that by depositing as little as thirty dollars a month in his prison account, I helped him maintain a certain level of dignity and ranking among the other prisoners. Mothers are tapped by their sons and the authorities to ensure the ex-felon has a place to stay when he

transitions from prison. Mothers continue to play an important role in the life of the ex-felon as he seeks to reestablish his presence in the community in which he resides.

Statement of the Problem

Little is known about the effects of an adult son's imprisonment on the mother's life and how these mothers learn to adapt to changes in their lives and relationships with others. Researchers have studied the impact of parental imprisonment on children (Coley & Barton, 2006; O'Connor, 2002; Travis, 2005), but studies of the experiences of the mothers of imprisoned sons are lacking. The voices of those mothers needed to be heard to help communities recognize and prepare to assist those mothers challenged by a family torn apart. This is imperative because society and organizations must be prepared to listen to the plight of the mothers and offer programs and resources to assist them. The plight of the incarcerated engages mothers as emotional and financial supporters, thereby increasing the scope of their motherhood roles. Traditionally, the roles of mothers tend to decrease as the child ages; however, with prisoners and ex-felons, the mother is called on for continued support, which sometimes extends well into the released prisoners' adulthood.

Coley and Barton (2006) describe the size, nature and environment of the prison population, various programs offered in the penal system for juvenile and adult offenders including those aimed at reducing recidivism, the effects on children of offenders, and the enterprise aspect of prison education. They conclude prisoners often exit the system already with three strikes against them: (a) most are dropouts with limited promise of securing viable employment upon release; (b) imprisonment prevents the buildup of employment experience; and (c) employers are not eager to hire ex-felons (Coley &

Barton, 2006). So whom can the ex-felon turn to upon release? Most newly released felons call on family members and friends to provide immediate support with finances, jobs, and housing needs (Green et al., 2006; Holzer, Raphael, & Stoll, 2004). Over two-thirds of ex-felons expect to live with family members upon their release, including about one-third with their mothers or stepmothers, which, according to ex-felons surveyed in Maryland, would increase their chances of remaining out of prison (La Vigne, Thomson, Vischer, Travis, & Kacknowski, 2003).

Travis (2005) also discusses the impact of incarceration on families and offers that little is known about the impact of imprisonment on the family networks (children, parents, siblings, and other kin). Imprisonment means other family members must step in to take care of children, notably grandmothers that thought their own child-rearing responsibilities had ended (Travis, 2005). Travis' research found family members are reluctant to discuss a loved one's imprisonment because of the social stigma attached to incarceration, and that returning prisoners expected more financial support from their families, thus heightening the feelings of shame, low self-esteem, stress, and uncertainty. According to this study, the level of family support makes a significant difference in the returning felon's transition from prison back to the community, sometimes at a high cost of possible conflict and emotional burdens in familial relationships. In addition, Conger et al. (2002) report that strains and pressures in daily living are precipitated by hardship conditions and have an impact on the well being and family functioning. Economic pressure represents the onerous experiences that give psychological meaning to living with economic hardship and that many "stressful, frustrating, punishing, or painful events and conditions are lawfully related to increased emotional arousal or negative affect that

varies from despondency to anger in both humans and other animal species” (Conger et al., 2002, p. 181).

Findings from previous research on related topics indicate there is a positive correlation between a mother’s internalized attitude and her child’s social competence (Halgunseth, Ispa, & Csizmadia, 2005; Kochanska, Clark, & Goldman, 1997). The mother’s personality and level of constraint and internalization of rules also play important roles in her child’s development (Kochanska, Clark, & Goldman, 1997). Other researchers suggest more research needs to occur concerning the social construction of motherhood. For example, Medina and Magnuson (2009) explored how mothers handle the challenges of having an adult son incarcerated and examined the continuity of the mothers’ involvement once the son was released from prison. I wonder whether other mothers question their responsibility to an adult son, or do they, like me, continue to think that some responsibilities never end?

Coley and Barton (2006) continue the discussion about the impact of imprisonment and highlight the importance of familial support to newly released felons. Their policy report compiled data and information from a variety of sources to provide an educational perspective related to the U. S. prison population, especially relative to the plight of young Black males, particularly high school dropouts, who comprise an increasing number in the prison population. Coley and Burton found that the incarceration rate of Black males 25 to 29 years old is 13 percent; the rate for Whites is 2 percent, and for Hispanics is 4 percent. An estimated fifty percent of all Black males without a high school diploma have prison records, compared to 1 in 10 for White males (Coley & Barton, 2006). The report continues with the position that prisons are filled

with poorly educated inmates who, upon release, return to their communities needing substantial support from families and the community. As indicated earlier, prisoners exiting the system as high school dropouts with little employment experience have a harder time securing employment, thus adding to the pressures felt by their families.

Purpose of the Study

The purposes of this study included: (1) adding to the knowledge base by gaining a better understanding of the experiences of mothers of sons who have been imprisoned as felons and how these women learn to adapt to the many challenges in their lives associated with this experience, and (2) identifying implications for educational practices and social policies that affect the lives of families of felons.

Research Questions

The main research questions were:

1. What are the experiences of African-American mothers of adult sons who have been incarcerated as felons?
 - a. What are some of the roles assumed by mothers of adult sons who have been imprisoned as felons?
 - b. How have the mothers' identities and personal, professional, and community relationships been affected during and after the imprisonment of their sons?
2. What coping strategies and resources do mothers of incarcerated sons report using (a) initially following imprisonment, and (b) as time goes on?
3. How have mothers engaged in learning over time as they adapt to the challenges of having a son who has been incarcerated as a felon?

Conceptual Framework

This study was mainly framed through the lens of social integration, symbolic interactionism and stigma to consider some of the challenges that mothers experienced and the coping mechanisms utilized during the imprisonment of adult sons. Symbolic interactionism was seen as an appropriate framework for this study because it deals with agency, interaction, and meaning, and the acknowledgment that reality should be understood from the perspective of the actors who interpret their world through social interaction (Garrett, 1998; Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2003). Sandstrom et al. (2003) credits philosopher Mead in his discussion of agency, interaction, and meaning. A pragmatic social philosopher, Mead believed individuals are active and creative agents who shape their own reality and behavior; individuals are symbolic beings who interpret and express their personal experiences in observable social contexts. Mead also believed that behavior is relevant to social interaction and involves interpretation of symbols to create meaning, assess situations, and plan courses of action in a manner that allows individuals some degree of control.

Symbolic interactionism explores the significant symbols that people use to communicate when trying to make sense in their world, and how people present themselves during different stages and challenges in their lives. Those significant symbols are important because they help us exchange meaning when establishing communication, and allow us to anticipate and coordinate our actions with others through general interaction, role taking and role making (Sandstrom et al., 2003).

In addition, Sandstrom et al. (2003) indicates social integration and symbolic interactionism draw on identity and the concept that things are rarely as simple as they

appear. What is reality to one may be different to another. We act in society according to the negotiated role that we perceive we must present at any given time in any given context. Who we are depends on our perception of how society views us, how we want to be viewed, and our determination of how safe the environment is for that particular conceptualized self. Mothers are particularly cognizant of how society views their children and some wear the robe of the felonious child, stigmatized as though they themselves had committed the offense.

Stigma overlaps various theories and was infused into the study because of its importance in understanding how people act in stressful situations. Stigma was referenced by several of the mothers either directly or covertly in this study. In his 1963 book, sociologist Goffman discusses the devaluation of identity that occurs when experiencing a stigmatized condition. Individuals feel unworthy, incomplete, discredited, and inferior. They experience shame, isolation, low self-esteem, and fear of discovery. Goffman indicates those who feel stigmatized may feel others do not accept them and treat them as inferior. This results in shame arising from their perception of self and how others really see them. When in mixed settings with those who do not share their particular experience and in situations over which they have no control (they cannot fix it or change the situation), the stigmatized may experience feelings of inferiority, which may lead to insecurity, suspicion, hostility, depression, anxiousness, and other maladjusted behaviors.

Furthermore, Goffman (1963) indicates that the stigmatized may feel they must constantly be aware of the impression they are making. In social situations, they experience uneasiness and become adept at managing the situations based on the social

categories in which they perceive others have placed them, such as in the case of imprisonment. Goffman discusses how the stigmatized present themselves differently because of the stigma depending on whether they are among sympathetic individuals or in groups with others who share their experiences. In such a setting, the stigmatized may express a jovial, outgoing demeanor, whereas when in a different environment, they may recognize the symbols of prestige and disgrace and present a reserved, self-doubting demeanor. The stigmatized are always aware of social grouping and agreed upon decorum of actions and expectations, and question whether they meet or fall short of values acquired through the process of socialization.

Goffman also stresses that in America the perspectives of stigmatized groups are continuously presented publicly in one fashion or another. However, I found it difficult during the review of the literature to find more than a couple of studies or references specific to the challenges related to stigma facing the mothers who have adult sons who have been imprisoned. Goffman also discusses the role of wise persons—those who do not have the stigma, but get to know the intimate secrets of the stigmatized and those who are related through social structure to the stigmatized individual—resulting in a relationship that leads society to treat both the stigmatized and the related as one, thus obligating the related one to share some of the discredit. He goes on to say that the intensity of the stigma may be less for the related one, but the effects of stigma are felt nonetheless. The framework of stigma lends support to further research concerning the effects of imprisonment on the mothers of adult male sons who have been imprisoned. It was important to discuss the experiences of mothers of felons as seen through their eyes and how they developed strategies to neutralize stigmatizing conditions.

I relate social integration, symbolic interactionism and stigma as appropriate theoretical frameworks for this study because of personal experiences as the mother of an adult son who has been incarcerated. I have reflected many times that I hid my son's involvement in the penal system because I perceived the aura of stigma what prevailed even in casual conversations among my professional, affiliate, and personal acquaintances. I practiced the art of strict impression management (Sandstrom et al., 2003) for over a decade to avoid what I perceived as a strong possibility that my son's imprisonment would negatively affect my employment and/or promotion opportunities. My own experiences included keeping the fact of my son's involvement in the penal system secret from my professional associates and even from friends that I considered close.

Whether it was pride or something less sinister, I feared the repercussions of others knowing that I was experiencing what "proper" society deemed as a flawed existence and that my outward façade of success hid a more clouded interior. I became adept at conversing about topics that called into play society's bias against those involved in the penal system and totally depersonalized any discussions. I even backed away from personal relationships because I did not want to have to explain to anyone outside my immediate safety zone that my son was a felon. I chose to remain alone for years to avoid having to expose such a painful chapter in my life. Instead, I filled my time, gaining the reputation of an overachiever in my career so I could avoid any down time, which allowed the moments of insecurities to surface. My initial intent when I engaged in this study was to become one of the participants; however, I learned that my own transformation remains a slow process and that I could contribute to this important topic

as a narrator and not a participant, and by delivering the study best through the eyes of the other participants.

Assumptions

This study was intended to help us to understand the experiences of mothers and potentially to help governmental agencies and the communities to design appropriate support programs of interest to the families of prisoners. Assumptions made in framing the study included:

1. People generally interact with others by placing them in pre-conceived categories, which may or may not present reality (Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2003). Mothers of adult sons who have been imprisoned may feel guarded when communicating outside their usual sphere of acquaintances. The mothers may feel that others view them with pity or avoidance because of their sons' imprisonment and that their status in society is less than others who have not been touched by involvement in the penal system.
2. People act toward others based on negotiated meanings derived from social interactions (Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2003). Members of groups have been socialized to recognize acceptable ways to act in certain situations. Mothers of adult sons who have been incarcerated must filter their actions and conversations based on the perceived expectations of the group in which they function.
3. People will make adjustments in their lives based on prior knowledge and experiences in order to deal with challenging situations (Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2003). Experience sometimes is a hard teacher, and mothers of adult sons who have been incarcerated will make adjustments in their lives to accommodate

feelings of insecurity, disbelief, added responsibilities, and the perceptions of others. The mothers may find they must make changes in order to cope with the difficulties associated with having a son who has been involved in the penal system.

4. People will experience transformational learning when facing challenging situations (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow indicates that developmental change or change with age is the basis of transformational learning. Mothers of adult sons who have been imprisoned will have the opportunity to reflect on the developmental changes in their thinking processes and actions as a result of having lived through the challenges of imprisonment.

Summary

Numerous studies have been conducted about the effects of imprisonment on the inmates and their children (Burke & Vivian, 2001; Chappell, 2003; Conway, 2000; Fabelo, 2002; Vacca, 2004). Missing from the literature reviewed were studies examining the intense, in-depth human experiences of the mothers of adult sons who had been imprisoned. A rare, 30-year longitudinal study conducted by Green et al. (2006) discusses the impact of adult sons' incarceration on 615 African-American mothers' psychological distress. A quantitative study of that magnitude, while important in understanding the effects of stress and financial burdens on the mothers, does not, however, allow the mothers to voice their intense experiences through the different stages of their sons' incarceration from the mothers' perspectives. I found few qualitative studies (Hilton, 2005; Medina & Magnuson, 2009) that explored how mothers handle the challenges of having an adult son incarcerated and examined the continuity of the

mothers' involvement once the son was released from prison. Therefore, additional study employing a qualitative paradigm was needed. See Appendix A for definitions of key terms.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The stresses of motherhood coupled with being a racial/ethnic minority in the United States appear challenging enough without the additional stress of having a family member imprisoned, particularly when it is an adult son and economics are added to the mix. Mothers of sons who have been imprisoned question their parenting skills, struggle under the weight of providing financial and emotional support to their felonious sons and their other children (Byrd, 2004; Conger et al., 2002; Travis, 2005), and wonder whether to reveal their plight to friends and others in their circle of influence (Travis, 2005). The stigma of imprisonment causes mothers to question whether it is worth developing a personal relationship because they may have to share their family history once more (Braman, 2004). They feel as though they, too, are serving their sons' sentences. The following literature review illustrates the plight of the adult male felons, the mothers of adult sons who have been imprisoned, and brings into question some of the issues surrounding what may have been done differently, who may have helped, and whether mothers continue to feel stifled in their role as the mother of the adult felon. The literature also brings to the forefront the lack of availability of education for felons and the perceived benefits of adult education to the felon and the community. Unfortunately, even felons who are educated find it difficult to secure adequate employment upon release from prison and continue to depend on family and friends for support.

The conceptual map (Figure 1) illustrates the components of the literature review that were used to frame the study.

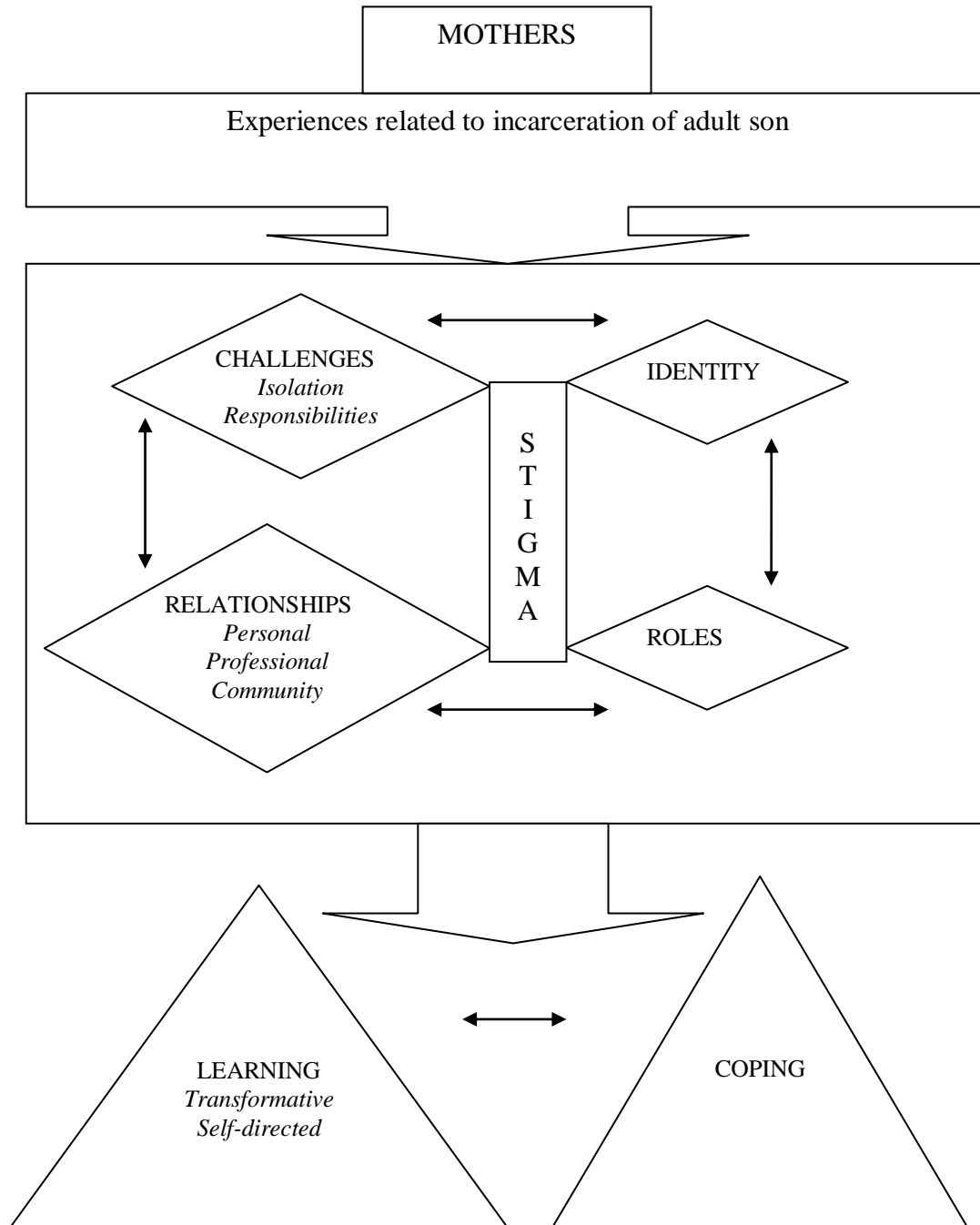


Figure 1: Conceptual Map: Introduction to Literature Review.

Plight of Adult Male Felons

Literature abounds about what happens to ex-felons (Burke & Vivian, 2001; Chappell, 2003; Conway, 2000; Fabelo, 2002; Vacca, 2004) who are released from prison and their struggle to reenter society. However, one must look at the incredible size of the prison population, the educational opportunities afforded prisoners during incarceration, and the attitudes of the community to appreciate the impact that returning felons have on the communities to which they return.

According to a report published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Prisoners in 2008* (Cooper, Sabol, & West, 2009), the U. S. prison population reached 1,610,446 at the end of 2008. Even though the report indicates a decline by 18,400 in the number of Blacks in prisons since 2000, Blacks still have an imprisonment rate of 3,161 men and 149 women per 100,000 persons in the U. S. resident Black population. The impact on the Texas community is illustrated in the report, *A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Texas* (Watson, Solomon, La Vigne, & Travis, 2004), which indicates the Texas prison population increased more than five times between 1980 and 2002 (from 28,543 to 151,003), making it the second-largest state prison population in the nation during that timeframe (Watson et al., 2004). That equates to a per capita rate of imprisonment of 693 prisoners per 100,000 residents in Texas. In 2002, 58,949 prisoners were released from TDCJ prisons and state jails representing a six-fold increase in prisoners who were released in 1980 (10,636) (Watson et al.). Most of the prisoners released in Texas (99 percent) returned to 5 Texas counties: Harris (15 percent, 7,971 prisoners), Dallas (8 percent, 4,097 prisoners), Tarrant (6 percent, 3,156 prisoners), Travis (4 percent, 2,342 prisoners); and the majority of those (23 percent) returned to the city of Houston. In

2001, the demographics of those released from Texas prisons reveal the majority (86 percent) were male with the larger proportion being non-Hispanic Blacks (44 percent) and 70 percent being less than 40 years old (Watson et al., 2004).

The discussion about the plight of the adult male felon includes the inadequacies of educational rehabilitation during imprisonment to assist the felon's reentry into society and the impact on the communities to which the felons return. Many research studies have been conducted and articles written about the positive benefits of providing prisoners and ex-felons access to effective educational programs during imprisonment and post-release. Such access includes, but is not limited to, literacy programs, vocational training, life skills training, post-secondary education, college courses and even degrees. The benefits extend to the prisoners, the community and families of the offenders. Offenders who engage in effective educational and training programs while in prison exhibit an increase in self-esteem and emotional control. The families and community benefits from the programs because the offenders are less likely to re-offend.

Coley and Barton (2006) discuss the size, nature and environment of the prison population, various programs offered in the penal system for juvenile and adult offenders including those aimed at reducing recidivism, the effects on children of offenders, and the enterprise aspect of prison education. The U. S. in the 1970s began reducing funding for rehabilitation and provide only short-term training, usually just before release, to aid prisons in the transition to the community. Coley and Barton suggest that efforts now should focus on the quality and effectiveness of prison education and training and a determination as to whether prisoners should also be students.

Conway's (2000) dissertation focuses on different education programs and the effects on the inmates' cognitive skills, employability and ability to make a successful re-entry to the community and remain crime-free. Conway analyzed data collected on prisoners who had participated in the prison's GED program while serving in Connecticut prisons during 1992-1996 and reports the positive effects these programs had on reducing recidivism. Conway's dissertation discusses inmates' cognitive skills, which has a bearing on a released felon's employability. Fabelo (2002) analyzed studies commissioned "by the Texas Criminal Justice Policy Council to evaluate the ability of the Texas prison education system to improve the educational level of inmates, enhance their employment prospects and lower their recidivism" (p. 106). The five-year study conducted by researchers Burke and Vivian (2001) indicates a 21.9% reduction in recidivism within five years after release if a college-eligible inmate completed at least one three-hour college-level course. Included in the report of the study was a poignant quotation by Former U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger, which captures the underlying failure of prison reform: "We must accept the reality that to confine the offenders behind walls without trying to change them is an expensive folly with short-term benefits—winning battles while losing the war" (p. 160).

Case and Fassenfest (2004) used focus groups to evaluate the effectiveness of post-secondary prison education in a mid-western state prison, as viewed from the ex-inmates' perspective, in reducing recidivism and increasing opportunities for employment. The focus groups revealed a division of perceptions along race and gender lines. White males perceived increased benefits from having enrolled in college courses, while Black males perceived more value from participating in vocational training. Black males felt that

institutional racism prevented access for greater opportunities, as did females who felt they had limited access to only traditionally female occupations. Black males and the female participants experienced lower self-esteem following release, which was a major barrier to employment. In addition, Vacca (2004) indicates that effective educational programs are those that help prisoners develop social and artistic skills, techniques and strategies for dealing with emotions as well as emphasizing academic and vocational training. He discusses the obstacles facing prisoners, including values and attitudes of authority figures; over-crowded prison populations; inadequate funding for staffing, supplies, and materials; prisoners' low literacy and reading proficiency; and their own attitudes towards education. Vacca quotes a 1991 study by Clark that found a significantly lower rate of recidivism among those prisoners who earned a diploma (26.4%) than those who did not (44.6%), and those who earned a college degree (26.4%) than those who did not graduate (44.6%).

Chappell's (2003), meta-analysis study on recidivism focused on the correlation of post-secondary correctional education and the recidivism rate. Legislation greatly reduced funding for correctional education and programs have had to justify their existence based on the effectiveness of such programs. Chappell's analysis of ten years worth of studies resulted in the conclusion that there is a statistically significant, positive correlation between participation in education and reduced recidivism rates.

Unfortunately, while a review of the literature substantiates the benefits of effective adult education programs for felons, it also reveals the need for citizens and the government to readjust their attitudes toward felons and reevaluate the laws that severely limit access to viable employment, housing, and other educational opportunities for those

who have served their sentences. Society's attitudes and government intervention regarding felons continue to impact families economically and structurally. Barriers set by society have been identified that make successful re-entry into society more difficult; e.g., laws intended to increase safety of the citizens, but which make it difficult for released offenders to obtain housing and employment (Fabelo, 2002). Case and Fassenfest (2004) report that while a reduction in the recidivism rate was a byproduct of inmates securing a college education or vocational training, it did not necessarily translate into increased employment or decreased social stigmatization. Needed is a holistic approach to educating adult offenders, one that combines counseling, education and social support while in prison and after release, job and life skills training, and increased opportunities for reintegration.

An ex-felon's rate of success also hinges on which strategies the community chooses in addressing the challenges and implementing programs for the benefit of those released from prison (Cecil, Drapkin, Mackenzie, & Hickman, 2000). Haulard (2001) discusses the importance of involving businesses in the effort to increase successful prisoner reintegration, the many obstacles facing the adult offender, and the continuing trend of states allocating increasing funding to build prison facilities—though without planning for educational spaces—instead of providing training and education to the inmates. While business involvement is important to help transition the felons successfully from prison to the community, the mothers' support is crucial.

Discussing the expansion of adult education during the 20th century, Stubblefield and Keane (1994) noted that, "Fundamental to a society that allowed greater political participation and economic opportunity was the improvement of educational access and

expansion of facilities for independent study” (p. 62). Never before has there been a need for greater access to education than for those in the penal system. To deny adequate access to effective post-secondary education and vocational training relegates prisoners and ex-felons to a life of continued struggle and perpetual designation as second-class citizens unworthy of taking control of their own destiny, continuing the limitations for successful reintegration into society, thus continuing the need for support from family members.

Stigma and Imprisonment

One of the different types of stigma is described by Goffman (1963) as an attribute that is deeply discrediting—a blemish of individual character perceived as weak willed as a result of imprisonment and unemployment—which may lead to discrimination, assumptions of inferiority and reduction in life chances. The resultant discrepancy between an individual’s actual and perceived identity is referred to as “spoiled identity” (p. 19), which cuts the individual off from society, discrediting him in an un-accepting society. The prisoners and their families can feel the damaging effects of stigma.

Byrd (2004) discusses one mother’s experience of having two sons imprisoned and how she dealt with stigma and fear throughout the legal process. The mother’s own support system contributed to the quality of care she was able to give to other members in her sphere of influence while she adjusted to her adult son’s imprisonment. The mother found church a viable support system, and eventually found solace in talking with others about her son’s imprisonment (Byrd, 2004).

Sigma is defined by O’Connor (2002) as “something that detracts from the character or reputation of a person; mark of disgrace or reproach” (p. 3). Researchers

Braman (2002) and Travis (2005) find that family members are reluctant to discuss their relative's imprisonment because of the stigma associated with imprisonment. Mothers of sons who have been imprisoned may experience difficulty overcoming this stigma and may develop defense mechanisms to help cope, some of which may have far-reaching consequences to their relationships, including those with their other children, and how they define themselves. Any association with prison produces shame and anger among families, increases the health-risk factors, and is consistent with stigma-based interpretation (Schnittker & Andrea, 2007).

O'Connor (2002) based his dissertation study on the theoretical underpinning of family crisis and reports that no scholarly literature had been found that examined the experiences of families of criminals from the arrest to trial. His study was designed as an "exploratory, instrumental, collective case study, using multiple cases to provide insight into what happens with the family members of accused felony offenders during the period from arrest to trial" (p. 226). Families of prisoners exhibit catastrophic stressors, which, according to Figley and McCubbin (as cited by O'Connor, 2002), are significant events that cause extensive pressure or tension in the family. Some family members expressed concerns that their families had been stigmatized by being related to the accused and felt as though they, too, were doing time.

Braman (2002) conducted a three-year ethnographic study of the effects of male's imprisonment on the family and how the families deal with the financial, social, and stigma challenges of having a family member incarcerated. According to Braman, the cycle of poverty in the families affected—mostly Black, inner-city families—is perpetuated and policy decision makers do not adequately discuss the difficulties of the affected

families. Braman indicates that family structure and values are compromised and families suffer in silence because of the stigma associated with the imprisonment—the use of shame in relation to criminals extends to their families as well. Families fear judgment by their neighbors, church members, co-workers, and other relationships. Brahman presents a discussion of the theoretical scholarship on social norms and stigma, draws on social networks or social capital, and posits that what is missing is attention to ethnographic detail viewed through real people’s relationships. He also discusses that stigma travels through relationships marking the families of prisoners. Some mothers in the study thought race was a significant factor in keeping families of prisoners from talking to one another, while some questioned whether they had failed their children by the way they raised them. Some of the parents struggled with stigma, isolation from relatives, and were victims themselves of alcoholism, depression, and spousal conflicts as a result. Coping mechanisms employed by some of the mothers placed strain on the family structure and created health issues. Braman’s central findings indicate incarceration injures the families of the incarcerated as much and sometimes more than the criminal. With over seventy-five percent of Black males projected to be incarcerated at some time in their lives in Washington, DC, Braman conjectures that the erosion on the family structure will continue to produce dramatic effects on generations to come.

Missing in past research is the attention to ethnographic detail and examination of how stigma associated with incarceration of a family member affects relationships (Braman, 2002; O’Connor, 2002). The exploratory and descriptive study by Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest (2003) does not focus directly on mothers of adult prisoners; however, the study includes a look at the implications of criminal sanction policies on the

families of felony offenders, which does include mothers. Arditti et al. (2003) used a conceptual framework acknowledging the losses associated with a parent's incarceration and discusses the link between incarceration and poverty, the financial impact on the family left behind, and the stigma associated with imprisonment. The researchers used semi-structured interviews conducted at a local jail in a mid-Atlantic state during spring of 2001 over a period of about ten weeks, which resulted in approximately fifty-six interviews. Families/caregivers targeted were those with children who visited the inmate. The findings indicate that most families' financial conditions worsened upon incarceration, and that seventy-two percent of partners began receiving governmental assistance during the family member's incarceration. Women who had biological children with the inmate sent less money to the inmate than those who did not share biological children. According to Arditti et al., family-studies literature does not include an abundance of research on the experiences of families interfacing with the criminal justice system and inferences are made from the corrections field. Those studies conducted suggest that the families of offenders are viewed as pathological, and family members suffered because of stigma associated with having an incarcerated member (Arditti et al., 2003). Unlike other contexts of loss (death, illness), families did not receive as much social support and experienced others avoiding them because of the incarcerated member, forcing families to face the difficulties of incarceration and separation alone.

Schnittker and John (2007) discuss the sources and consequences of stigma related to disability, welfare use, and the parents of deviant children. The longitudinal study began in 1979 with yearly interviews until 1994 of youths between 14 and 21 years

of age and included interviews during imprisonment and after release. The researchers focused on the effects of incarceration on health, especially after release, and approached the study through a theoretical framework that outlines the direct and indirect effects of prison sentences, with an emphasis on stigma. Their data suggest incarceration produces shame and anger among family members and among trusted friends, contributing to an especially difficult time with social integration. The stigma of incarceration is so great that ex-inmates fared better upon their return to society by moving to a different community. The researchers used a stigma-based approach and find that poverty, unemployment, and isolation are the most powerful risk factors in social epidemiology, linked to a wide assortment of physical and mental health outcomes. According to Schnittker & John (2007), “Any contact with prison increases the health risk factors, which is consistent with stigma-based interpretation” (p. 115). In some states, discrimination against felons is promulgated by the inability to vote or receive certain welfare benefits, including public housing. Even those ex-felons who are able to find employment suffer from a sense of diminished self-worth and constantly have to prove their value. Some ex-felons simply lack the tenacity or verve necessary to overcome these barriers in an unsupportive environment, another indication of the importance of having a built-in familial support system. The researchers point out that it is important to consider the long and often overbearing shadow of incarceration “as it affects those with whom the prisoners’ lives intersect and the possibility that incarceration does more to undermine social systems than bolster them” (Schnittker & John, 2007, p. 127).

Related Literature on Stigma

As previously discussed, Goffman (1963) attributes stigma to perceptions of inferiority and spoiled identity. Stigma associated with imprisonment may be viewed as similar in some ways to stigma associated with disabilities, and while in some cases the male parents are present, the mothers' involvement in the role of the child with a disability is usually continuous.

A study by Koro-Ljungberg and Bussing (2009) ties the issue of disabilities to stigma. This qualitative, longitudinal mixed method study (involving 182 students 12 through 16 years old, and 30 parents) examined how family members deal with the stress of caring for children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in the context of courtesy stigma (using Goffman's 1963 definition: "a phenomenon in which both the stigmatized person and his or her intimates are treated as one unit in social situations" (Koro-Ljungberg & Bussing, 2009, p. 1176). The researchers used grounded theory to analyze the data and concluded that families react to external, societal pressures, and to internal sense of responsibility in caring for immediate family members. They pointed out that a zero-tolerance to stigma is advocated by the Surgeon General relative to children with mental disorders, but the role of stigma from the caregivers' perspective is just beginning to be studied. The perceptions of stigma associated with disabilities are dynamic with individually held beliefs promulgated by the social majority who perpetuate their judgments and attitudes. Koro-Ljungberg and Bussing refer to several prior studies (including Hinshaw, 2007; Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000) and "asserted that stigma operates through social processes of comparison, identification, and devaluation...it acts as social markers (deviant, flawed, undesirable) across cultures and

times...and can be physical, behavioral, biographical, or the result of group membership” (Koro-Ljungberg & Bussing, 2009, p. 24).

Mothers with imprisoned sons sometimes exhibit strategies similar to those of mothers of children with disabilities. Koro-Ljungberg and Bussing (2009) believe studying how stigma manifests itself in individuals’ lives and how stigmatizing effects occur is needed in addition to defining stigma or investigating socio-demographic factors that shape individuals’ stigma perceptions. They state, “Individuals with the disability and their kin are affected by stigma, resulting in withdrawal, concealment, role acceptance, and confrontation as means of coping with the situation” (p. 1177). Families also experience fear, shame, and discrimination. Koro-Ljungberg and Bussing also indicate, “Individuals with mentally ill relatives included internalized stigma (feelings, thoughts, beliefs), interpersonal stigma (immediate family), and institutional stigma (e.g., interactions with insurance companies)” (p. 1177). Different stages of stigma are experienced over the life of the disabled member, and the authors assert that mothers often experience the primary burden of child-caring responsibilities and thus incur a greater level of perceived stigma. Mothers often engage strategies to counter the effects of stigma to help their children be perceived as normal (Koro-Ljungberg & Bussing). The researchers conclude stigma greatly affected the lives of the child and their parents and management of stigma was guided by the parents’ internal sense of responsibility to provide solutions to everyday problems (Koro-Ljungberg & Bussing).

Mothers’ Roles in Complex Parental Situations

Mothers negotiate different roles through the stages of their sons’ imprisonment, including that of support giver, and the commitment to that role plays an important part in

the life of the ex-felon and other relationships. How people view and present themselves is fluid and transitory depending on the situation and the times (Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2003). Sensory experiences, those that make you feel either positively or negatively, help contour the perception of oneself in relation to family, friends, and others at any given time. Given the limited literature available on mothers of imprisoned children (Medina & Magnuson, 2009; Green et al., 2006), I have drawn upon a dissertation study about mothers of incarcerated sons and other literature regarding the effects on relations for mothers in similar challenging situations.

Hilton (2005) poignantly discusses the tremendous toll that having an incarcerated son takes on mothers. The high rate of incarceration of African-American males means that more Black mothers than any other group are affected. Hilton's dissertation study focuses on the Black mother/Black son relationship and states, "it is usually the mother who faces the immediate repercussions of supporting this person in prison" (p. 15).

Quoted in the dissertation is a summary of the mother's role to her incarcerated son:

Mothers represent the island of relationship certainty in the ocean of insecure and changeable relationships. Mothers visit sons who are prisoners. Mothers write. Mothers remain as loyal and consistently attentive as they were prior to their son's confinement. For many mothers, the imprisonment is a continuation of earlier arrests and jailings. They have a felt and expressed commitment to offer nurturance and help to their sons (Brodsky, 1975, p. 125).

Hilton also notes the dichotomy of Black motherhood. The Black mother is revealed as the backbone of the family, but also is often viewed the cause of many of the problems associated with the alleged demise of the Black male.

Providing support for their own children, and in some cases, the children of the adult felon, is another role mothers of adult felons assume. In their 2008 article about the impact of a cognitive perspective on parenting, Azar, Reitz, and Goslin indicate that the level and quality of nurturing provided by mothers during stressful periods may have long-term effects on the mother-child relationship and their children's emotional adaptability. Azar et al. (2008) introduced cognitive science as a framework in understanding parenting risk and discuss cognitive constructs that have been linked to parenting and to child risk.

It is important to understand the experiences of mothers who have endured the pain and heartbreak of seeing a son go through events that led them to involvement in the penal system. It is important, also, to try to understand how mothers have endured the changes in family dynamics and feelings of powerlessness, low self-esteem, unworthiness, and hopelessness. Unfortunately, mothers of felons often are both single and on the lower socioeconomic levels, and the burden placed on mothers with incarcerated adult sons results in added financial distress (Green et al., 2006). Mandara, Johnston, Murray, and Varner (2008) included in their study the effects of marital status and family income on the self-esteem of 292 African American mothers. Their findings indicate that married mothers on the lower socioeconomic scale displayed the same level of self-esteem as high-income mothers; however, single mothers displayed a lower level than married mothers. They also conclude that being married can buffer the effects of being low income, and financial resources can buffer the effects of being single (Mandara et al., 2008).

According to Azar et al. (2008), mothers use prior knowledge to navigate the requirements of child-raising and present reasons for use of discipline: negotiating contextual obstacles, protecting their own sense of self-efficacy, or balancing their adult needs against the child's and their partners. They suggest parenting is not always the priority as mothers engage in their own developmental journeys. The researchers discuss the value of recognizing cognition in parenting, implications for parenting and child risk, and implications for future research. Azar et al. also suggest that a focus on cognition is important because it brings to the forefront another aspect to parenting other than instinctually driven actions. Cognitive views acknowledge the educational aspect of mothering and recognize that not all mothers are equally prepared to meet the challenges of parenthood.

A look at a culturally based schema to parenthood is also important because it highlights the need in understanding "the impact of culture, ethnicity, and gender on parenting beliefs and practices" (Azar et al., 2008, p. 296). The social-information process (SIP) theory looks at three important elements critical to understanding parenting: (1) schema, (2) executive functioning, and (3) products of these two (appraisals, attributions) and also takes into consideration "contextual factors (culture, social support, and neighborhood) and child and partner characteristics that interact with cognition to produce parenting responses" (Azar et al., 2008, p. 296). In other words, how a mother reacts to her child depends on prior knowledge, cultural factors and characteristics of the child (Azar et al., 2008).

Researchers continue to examine the correlation between parenting styles, empathy, and the level of antisocial behavior, including maternal permissiveness

(disengagement) and antisocial behavior (Schaffer, Clark, & Jeglic, 2009). Schaffer et al. conducted a quantitative study involving 244 urban university students to determine whether certain variables serve as a causal pathway for adult antisocial behavior. Their findings show a significant relationship between permissive maternal parenting, cognitive or emotional empathy, and antisocial behavior (Schaffer et al., 2009).

A quantitative, longitudinal study by Oliver, Guerin, and Coffman (2009) examines 111 children beginning at ages 1 through 17 and their parents to determine whether links exist between parents' personalities and adolescent behavior adjustments. Oliver et al.'s conceptualization of parenting styles was at the core of the study, linking parental warmth and child outcome. Mothers who exhibited neurotic behaviors were linked to overt signs of antisocial behavior in boys; and part of the findings suggests the role of maternal conscientiousness and ability to set appropriate limits in facilitating positive adolescent behavior (Oliver et al., 2009). Children whose parents establish warm and responsive relationships with them demonstrated lower levels of aggressive and delinquent behaviors and lower levels of social withdrawals (Oliver et al., 2009, p. 632).

Mothers of felons sometimes question whether their choice of parenting strategies has a bearing on the outcome of the sons. Previous related studies have examined links between parents and maladaptive behavior of children. Alink, Cicchetti, Kim, and Rogosch (2009) find that children who experience maltreatment are adversely affected and may later exhibit symptoms of depression and inappropriate aggression. Discussed in their quantitative study are the effects of maltreatment on a group of 111 maltreated and 110 non-maltreated 7-10 year-old children (60% boys) in context of emotional

regulation and the mother-child relationship quality. Alink et al. find that while research supports the theory that children who have been maltreated are at risk for maladaptation, psychopathology, and impaired development of emotion regulation, not all children who have been maltreated experience emotional and behavioral problems. Alink et al. draw on past research to demonstrate that individuals who experienced maltreatment in childhood may manifest later depression, physical and relational aggression, delinquency, and internalizing and externalizing problems in general, or impaired emotional regulation. The researchers analyze the participants' responses consistent with attachment theory, and indicate that children who develop a secure attachment to their mother rely on her as a source of comfort and protection. This secure attachment facilitates a child's ability to negotiate developmental task strategies and lessens the risk of emotional and behavioral problems. "Attachment has been shown to be an important construct in the relation between maltreatment and psychopathology; children who are at risk for developing insecure attachment relationships with their caregivers as a result of maltreatment experiences are prone to develop behavioral and emotional problems; however, an important addition to the existing literature is our finding that not all maltreated children exhibit impaired emotion regulation skills" (Alink et al., 2009, p. 832).

Related Literature on Mothering of Children in Challenging Situations

Previous research on the impact of the son's imprisonment on mothers' relationships is scant. Findings from research of the impact of children's disabilities on mothers' relations may shed light on mothers of imprisoned sons. The quantitative study by Dodd, Zabriskie, Widmer, and Eggett (2009) examines the relationship between

family leisure involvement and family functioning among families that include children with developmental disabilities. The researchers analyze the responses from 144 parents and 60 youths (predominately White males ranging in ages from 10-17) to gain a greater understanding of the challenges and stressors associated with the “nontraditional” family (Dodd et al., 2009). The researchers indicate family leisure is important in “promoting cohesive, healthy relationships between husband and wives, and between parent and children” (pp. 262-263), is important to increase functioning in the areas of communication, bonding, child development, and learning, which in turn increases trust, support, kindness, affection, interaction, and communication (p. 263). The researchers find that the “high physical and emotional demands on families of children with developmental disabilities do not only take their toll on parents, but they limit parental time for other children and have a significant emotional and social impact on such siblings as well. The economic, physical, emotional, and social demands faced by these families often result in higher constraints and stress levels and affect overall family functioning” (p. 265). However, those constraints and stressors do not necessarily transfer to greater levels of overall adjustments in the affected families, resulting in parental adaptation rather than parental dysfunction (Dodd et al., 2009).

Miltiades and Pruchno (2002) illustrate the added burden women have on caring for their children. Their study suggests that cultural differences should be considered when discussing how Blacks deal with the stress of caring for an adult child with developmental disabilities. They indicate that little attention has been given to the long-term effects on older women (aged 50 or older) that cared for adult children with mental retardation (Miltiades & Pruchno, 2002). Parents traditionally have been the caregivers

of children with intellectual disabilities, who, because of advances in medical technology live longer into adulthood. However, women statistically outlive their husbands, and because they have assumed the primary role as caregiver, women have the greater burden in caring for the adult child with developmental disabilities (Miltiades & Pruchno, 2002). The researchers conducted a quantitative study to explore how 71 Black and 71 White women handled the stress of caring for an adult child with intellectual disabilities and to analyze the effects of race, religious coping, and caregiving appraisals. The study looked at the theoretical model of care-giving appraisal developed by Lawson, Chang, and colleagues, which include measures of caregiver burden and level of satisfaction (Miltiades & Pruchno, 2002). The conceptual framework, *subjective caregiving burden*, used in predicting caregiving burden and satisfaction, is based on the model developed by Lawson and colleagues and is defined as “the perception of psychological distress, anxiety, depression, demoralization, and generalized loss of personal freedom attributed directly to caregiving” (Miltiades & Pruchno, 2002, p. 84). Measures in the study include caregiving appraisals, stressors, and resources. The study concludes that Blacks relied on religion and reported a higher level of satisfaction in caring for their child, but they also sustained a higher level of burden because of socio-economic levels and poor health (Miltiades & Pruchno, 2002). Suggestions as to why Blacks appear to cope better in the care-giving role were Blacks have more resilience because of having had to overcome greater past adversarial conditions, or that cultural traditions empowered Blacks but not Whites (Miltiades & Pruchno, 2002). Implications are that faith and faith-based organizations should be considered when determining best methods in offering services

to Blacks who care of adult children with disabilities, and cultural sensitivity should include such awareness (Miltiades & Pruchno, 2002).

Adult Learning

What and how the mothers learn from the experiences of having adult sons incarcerated are important components of the current study, so it is important to review the theories on adult learning. Mezirow (1994a) defines transformative learning as “the social process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience as a guide to action” (p. 222-223). Taylor (1997) further indicates that “transformative learning is found not to be just rationally-based, but is reliant on intuition, other ways of knowing, and empathy” (p. 7). Other ways of knowing includes learning through relationships (trust, friendship, support) (Taylor, 1997). In addition, Stevens-Long, Schapiro, & McClintock (2012), identify three key factors in their study on transformative learning in doctoral education:

A learning process that was interactive, self-reflective, self-directed, and experiential; interpersonal relationships ... characterized by community support, collegial relations with faculty, inclusion of diverse people and perspectives, and bonding with fellow students; curricular content and structure that lead to a transformation in perspective and worldview. Critical content included systems thinking, human development and consciousness, social constructionism, and critical theory (p. 191).

Stevens-Long et al. (2012), indicate the experiences noted in their study are consistent with the elements by Mezirow (1991) and Taylor (2005, 2009), particularly critical reflection in the transformative learning process.

There are multiple theories of adult learning, including andragogy. Knowles (1984) introduced several ideas about andragogy and the nature of adult learners, including that the learner is self-directed, older learners desire to take more responsibility for their own lives, and adult learners bring a wide range of experiences to the learning situation that they relate to new material. Knowles also indicates that adult learners do not learn just for the sake of learning, but rather are internally motivated to deal with a change in their lives, which precipitate learning situations.

Hinkson (2010) discusses Knowles's assumptions on andragogy in the context of her study related to continued education and community colleges. She indicates, "Adults need to know why they need to know information... Adult students must recognize the value of instructional content before engaging in learning and connect the relevance of the material to their lives" (p. 28). Adult learning occurs in different stages of life and becomes more self-directed as one matures (Merriam et al., 2007). "Adults have a deep psychological need to be viewed by others as capable of self-direction and have a self-concept of making their own decisions" (Knowles et al., 1998, p. 65). Decision-making is important to mothers who face the many challenges of having adult sons who have been incarcerated. Their circumstances may seem out of their control, but having the ability to learn in a manner that fits their particular need helps to bring some degree of dignity back into their lives.

Summary

This study includes a review of literature that discusses the plight of the felon and continues the premise that the felon's incarceration has a detrimental effect on his family. Family members feel the stigma of imprisonment, which may have an effect on their

relationships with other family members, friends, and associates. The role of mothers in challenging situations is examined to help understand the challenges facing mothers of adult sons who had been incarcerated.

This literature review acknowledges previous studies that discussed the challenges facing mothers in complex situations, which are similar to the challenges facing mothers of adult sons who have been incarcerated. Challenges include isolation, a sense of responsibility, and the effects on personal, professional, and community relationships. Mothers also experience identity and role conflicts, all of which are complicated by the shadow of stigma that permeates the lives of the mothers. Of particular interest in this study is how mothers of adult sons who had been incarcerated underwent a transformative sense of learning as a result of their experiences in coping with the fallout of having a felonious son.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the theoretical framework used in guiding the study, the research design, methods of recruitment and selection, data collection and analysis strategies, and trustworthiness. The purposes of this study included: (1) adding to the knowledge base by gaining a better understanding of the experiences of mothers of sons who have been imprisoned as felons and how these women learn to adapt to the many challenges in their lives associated with this experience, and (2) identifying implications for educational practices and social policies that affect the lives of families of felons. Accordingly, the research questions guiding the study were:

1. What are the experiences of African-American mothers of adult sons who have been incarcerated as felons?
 - a. What are some of the roles assumed by mothers of adult sons who have been imprisoned as felons?
 - b. How have the mothers' identities and personal, professional, and community relationships been affected during and after the imprisonment of their sons?
2. What coping strategies and resources do mothers of incarcerated sons report using (a) initially following imprisonment, and (b) as time goes on?

3. How have mothers engaged in learning over time as they adapt to the challenges of having a son who has been incarcerated as a felon?

The study helped me delve into the lives of those women who have dealt with the issues related to having an adult son imprisoned and discusses the effects on the mother's relationships with family members and interactions with others.

Theoretical Framework Informing Research Design

The phenomenological approach involved in this qualitative study was a powerful tool because the focus was human experience and behavior. Husserl (1954), credited with developing the phenomenology method, indicates the need for a transformation of attitude that allows us to recollect our own experiences while attempting to make meaning of the experiences of others as told through their first-person point of view.

This second epoche' and the analyses that follow from it allow us to recollect our own experiences and to empathically enter and reflect on the lived world of other persons in order to apprehend the meanings of the world as they are given to the first-person point of view. The psychologist can investigate his or her own original sphere of experience and also has an intersubjective horizon of experience that allows access to the experiences of others (Husserl, 1939/1954, p. 254) (p. 168).

Husserl's approach is relevant to this study because it focuses on mothers of adult sons who have been incarcerated. The mothers' stories, as told through their own lens, are reflections of their experiences and the changes that occurred throughout their journeys. Other researchers express more recent viewpoints of the phenomenological approach. Patton (2002) indicates that the inductive design allows for the emergence of patterns

from the data without “presupposing in advance what the important dimensions will be” (p. 56). He stresses the main focus of a phenomenological approach is to “explore how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning” (p. 104), which requires methodology that thoroughly captures and describes peoples’ lived experiences as they “perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (p. 104). What that meant to this study is it allowed me to listen to the mothers as they talked about their experiences of having an adult son incarcerated as a felon. The patterns and themes that developed out of the data helped explain how those experiences impacted the lives of the mothers. While cautious of bringing “emotional and intellectual baggage” (Behar, 1996, p. 8) to the study, I drew on my own experiences to relate to the mothers; however, the stories as heard from the other mothers of sons who have been imprisoned guided the conclusions developed in this study.

The phenomenological approach afforded me the opportunity to explore through prolonged interviews the meaning that the participants gave to their lived experiences, their way of understanding and constructing their experiences, and how they had gained a sense of empowerment from those experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Clandinin and Connelly (1989) indicate that by telling one’s personal experiences in a narrative, story format, one reveals personal and social growth, which is one of the principal tenets of education. What that means to this study is that I expected to be able to discern levels of personal growth experienced by the participants and document their journeys during and after the incarcerations of their sons. In addition, Clandinin and Connelly discuss reflection and deliberation as a method of using past experiences to prepare for the

future. Focusing on the phenomenon of having an adult son incarcerated and drawing on the experiences of other mothers adds to the existing knowledge on useful strategies when coping with relationships in the context of adversity.

Participant Selection

Wertz (2005) indicates participants are selected for a phenomenological study based on whose “lives involve a revelatory relationship with the subject matter under investigation...The basis of this decision is the judgment of whose experience most fully and authentically manifests or makes accessible what the researcher is interested in” (p. 171). I utilized the strategy of purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 2003) and focused only on African-American mothers who had the unique experiences of coping with adult sons who had been imprisoned. I interviewed eight women who served in maternal roles (mothers, foster mothers, sisters) of adult sons who reside in Texas and who met my expectation that they would engage in lengthy discussions about their lived experiences (Husserl, 1954; Morse, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

The eight participants were selected because they met the essential criteria of the study. They were African-American (one identified herself as Creole) women living in Texas who had a family relationship to an adult African-American male who had been incarcerated for at least one year in a local, state, or federal correctional institution. Five of the participants were the biological mothers, one was the foster mother, and two were sisters of the felon/ex-felon. Two of the participants had two sons incarcerated at once, one participant had a son and grandson incarcerated at once, and two of the participants themselves had been jailed for brief periods. One of the participants’ brothers, her son and grandson were imprisoned. Four of the participants were married, two were widows,

and two were single. Four of the participants lived in a large metropolitan community (approximately a million people) in central Texas and four lived in a small southeast Texas community (less than 60,000 people). Ages of the participants varied from mid 40s to 80 years old. The participants were assigned pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes.

I was aware of the possibility that some mothers might have been hesitant to discuss in detail their experiences of having a son involved in the penal system. According to the *National Blueprint for Reentry* report, the cultural stigma associated with having a criminal record affects many from the “economically distressed communities of color” (H.I.R.E., 2008, p. 7); therefore, I interviewed African-American women. I originally considered also including myself as a participant in the study, but reconsidered the emotional work this would require and decided instead to remain in the role of an empathic researcher who might bring particular insight due to my own experience. An overview of the participants is illustrated in Table 1.

Recruitment

Patton (2003) defines snowball sampling as “getting new contacts from each person interviewed” (p. 194). Snowball sampling was an appropriate means of recruitment in this study because mothers of adult sons who have been incarcerated may be more likely to have disclosed to others in the same situation. Therefore, I initially approached one of my associates to participate in the study. Once I identified at least one mother who fit the study criteria, I asked that initial participant to refer me to other mothers who were willing to participate in the study.

I made the initial contact in the majority of the cases by a telephone call during which I identified myself and the purpose of the study, followed by an email and/or letter to ensure the participants had a chance to review the consent and demographics forms. The demographics form took from five to ten minutes to complete depending on the recall knowledge of the participants. The solicitation flyer (see Appendix B) was also provided by email or in person to each participant to share with others who might have been interested in the study. Follow up calls or emails were used to establish and confirm the logistics of the interviews (time, date, location).

Data Collection

The in-depth interviews were important components in collecting data to learn the interest and focus directly from the persons being interviewed. The face-to-face interviews for this study took place at a site and time that was convenient to the participants and me. I used the three-interview series guide described by Seidman (2006) to focus on the participants' life histories, details of the experiences, and reflections on the meaning. This method of interviewing was important to the study because it ensured that I allotted adequate time to listen to the experiences as told by the participants. Initial interviews lasted from one to three and a half hours, with follow up sessions scheduled for subsequent questions and clarifications. Each participant initially agreed to follow up sessions; however, one of the eight participants was unavailable for follow up interviews. One of the eight participants required three separate face-to-face interviews; one required two separate face-to-face interviews; and for the remaining five, each of their interviews were completed in one face-to-face meeting.

Initial data were collected in April-May 2011. The original projected timeline showed a three-month data collection period, however, unforeseen circumstances caused me to postpone completion of that phase of the study for almost a year. Three of the first four participants agreed to participate in the study when contacted again early April 2012; however, while providing usable responses to the questions during the first interview, the first participant was unavailable for further interviews. The four new participants began their series of interviews in April 2012. All interviews, ranging from one- to three-hour sessions, were completed by the end of April 2012. Interviews took place in the privacy of the participants' homes, their friend's home, or their place of employment. One of the interviews took place at a public library hidden in the nook of the children's section.

All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and then transcribed by me to provide a verbatim recollection of the participants' responses. As indicated by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008, p. 99), "there is no substitute for fully immersing yourself in your data." Listening to the participants' responses during the original interviews, transcribing their responses, then reading the transcriptions repeatedly helped me to become fully immersed using the participant's voices and words during the analytical process. The participant's responses were transcribed in Microsoft® Word documents. I also entered individual questions in a Microsoft® Excel spreadsheet and keyed each participant's response to those questions in the spreadsheet in order to focus on the collective responses to a particular question. I made numerous notes in the margins of each document for later use in coding, developing categories, patterns, and themes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

I served as the primary data collector, transcriber, and analyst to delve into the lives of the participants using an inductive process that facilitated meaning making and understanding of the participants' world through their own experiences and voices. Each participant was asked to complete a consent form (see Appendix C) and a preliminary questionnaire to gather demographic information (see Appendix D) that they either brought to or received during the first interview session. I established rapport with the participants and set the tone of the interviews by reiterating the purpose of the study, clarifying any questions or concerns before the interviews began, and reassuring participants that the confidentiality of their responses would be maintained.

Patton (2002) recommends researchers use an interview guide when gathering data to ensure the same basic line of inquiry for each participant; this procedure is often referred to as a semi-structured interview. The order and wording may be varied, and additional follow-up questions added as appropriate. Study participants provided verbal responses to the open-ended questions (see Appendix E). The questions focused on participants' actual experiences and perceptions related to roles and changes in relationships, in the hope of understanding the experiences as expressed through their own perspective without any predetermination of categories (Patton, 2002). I began the interview sessions for each participant with the same open-ended questions; however, as Corbin and Strauss (2008) indicate, sometime participants will agree to be interviewed, only to have little to say once the interview process begins. Accordingly, follow up questioning depended on the responses indicated, and I also had questions available that helped the participant relax and feel more comfortable in sharing experiences. Participants also were encouraged to offer unsolicited input.

I made notes throughout the interview process as recommended by Patton (2002) and Rossman and Rallis (2003). Patton indicates, “field notes are the most important determinant of later bringing off a qualitative analysis” (p. 303) and should include everything observed that the researcher believes is important to the study. Rossman and Rallis describe field notes as “the written record of your perceptions in the field” (p. 195)—everything you see and hear that can be turned into data, including the physical setting, activities and interactions among people in the study environment and the researcher’s reactions to them. In this study, my notes included references to the participants’ reactions (i.e., gestures, body language) as they responded during the interviews. It was important to listen to, observe, and to make note of comments that were made after the tape recorder was off because sometimes participants felt more comfortable disclosing bits of information when they felt they were not being taped (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I reviewed my notes after each interview to help me write “thick descriptions (details, emotions, and textures of social relationships)” (Rossman & Rallis, p. 197) about each participant leading to the development of themes and eventually, study findings.

Data Analysis

Rossman and Rallis (2003) believe that analysis begins with the research questions and that one of the characteristics of qualitative research is reflection, which the researcher should engage in throughout the study to understand how they can affect the outcome of the study. Personal assumptions, prior knowledge and experiences play a part in the researcher’s interpretation of the data during the analytical process, and it is

sometimes useful to draw upon our own experiences to gain insight into the lives of our participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Once transcriptions were completed, I reviewed the transcripts several times to gain a close familiarity with the data as I engaged in the process of coding and analyzing the data. I drew on the recommendation provided by Moustakas (1990), in which he indicated that by setting the data aside, then returning to it at a later date, the researcher could experience “an awakening of fresh energy and perspective” (p. 51). The next step was to see what overall categories would emerge from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I searched for short phrases that provided the essence of the reply and continually reviewed the Excel spreadsheet to condense the replies from each participant. This required my reading through the condensed replies and grouping them into categories based on their similarities and to determine how they related. The process of selecting themes was the next step, and I drew on my original concept map, an important component in phenomenology, to brainstorm and help identify important concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Rossman and Rallis also indicate that a phenomenological analysis requires the researcher to approach the data with an open mind and to allow meaning and structures to emerge through the development of themes, after which the researcher writes a “narrative description of the phenomenon of interest” (p. 296). It is important to note that my original concept map included segments that were later discarded or revised when the data suggested otherwise. The conceptual map discussed in Chapter II included the topic of human social capital; however, the findings related more to community cultural wealth.

Another strategy described by Rossman and Rallis is meaning categorization, which I incorporated by coding lengthy interview passages into emerging categories. I used this coding strategy to identify major themes, aggregate them into a spreadsheet by clustering common reoccurring topical codes together, and then wrote my narrative description. Corbin and Strauss (2008) indicate that sometimes “emotions and feelings cue the analysts as to the meaning of events to persons” (p. 83). Therefore, it was important throughout the analytical process to ensure that I used data obtained from all sources—questionnaires, tape recordings, transcriptions, notes made during and after recordings, including how the participants expressed emotions as they answered or avoided answering some of the questions.

Trustworthiness

Rossman and Rallis (2003) suggest two measures of trustworthiness regarding a research study, the first having to do with credibility and the second, ethical conduct: “Does the study conform to standards for acceptable and competent practice, and does it meet standards for ethical conduct with sensitivity to the politics of the topic and setting” (p. 63)? For the purpose of this study, that means that I had to ensure that the techniques utilized in conducting the study were supported by prior research and that the study was initiated after approval was granted.

In addition, Lincoln and Guba (1985) present five major techniques for establishing credibility, four of which were useful to this study: (1) activities increasing the probability that credible findings will be produced, (2) peer debriefing, (3) referential adequacy, and (4) member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Several of these techniques were appropriate to this phenomenological study. The first of Lincoln and Guba’s (1985)

techniques for increasing the probability of credible findings involves learning the culture of the phenomenon under study. For the purposes of this study, I had personal knowledge of the culture because I have lived through the challenges of my son's incarceration; and the participants I recruited came from the same culture involving the experiences of African-American mothers.

I asked questions to the participants in a manner that prompted verbal and reflective expression of their experiences. This involved a series of one-on-one, in-depth interviews of each of the participants conducted in a manner that helped to make them feel comfortable in sharing their experiences with me. Member checking was accomplished by having the participants read the transcriptions and by sharing my findings based on their responses to confirm that the data were adequate representations of their perspectives.

Peer debriefing was another method for establishing credibility. I engaged my dissertation chair in conducting an independent review of portions of my data analysis. This helped me discover missing perspectives that may have had a bearing on the study, and also ensured that my findings were supported by the data as presented.

In this study, establishing referential adequacy involved audio tape recording and verbal transcriptions of the interviews of each participant, which were useful in ensuring that the responses were accurately presented. Along those same lines, member checks—in this study, allowing some of the participants to read the verbal transcriptions, listen to the tapes, and read my findings when they requested—also helped to establish credibility.

Transferability of the findings in this study is to a degree limited by the small number (eight) of participants. However, this write-up provides rich details of the

participants' experiences, which will allow the readers of this study to use their own judgment in interpreting the findings and judging their potential relevance to their own situation.

Ethical issues are a normal concern, but were especially important in this study because I interviewed the mothers of ex-felons. Potential participants for this study were approached only after approval had been received from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and no money was paid to the participants during the conduct of this study. Though I utilized snowball selection in gaining access to participants, I kept the details of each participant's responses during the interview sessions confidential. I protected the confidentiality of the participants by using pseudonyms instead of their actual names at all times and stored the data in a secure environment accessible only to me. I also transcribed all the data myself to add another measure of protection.

Summary

The phenomenological approach to this study involved conducting individual, in-depth interviews, thus allowing me the opportunity to listen as the mothers told about their experiences of having adult sons who have been imprisoned as felons. Symbolic interactionism was also useful in understanding the strategies used by the mothers in dealing with the stigma associated with their sons' imprisonment.

Snowball sampling was used to identify and select the eight participants, and data was collected during one to three individually held, face-to-face interviews. Patterns and themes emerged from the data collected, which was used to shape the findings. Trustworthiness (credibility and ethical conduct) was a factor for consideration during this phase of the study.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Portraits of the Mothers

Interviewing the eight participating mothers allowed glimpses into their realities and experiences from an individual point of view. My notes helped to contextualize their stories; however, the mothers' own voices served as the principal data during the analysis process. All of the participants initially appeared eager at the opportunity to share their

Table 1

Participants' Demographics

Participant	Age	Relationship to Felon	Education	Income Range	Work Status
Alice	43	Sister	Associate	\$25-35,000	Full-time
Cynthia	56	Mother	B.A.	\$35-50,000	Full-time
Deborah	54	Sister	College (3-1/2 yr)	< \$25,000	Full-time
Donna	55	Mother	HS Grad	> \$50,000	Homemaker
Irene	63	Mother	Assoc. LVN	> \$50,000	Retired
Josephine	80	Mother	Grade 8	< \$25,000	Retired
Katherine	63	Mother	HS Grad	\$35-50,000	Retired; P/T
Leona	71	Foster Mother	HS Grad	< \$25,000	Retired; P/T

personal stories about the impact that their son's or brother's imprisonment had on their lives. All but one of the participants expressed an initial reaction of devastation when they embraced the reality of losing their loved one to the penal system. An overview of the participants is presented in Table 1–Participants' Demographics.

Alice

Alice is 43, married, and lives in central Texas. She earned an Associate degree and worked as a teacher's assistant. She has no children of her own, but her 36-year old brother lives with her and her husband. Her brother was 28 when he first went to prison and had been in and out of prison for about ten years. He had been out this last time a little over a year. We conducted the interview privately at her place of employment one day after work and finished the questions in one session. Like the other participants, she indicated she would be available for follow up clarifications when needed. Alice impressed me with her insightful responses to the interview questions. Her concern for her brother resonated in her remarks.

It just kind of - it make me feel like he has a lot of limitations now kinda like he's got stuck 'cause of the situation. It seems like a lot of things he can't do or participate in or it's like away from society, like not by choice, kinda by force. It makes me feel frustrated as well. I kinda feel, not really sorry for him, but like it should be a better system in place to give people other chances, you know... I feel really uncomfortable, just frustrated—not just with him but with the situation. It just makes it hard for him to get certain jobs even though he's qualified for a lot.

Of the time when she learned of her brother's imprisonment, she said,

Well, it was kind of frustrating, just realizing - I just never thought it would happen to him, you know, or really anybody in my family. You never think that or expect that. Not like you are not human or anything, but just that you never really think that that's gonna happen.

Cynthia

Cynthia is 56 years old, single and lives in central Texas. She has two sons (ages 29 and 22). She has a Bachelor of Arts degree and works fulltime as a juvenile case manager. She also teaches swing dancing and organizes dance competitions for community youths. Her interview session took place in a public library at her request. We had to stop several times during the interview to allow the little children to browse around looking for books before continuing with our discussions. Cynthia appeared to be a very insightful participant who at the start of the interview questioned why I was doing the study—not the purpose of the study—but why was I interested in the topic. Cynthia said, “It’s painful to even hear you say that word felon. It does something. Just when you said it, I felt like a...It’s not good for me.” She later said, “I’d rather visit him at the prison than see him in the grave.” She expressed she was a strict parent and gave examples of her parenting style.

When my son, he first got in trouble when he was 16, I turned him into the law. I took him to APD and turned him in. I said, “You know you weren’t raised” - he burglarized a house - I say, “You were not raised like this,” and I said, “I told you not to ever back me into a corner like this.” So I had this spiritual conflict going on and a fleshly conflict going on. Should I turn this young - should I turn this

child in so he could face the consequences of his actions to get it over with or should I just trust you, God, and make - have him face the consequences, or should I just hide him 'cause they [police] came to my house and questioned him. But 'cause he was so clean cut, they walked away. The police walked away. He said, 'He couldn't have been the one, Mam; we sorry we disturbed you.' But when they left, I said, 'It's me and you talking.' I said, 'You did that didn't you?' He said, 'Yes, Mam, I did.' I said, 'This is what you going to do.' I said, 'You are going to put on your clothes.' It was like almost 12:30 at night. I said, 'You going to put on your clothes, I'm going to take you down to the police station.' I said, 'Remember what I told you about your consequences and your actions?' I said, 'I'm going to take you to the police station, but' I said, 'I want you to know I'm going to be with you every step of the way.' I said, 'You've got to deal with this.' And I turned him in to the law. He hated me for a while for that. He did, but I had to trust God. I had to do so and that's why he said, 'If you hadn't been as hard on me as you were, Mama, no telling what I would have been.' It's no telling, so he hated me for a while 'cause most mothers wouldn't do that. It was so hard for me to do, you know. I loved him, both of my sons with real motherly love, but I told them, don't back me into a corner.

Even though both sons have been jailed—her youngest son recently was jailed on outstanding warrants—her responses focused on the oldest son who was imprisoned at age 24 and was serving a 20-year sentence. When Cynthia learned her son was going to prison, she said,

Utter devastation. He was going in a direction that was totally opposite of the way he was raised and the particular life style that he got into, I protected him from those types of environments, you know. He's in prison for selling drugs and I was like a ferocious mom with my sons, you know. None of that touched them, so him going to prison made me look at myself and say, 'Where did I go wrong, what did I do to deserve this?' I very personalized it. It wasn't me. I wasn't looking at it like he's a grown man. He made his choices. He's going to do his time. I raised my sons to be accountable for their actions. Good actions, good consequences; bad actions, bad consequences. And so when he went to prison, I really felt like he did it to hurt me. That's how I took it.

When asked about her biggest challenge, Cynthia said,

Well just the loneliness, just really sadness, loneliness, sadness and trying to keep a smile, keeping my head up through it all 'cause that's a major challenge for me 'cause I am a woman and a mother of these men, and my challenge is to keep up the front even though I'm feeling bad. That's a major challenge.

Deborah

Deborah is a 54-year old married mother living in central Texas. She has three and a half years of college and works as a substitute teacher and in an after-school tutoring program. She has three biological children: two sons (ages 22 and 31) and one daughter (age 28). She has two brothers (ages 44 and 46) whom she calls her foster sons because even though she was only a teenager at the time, she assumed the responsibility of raising her two brothers. She was very animated when responding to my inquiry of why she, at such a young age, had raised her brothers. She said,

[Her younger brother] was 12 years old when she [her mother] died... but I guess 'cause I promised my mom that night, and I think that's it, 'cause he still my baby brother, and even after my mom died he called me mom.

Deborah's initial responses were focused on her younger brother, but later responses revealed both brothers had been in jail.

Because my mother passed away while I was a teen in high school and when she died she left my two young brothers for me—the 12 year old—that's the one, oh God, both of them actually been in jail, prison for stealing drugs and stuff, but the 12-year old, that's the one I'm talking about now... And the night she passed away, she asked, she told me to basically, to please - she wanted me to have, take care of my two younger brothers because I had an older sister and two other brothers but all of them was married and me and my two younger brothers were at home with her and she figured I could do better with them than the others and stuff. So I had to promise her the night she died on her deathbed that I would and I did. It was hard, but I made it.

Her reaction when she learned about her brother's imprisonment was,

Well, I was pissed, but not at the court. I was pissed at him for being stupid, for doing something he didn't have to do. I was very mad at him. I wanted to strangle him 'cause I was working trying to take care of him and everything and he gone go do something, some dumb stupid stuff 'cause he got friends talked him into it. So that's just that. He ended up in jail, prison actually or both.

Donna

Donna lives in southeast Texas and described herself as a 55-year old Creole, married mother of two sons (ages 39 and 36) and a daughter (age 37). Her oldest son was 26 when he went to prison, and during our second interview, she shared that his son, her 18-year old grandson whom she had raised since he was three years old, was now in jail. She also had raised her oldest son's daughter since age six months. Our first interview took place in one of the referring participant's home, but the second interview took place in her own home. Donna eagerly shared a lot about her personal background during the three and a half hour first interview, including her childhood molestation and a stint with the penal system. She was jailed at age 16 after shooting one of her friends, but was released after one month. By that time, she had already gotten married and had at least one child. She said, "At that time I was a 16-year old, but I was a grown woman stuck in a 16-year old body, because I had to grow up faster than I wanted to." Donna indicated her childhood was dysfunctional with an abusive dad and a "mom just as crazy." Her mom was "in and out of mental hospitals, so when I grew up, I was kind of afraid that I was going to be like him, or I was gonna be like them, or I was gonna be like her." Four of her six brothers have been imprisoned, including one for murder. Donna finished high school and worked at odd jobs at one time or another, but has mainly been a stay-at-home mom. On learning that her son was going to prison, she said it was,

Very devastating, very devastating to me ... And that's what makes it so hard. I can't go to my son... I could call him for me, for times when I be having problems maybe with his father, or just call for me and say, 'look I feel like this, son,' and

talk to him. Maybe he would have some knowledge and encouragement to tell mom. You know, that son that I could have, fought and prayed, 39 years old.

Irene

Irene is a quiet spoken, 63-year old married mom who lives in southeast Texas with her fifth husband. They have been married 27 years and reside comfortably in their nice, corner lot home. Her husband served as her children's step dad beginning when they were teenagers. Irene is a high school graduate who later earned an Associate degree. She worked as an LVN for several years until an injury caused her to stop working. She was a stay-at-home homemaker for a few years before she returned to work as a security guard to earn extra money to help her sons and grandchildren. She has three children: two sons (ages 42 and 40) and one daughter (age 36) and at least four grandchildren. Both sons and two of her grandchildren (male and female) have been imprisoned (including an occasion when both her son and his son were incarcerated in the same unit). Her oldest son became involved in the penal system at age 16 and has been in and out of prison for years at a time up until about four years ago. Her youngest son went to prison at age 30 for a couple of years. Even though he has been out of prison for about seven years, he has returned to jail a couple of times for various reasons and had been homeless from time to time. I traveled out of town on two occasions to interview her in her home as she told me her story. She indicated, "It was very depressing, nerved up, nerve wrecking," when she first learned about her sons' imprisonments. She stated,

Well, all before it would be very depressing. You have, you know, I would have, I would guess you would call it anxiety attacks, figuring out what can I do – what, what, what it is. But after a while you just say just go ahead and help. There's

nothing you can do, but just go ahead. And you know they need some money on the books. So, you automatically have to do that, you know. And then you feel sorry for your son who is homeless, but then, there is only so much you can do. So I know that, hey, I've done the best I could, and in my situation, I don't feel as bad anymore.

Josephine

Josephine is a personable 80-year old widow who lives in a small but neat home in southeast Texas with her daughter and son. She was proud of her new home, which she and her husband had acquired after Hurricane Rita. She said,

You know we were living in those little sharp shooter houses. Pray for me because I'm blessed. This is a blessing here because I didn't have to pay one penny for this. This is my land, but they give me this house.

Josephine finished eighth grade and worked in childcare services taking care of children with special needs until her retirement, or more aptly put, until she stopped working. She said, "I'm not retired. I didn't retire from anything. I worked 29 years ... but we didn't have any retirement thing, so I don't have any, I didn't have any retirement." Josephine had three children, two daughters (ages 59/deceased and 57) and one son (age 56). Her husband had died the year before the interviews and her oldest daughter had died a couple of years before him. We completed the interview during one session at her request, but she indicated she would be available for follow up clarifications if needed. She indicated her son was not too keen on the interview. "Lord dear God, he was here, but he got so upset with me that he left. Ooh he had a fit; that's why I was glad you were coming over." Her son was first jailed at age 16 or 17 and had been imprisoned three

times totaling about fourteen years. Released from prison approximately four months ago, he shared the home by sleeping on the living room sofa. She said,

That's why he was released because he had a place to come.... I had to get, you know, when he first came out, when he first went in and come out, they didn't have that, but when he come out this time, he had to have that thing on his leg and I was so happy about that. He had that monitor on his leg. He just got it off.

She said of her son, "He was my hero, so to speak. He was my little man and I never thought that he would get out there with his friends and start picking up the things that was going on with the drugs." When she first learned of his imprisonment, she expressed,

It was sort of embarrassing, but I think I handled it pretty well. Yes, I didn't go off the deep end. I went off the deep end when he went back the last time. The other first two times that he'd gone in, it was kinda like who said who, who said what and I was caught up in at that time. Then the last time he was on his own because he wanted to do that - he wanted to do it.

Katherine

Katherine is a quiet spoken, 63-year old single mom who agreed to meet with me in the privacy of her cozy, neatly kept home in central Texas. She is surrounded in her neighborhood by other members of her family, whom she says provide an important support system. Katherine worked two jobs throughout her life to be able to provide for her three children: two sons (ages 41 and 43) and a daughter (age 38). She retired from public service and now enjoys part-time seasonal work. She has several grandchildren, whom she sees occasionally, but is especially close to her only daughter. Unlike the

other participants, Katherine was not surprised that her oldest son was imprisoned and became animated when talking about him. She said,

When he was growing up, well, he grew up with my parents, my mom and my dad. And my mom passed away when he was about eight years old. And so I had a sister that was the same age, and my dad wanted to keep them to grow up together and they grew up together, him and my sister.... He always had an attitude problem. He had a lot of behavior problems when he was growing up because he didn't want to, never did want to follow instructions.

Her son returned to live with her about three months before graduating from high school. She indicated he was very disrespectful and,

He would curse me out.... He always wanted to make fast money, didn't want to work ... That was stressful having to argue with a grown man to get up every morning so he could go to work. And then I had to feed him. I provided shelter and everything, and he just sort of like, he was taking over the house. He would invite people over that – guys over that I didn't even know. I didn't know who they were and apparently they were friends who was doing drugs and stuff when they came over. So, that, I didn't like that at all. And it got so, he would take things. He would go through everything. He would take things, and that was hard to deal with, so I guess, so, I didn't really trust him.

Her son went to prison for five years when he was 17-18 years old. At the time of the interview, he had been in prison for five years, his third time around. Katherine said, "It's been less stressful."

Leona

Leona is a 71-year old widow living in southeast Texas. She finished grade 12, is retired, but works part time as a foster grandmother. Both of our interviews took place in one of the referring participant's home. Leona had no children of her own, but raised her 25-year old foster son as her own from age 3.

Well, his mother - I lived in the same neighborhood with his mother and her mother.... I started, you know, got attached to her, you know, and I'd see him just 'bout every day, but then she got on drugs. She wasn't really that interested in this child. And what happened, her mother died when he was like about two and a half years old, something like that - and she really turned the apartment into a crack house. And I used to go get him out of there, you know. Oh, she was glad for me to come get him, so I kept him a lot of times, so she started going out there on the streets and getting high and doing her thing and she just left him there. And if she would come and get him, I would be very worried about him because she was the type of person that she was. She was a drug addict and her friends were drug addicts, you know what I mean. Anything could have happened to the little child, so I just kept him and I raised him up until, let me see what year she died, 1998, I think.

Her son was 23 when he first went to prison, and upon learning of his imprisonment, she said, "It was devastating to be knowing this, that he could be going to prison because I understand prison life is not a good life...for any person."

Emergent Themes

The mothers of adult sons who have been incarcerated as felons were guided in this study mainly by questions about their general experiences, roles, and coping strategies. Their responses to the questions generated heartfelt detail from which two

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes: Learning Related to Son's Imprisonment

Theme	Subtheme
I.	<i>Adult Learning—I Would Have Done Things Differently</i>
	A. Expectations of Adult Motherhood
	B. Roles Played
	1. Support to Felon
	2. Mother/Grandmother
	C. Learning That Took Place
II.	<i>Adaptation—I Became Stronger</i>
	A. Change Happened
	1. Self-perception
	2. Shifting Perceptions of Others
	3. Relationships with Others
	4. Broadened View of Felons and the Legal System
	B. Sources of Strength
	C. Lasting Impact
	D. Needed Community Support

major themes emerged. The first theme focused on the experiences the mothers had and what, if anything, they would have done differently given their expectations and the resultant reality of their sons' imprisonment. The second theme delved into the mothers' relationships and the resources employed to adapt to the challenges of having sons involved in the penal system. The themes and subthemes are presented in Table 2—Themes and Subthemes: Learning Related to Son's Imprisonment.

Adult Learning—I Would Have Done Things Differently

Experience is a hard teacher and some of the mothers indicated they would have done things differently if they had known the results of providing certain types of support, especially financial support, to their sons while they were incarcerated. In addition, the mothers had expectations of being able to enjoy their middle-age-and-beyond years differently, free from the main responsibilities of parenthood. Theme one focuses on the expectations of adult motherhood, the roles played by them, and what the mothers said they had learned as a result of their sons' incarcerations.

Expectations of adult motherhood. The expectations that the mothers had for their sons and themselves conflicted with the reality of extended parental roles and responsibilities as a result of their sons' imprisonment. Irene and Cynthia expressed frustration at having grown sons dependent on them and at having to extend the early stages of parenthood (childhood and adolescence, early adulthood) into middle and late adulthood. Irene (63 years) stated,

I had hoped that they would go on and be decent citizens, working, just like everyone else, you know, taking care of themselves, being independent, not dependent. Because being in the system, you are dependent, and I never thought I

would have to be helping sons. I thought they would be helping me in the long run, but that didn't happen.

Cynthia (56 years) expected her sons to mature as responsible husbands and fathers. She indicated, "I wanted to have sons who would be able to take care of somebody's daughter someday, you know, be a good husband one day, a good father one of these days."

Donna's (55 years) expectations of a more carefree, social lifestyle as she aged were disrupted by added responsibilities directly related to her son's imprisonment. She stated,

I want to be 55, you know. I should be hanging out with the golden-years girls, you know. I should be taking that time off to maybe go on a little road trip with the girls or hang with my friends, you know, and sit down or go have coffee at they homes in the morning or something, you know, have a meeting time, you know. And I don't have that because I'm trying to now run back and forth to school house, you know, to high school now, you know, and when I was going to elementary, going to, you know, to that stages where I had to do with them when my kids was small, you know, I had to do that all over again. It's like now I'm growing up all over again, you know, to that stages.

The mothers expected their sons to be the supporters instead of the dependents. Two of the participants spoke directly to how they expected their sons to reciprocate the years spent in raising them. At their ages, Irene and Cynthia envisioned their sons providing support to them as they progressed through their later stages of life either financially or through moral support. Donna shared her vision of what she expected her life to be at age 55. She expected at middle age to be enjoying social time with friends

her own age instead of having to raise her son's two children from toddlers to adulthood because of his incarceration.

In addition to not having fewer parental responsibilities as they aged, two of the mothers also indicated their sons' imprisonments caused them to make changes to their educational dreams. Donna indicated her son's imprisonment affected her ambitions to return to school. She stated,

I love to bake and I said I wanted to get more details of decorating, getting more ideas of going back to school because that's something I love to do ... I'd love to have that knowledge and then I wanted that experience of being around other people. I didn't get that experience of high school, but I went back to high school after my kids had graduated and I went back and finished. Then I didn't get the chance of being around other students and I wanted that experience for myself even at an old age and being around younger kids and I think being outside, I would have learned more, you know, being around younger kids and even other adults, and even being just in the school system, and I would have probably got that feeling. Some people I hear them talking about their sorority and stuff like that. I, in my heart, I wish I know how they felt, being in school and high school and being with their classmate and then going to the prom and all that. I didn't have that.... I wanted to do that, go back to school ... and if I hadn't gotten his children, see, I couldn't do that. See, I had to get custody of his kids. And that's what I was telling her [her daughter] about, but she said, 'Mom, you can still do it.' I told her no, it would be hard on me to do that right now, you know, to get his kids and do that. I didn't want to do it, but I knew no one else

who was going to take up the job of getting his children, so that's what stopped that.

Like Donna, Cynthia indicated she had to make changes to her educational expectations as she adapted to her new reality. She said, "I was working on my Masters degree in conflict resolution/family mediation when [her son] got in trouble and got the gun charge, having the gun on school grounds, so that stopped me from getting my education."

The mothers' expectations of how they would spend their adulthood, including educational aspirations, were altered as a result of their sons' imprisonment. The next section provides more details about the roles the mothers played while navigating the responsibilities of having sons imprisoned.

Roles played. The mothers played important roles in the lives of the felons and the felons' children. Those roles are discussed in general terms of support given by the mothers to the felons during and after incarceration and by the mothers in extended roles as grandmothers.

Support to felon. All but one of the mothers indicated they provided some level of support to the felons during imprisonment and upon their release. The support during imprisonment included writing letters, making visits, sending money, and accepting telephone calls. Upon release, forms of support included providing food and shelter, clothing, helping with job search, other financial assistance, and moral support. Some of the expressions of support were met with appreciation; others were not.

Katherine, Irene, Leona, and Josephine indicated their sons displayed a sense of entitlement instead of appreciation. Katherine spoke of the struggles she experienced in

trying to raise three children as a single parent and the ungratefulness exhibited by her son when she tried to help him upon his release from prison. She stated,

When he got out [the first time], I did take him in... Wow, that was a trip because he still didn't listen. He done whatever he wanted to do. He wanted to sleep. He was lazy. He wouldn't get up. He had a job. He had a job and someone would come to pick him up, but he wouldn't get up. So every morning I would have to argue with him to get up ... That was stressful having to argue with a grown man to get up every morning so he could go to work. And then I had to feed him, I provided shelter and everything, and he just sort of like, he was taking over the house. He would invite people over that, guys over that I didn't even know. I didn't know who they were and apparently they were friends who was doing drugs and stuff when they came over. So, that, I didn't like that at all. And I got so - he would take things. He would go through everything. He would take things, and that was hard to deal with, so I guess so I didn't really trust him. It wasn't a good feeling. I don't know. It's like, it was sort of, I don't know, sad and hurtful because he done things like that, but I didn't condone any of the things he was doing, and I didn't really want to be around him. I would look for jobs for him, interviews... I was dropping him off at the corner in the morning so he could catch the bus to where he was going and I'd go to work. But one day I got sick and I came home from work and he was at my house. He had—he was at home—he had the music blasting, all the lights on, ironing his clothes and talking with one of his friends whom I didn't know, never seen before. And then when I asked him, 'Why are you at home, you supposed to be at work.' And then he told me,

‘Why, you must be a damn fool if you think I am going to work.’ So, I said, ‘Well, if you think I am going to take care of you,’ so I put him out. I asked his friend to leave. And that’s why my bills were all high and everything. The bills were high and I was trying to survive because I had two other kids, trying to take care of him.

But still, Katherine indicated she provided some support while her son was in prison, “like writing to him, and like, maybe sending him money every once in a while.”

Both of Irene’s sons have been imprisoned, the oldest one in and out of prison since he was 16 years old. Like Katherine, she indicated she provided continuous support to her sons to no avail. She stated,

At first, I would go and visit, but after so many times ... it’s still, it’s draining you. It’s pulling your funds, emotionally, financially, and you find yourself doing things that you said no, no, enough is enough, and you continue doing... I have sent them funds to put on their books. I’ve tried to help continuously all kinds of ways, and as of today, it still hasn’t helped. Financially, housing, clothing, food - tried to be as supportive as I could be. I was the only one there who could help ... and after awhile it became too financially draining. And it just wasn’t doing any good. Sometimes you think one last time it would help. Nope. My goodness, I could have been rich by now with all the money I’ve wasted; just being truthful.

Leona’s son had been imprisoned three years. She supported him financially, wrote letters to him and visited him during his incarceration. She said,

Well, I do send him funds and I send him what I can afford to send him, you know. No more, no less. Oh, like I send him money monthly to put on his books, I write letters to him and I visit once a month, sometimes twice a month.

Almost a year later when I conducted the follow up interview, Leona's son had been released from prison and was living with her; however, things had changed, and she expressed frustration at having to continue to support her son. She said,

Well, he is out of prison, and he's been out for like three months, and he's having a hard time finding a job... I'm supporting, I'm providing a place for him to stay, and I'm providing all the food, things like that, but it seems as if he is not looking hard enough for a job, because as a felon, you cannot pick the job that you want, but there are some types of jobs available. Now, he had a job working at Popeye. He worked there about, oh, I guess about a month, and he decided they weren't being fair. They were working him overtime and he wasn't getting paid for it. So he quit, but I feel like he should have had plan B before he quit the job. It's a little frustrating because it seems like he should help around the home, you know, but he doesn't. He's in and out, he got time enough to go and socialize with his friends, seems like he's not making enough effort to find a job.

Josephine's son had been in and out of prison three times and he was living with her at the time of our interview. She provided food and shelter. She said the first two times she had provided financial support and had visited her son during his incarceration. However, the third time, she had taken a harder approach. She stated,

Ok, here he is, had good jobs, but he didn't stay to them. And I say, 'Oh, but he needs this job, he needs to get out so he can get back to this good job,' and I

would do everything I can to encourage him like giving him money, going to see him, and stuff like that that's going to give him encouragement that he had somebody at home that cares about him ... and I'd be sending it every month. When I was working, I'd be sending it. Put my income tax [in his prison fund], wasn't but \$200, but the second time he came he said, 'Mom, you know what?' He was just talking, he was so happy. He said, 'You know what, you can get more drugs in prison than you can on the outside' ... And when he said that, I said oh, but I didn't believe it. I didn't believe it until I heard somebody else say it. When I heard the next person say it, you better slack up. One, two, three, all that money I sent him Uh uh, you not getting any money this time, and he looked so, he looked so hurt. I said, 'I'm not sending you one penny, son,' and I didn't. I realized I can't teach him with money and so that's why my decision was to not give him any money this time, but he was so young at the first time and I could see helping him that time.

Three of the mothers felt they were the felons' only means of support during and after incarceration and continued to offer financial and moral support. Alice, Deborah, and Cynthia indicated they felt obligated for various reasons to remain the felons' main source of support. Alice offered insight as to why she felt she was her brother's only recourse by pointing out some of the challenges facing felons upon release from prison. She said,

He got right out and he needed a place, I guess they call it parole or something like that. They needed a place. He had to have an address to come and certain family members live in apartments. He couldn't go live with them; you can't be a

felon and live in an apartment....I have offered him a lot of support...I've tried to help him with all his legal stuff and try to keep his faith going, you know, his faith in God, and just keep him feeling positive. It's kinda hard, but just keeping him feeling positive and hopeful and it's kind of hard when a lot of doors are being slammed in your face. It's just really, really hard, but I try to do the best I can by being right there for him just explaining that this is the consequences. There's nothing you can do about it. There's millions of people in that situation and so for some reason the problem seems to be growing because if you don't have a job you can't pay fines and fees, and you can't meet all these different requirements and these things that they want you to meet and, you know, it's kinda messed up. It really is...but I don't want him to feel like the whole world is against him because he made a mistake. I don't want him to feel like I'm judging him because anybody can get caught up in something, you know, that you least expect, you know. Even if you are not participating in a crime you can be at the wrong place at the wrong time, you know. People accidentally do stuff all the time. And I just don't want him to feel like he's in this world all by himself even though he knows our family loves him but a lot of people give up and, well, that's just the way it's going to be, that's just the way it is. But, you know, it just about is, but everybody can't give him that approach because it makes him not want to live, you know, out here in the free world, so it's just kinda hard. It's really hard. It's like a mental game, you know.

Deborah kept her promise to her dying mother to raise and support her two younger brothers even after they became felons. She painted a picture of support for one of the brothers. She stated,

Oh yeah, when he got out, I'm still doing it and he's grown because he lost his job. When he was in jail I sent him money to put on his account so he could get like snacks in jail, cigarettes and whatever. I bought him shoes and sent to him and they allowed us to send some other little stuff to him that he needed some personal stuff. I let him call me. I used to tell him to call twice a week, like he called on Wednesday nights and Sundays after church. And then, well now it's easy to call long distance, but back then it was expensive as the dickens to call long distance and a collect call was even more expensive 'cause I couldn't call him so he had to call me so when I paid all that. And I used to tell him, now when you get out you need to get yourself straight 'cause you are a grown ass man. You act like an adult and not follow behind stupid ignorant friends, or so-called friends, 'cause none of my friends ever tried me to do stupid stuff or I was stupid enough to follow them.

In addition to financial assistance, Cynthia indicated her role was to provide motivation to her son who was serving an 18 to 20-year prison sentence. She stated,

Oh, I'm his support system, I'm his motivation. I'm motivational for my sons anyway 'cause they are black males. I was always like that even before they got in trouble. So, I'm his motivation... He has on paper, he had 18 years; he's been gone already five so I have to keep him motivated all the time and he, both of my

sons are mentally strong because I raised them to be strong... I didn't want to have mama's boys... I keep money on his books.

She said she continues to support him,

Because that's my son and he, he's in the system but he's not of the system, and in as much as he's in there, just as I supported him as an involved parent when he was in school, I am going to be an involved parent regardless if he needs me to be. And yes he's grown, yes he's made bad choices that put him there, but I'm not going to turn my back on my sons ever if they're in a position of need. If they are not in a position of need, then they are on their own, but I'm not going to kick my son while he's down ... I don't need to wash his face with that because God is going to take care of that.

Only one of the mothers took a tough-love approach and did not write, send money or visit her son while he was imprisoned. Donna indicated any resources she would have used to help her son now had to go to his children. She keenly felt the loss of privacy she could have shared with her son. She stated,

Well, since his imprisonment, we had come to the point when he tried to call me when he first got in prison and he wanted me to put money on the books. And I just simply told him I would not answer your calls, I will not pay for your calls, and I will not put money on your books because the money I would have supported you if you was out and doing something for your life and you got in trouble and we would have helped you financially, that's gone because that's going to have to go towards your children. Your children now done took all that, that you would have, probably would have received, so now that cut off.... And

that's what I told my children, if you go, I'm not coming there... I done all what I can and then now you done taken it out of my hands to tell you anything because once you there, I'm just pretty much; if I write something to you, my words and everything is going to be looked at from someone else. They got to look at my letters where this is something I want to tell you just between I, you know, just to have something, that relationship with you. And if that'll come to a letter and it's got to be looked at and examined by someone else, a stranger, and what it gonna mean to me then because it's like a secret that I want you and I to have, something that's between you and I, you know, then I got to share it with some strangers what I gotta tell my son. And then, what encouraging word could I give you now because now someone else is telling you what to do. You don't have that freedom you had at home to move around, to do what you wanted, you know, and you and I could meet anytime you felt like. But you've taken that away and, see, I don't want to share that moment with no one else.

The mothers provided different degrees of financial and emotional support to their sons during their incarcerations. Most felt obligated to fund their sons' prison accounts and to write and visit them in prison. Only one of the mothers took a hard-nosed approach and refused to send money, write, or visit her son during his incarceration. The next section is written help the reader understand the impact on the mothers as their extended roles of grandmother is pushed farther than expected as a result of their sons' incarceration.

Mother/grandmother. The average age of the mothers in the study was 60, which meant to them they were comfortable having adult children, but expected at that age to

play a supporting role of being a grandmother. Instead, four of the mothers, Leona, Cynthia, Irene and Donna indicated they had to assume a greater role in their grandchildren's lives as a result of their sons' imprisonment. Leona and Cynthia indicated their grandchildren sometimes accompanied them on prison visits. Leona stated,

Those kids are a little affected by it because one of the little boys the other day he told me, he says, 'I want my daddy,' just like that... I babysit him and I take him sometime. He wants to go and I take him.

Like Leona, Cynthia indicated she takes her grandchildren to see their father in prison. She also indicated she played an important part in her grandchildren's lives by helping to maintain the flow of communication. She also expressed the need to take her son's place as dad to one of her granddaughters whom she felt had the most need. She stated,

I keep open communication between him and his kids out here – go take them for visits. He has three kids by three different women but all the kids know each other. They know they brother and sister and when I go see him, they go with me... Two of the mothers, my grandchildren are the only kids in the family. One of them ... my granddaughter, is the oldest of four. So she was the one that was my son's *ride a die*. She was with him all the time. She was the one that I feel will suffer the most. So because of that and she's the oldest of four and her mother struggles, she can't have the things that the other kids can get 'cause the other kids, they the only child and they just think of something and their parents give it to them. Their moms give it to them, or extended families, you know.

They have the latest name brand things, you know, hair, hair cut, name brand everything. But I would gravitate to her more so than the other two. And I love them all, but when I have a limited amount of money, it's going to go to her and that's to level that playing field. And I have had to explain that to both of my sons because I don't ever want them to think that there's favoritism. Now if she were the only child or if her mother had the kind of finances that would keep her afloat with the other two kids, I wouldn't be doing that. All three of them would get. If I had \$30, all of them would get \$10, but as it stands now, I spend most of my time with her. She would go to my dance classes with me and everything. If I had extra money and she needed money for field trips, I'd give it to her because she is the one who could fall off the track because her daddy's been to prison, and she hasn't; and it's because I'm involved with her... She's very smart, she makes very good grades, she's been through – the trauma of losing her dad, you know... And that's his oldest daughter. She's 12 and I just need to make sure until he's home 'cause he would be devastated if anything happens to any of them but particularly her 'cause she is the one with the least of all the grandkids... I am the daddy while he is gone... Yes, that's a role that I am assuming right now, and the other two, they will be ok. I talk to them all the time...

Irene, like two of the other mothers, offered support to her grandchildren and their mother. She stated,

Well, whenever their mother called and for asked for help, I would try to help, that's financially. And as far as the second one's child, I was more involved; I kept her for a while during the summer. I visited her when she had to go to boot

camp and all the other little places, and as of today, I still help her, you know; but that has come to an end, also, because there is nothing really that I can do. They have to want to do for themselves. They have to want to do, and I can't see it happening.

Donna had taken a hard-nosed approach by not visiting, writing, or sending financial support to her son while he was incarcerated. She expressed frustration at having to bear the burden of raising her son's two children. She said,

I'm caught up being mother slash grandmother... It causes me to kind of like be in a fusion trying to be two roles where, at the age I am... I'm looking for him now to be here with his children, with his son and daughter I'm taking care of now; been having them since they were three and one. Now they are 14 and 16. And, you know, it's hard because his son is having problems... we would both be doing this together. You know, even if he would have been with his father, at least I would have been added to that, added, been their grandmother, not being mother slash grandmother.... And it was sort of like at my age, too, it was like, 'Well, wait a minute, let me try to remember what I did when they was that age,' *[laughter]* you know, that I'm used to talking with a 36-year old, that I'm used to talking to a 37-year old and then now I gotta talk to a 14-year old and a 16-year old with all these new slang and technology going on, you know. Ok, and now I gotta keep up with these music, you know, and then she coming in certain things, like you giving them the phone now where they having this texting and now they telling you gotta check on it and now you gotta put a lock on your television *[laughter]* because you got this 16-year old and this 14-year old over here....

When I got custody of her, I told everybody when I got custody of both of the kids, I loved the one and hated the other. I had postmortem. I was expecting already to raise the first one. I was expecting that was going to happen. I was gonna have to train and raise this little boy. And when they had the second child, I was so mad and so angry until I couldn't stand the little girl.

The burden of having to provide support to the felons during and after imprisonment was expressed in different ways by the mothers. Katherine distanced herself from her son by not providing housing, but continued to write and send money to her son while he remained in prison. Irene, Leona, and Josephine felt they were the felons' only recourse and resolved to provide financial even after repeat offenses. Donna did not visit, write, or send money to her son during his incarceration, but like Irene, Leona and Cynthia, she participated substantially in helping to raise her grandchildren. Alice and Deborah felt obligated to helping their brothers, one because of a death-bed promise to her mother and the other because none of her other relatives were in a position to provide housing. All of the mothers provided some level of financial support, either directly to the felon or indirectly via their grandchildren. Cynthia indicated she felt her roles extended to playing dad to one of her son's daughters, who seemed to be more financially vulnerable than his other children. Alice and Cynthia expressed a strong belief that one of their main roles was to help motivate the felons and help keep spirits high.

The purpose of this segment was to help the reader gain insight into the roles the mothers had to assume as a result of their sons' imprisonment, whether financial or moral support, sometimes voluntarily, other times through imposition. The next section

focuses on what the mothers learned about themselves and their sons as a result of their sons' involvement in the penal system.

Learning that took place. The learning process is sometimes seen through different lens and develops along different timelines. Some of the learning that occurred among the mothers resulted because of health concerns, others from financial concerns. Two of the mothers indicated they learned they would have made different decisions regarding their spousal relationships, and two questioned their decision to offer the types of support rendered. With learning comes altered decisions and several of the mothers shared how their decisions would have changed had they known beforehand what they had learned during their sons' imprisonment.

When I asked the mothers what they had learned as a result of their sons' incarceration, several of the mothers were concerned about their health and control of their lives. Katherine indicated, "Well, I've learned not to stress out over it because if I did, I would be sick, so I have learned to take care of myself." Leona also indicated that concern about her health helped to shape decisions about helping her son. Leona stated,

Well, I, sometimes I get very frustrated with him, but I'm trying not to do that, because I don't want to get my blood pressure up, 'cause I have developed pressure problems, blood pressure problems, and I'm trying not to get myself.... I would hate to see him go back, but, I feel like if he goes back this time again, that I, it was going to be different from what it was before. I am not going to do a lot of visiting and I am not going to send a lot of money. I'm not saying I am not going to send him nothing at all, but sometimes I'll send him something for his books.

Irene wanted to take back control over her own life, which she indicated was a long time coming. She stated,

They are living their lives, and I can't let them take over my life. It's taken a long time to get to that point, and sometimes I still miss it, but you have to keep telling yourself, it's their life. They are doing what they want to do, there's nothing I can do to change it. Get on with yours... I think I would have pulled back a long time ago and not helped at all.

Three of the mothers expressed learning related to financial decisions they had made as a result of their sons' incarceration. Like Leona, Josephine indicated she would not have offered as much, if any, financial support during imprisonment. Instead, she would have saved the money to offer support upon her son's release. Josephine indicated that providing support during incarceration may have enabled her son. She stated,

I think I kind of enabled him, being as young as he was. 'Well, mama gone send me money. I go out there and do something, and she gone send me some money.' And he go back in... I kept hearing in my head over and over, 'What you gone do? You gone help him or you gone stop?' Well, I'll help him. Two years wasn't bad. I was working, money coming in every day, you know, month, every two week. So it wasn't too much to think about. Just help him. But then one, two, three you out, three strikes. So that's the way I did it. Yea, first thing, I would cut off his financing from the git go. I would not send him anything. I would write him, but I would not send him one penny. I think that would have been the best out for him and for me because the money I could have put aside, I could have saved it so when he did get out, I could buy him a little transportation.

When asked what they would have changed, in addition to limiting financial support, two of the mothers indicated they would have handled their personal relationships differently. Irene stated,

Some people learned at an early age when they have children, just raise your children. It took me a long time to realize that. I kept looking for a father to raise my children, and I should have just raised them myself. It may not have made a difference, but that's what I would have done if I would have known back then what I know now.

Cynthia initially indicated she would not have made any changes, but later indicated that like Irene, she would have made different decisions about the men in her children's lives. She stated,

You know what, if I could do it all over again, if I could turn back the hands of time, I would not have - I would not have made some of the choices I made in the men I was involved with. Like my ex-husband, good God. I should not have married him... I don't think he was a good influence on my sons in terms of what a man should do and how a man should cope. He was a mama's boy and so if I had to go through that experience again what I would do would have been remained single and I think I could have done a better job. There is a time when a young man has to, he can learn certain things only from a man and I realize that. I would have placed him with good mentors. I would have been voracious about that, but because I had a husband I thought mentorship was not needed, see, and that was my truth... So if I could do it all over again, I would not have gotten married. I would have stayed single and made better choices with a lot of things.

I would have wanted them to go to different states and be involved with different things; you know, travelled and see other cities outside of their world. That's what I would have done. I think that's one of the biggest mistakes I made with them.... I would have graduated from high school, raised my sons, retired from a job, and then go and get my degree instead of graduating from high school, getting a degree, than having my kids and ending up like this. You see, with all this, I should have been more hands on. I would have made better choices with all the man things, you know what I am saying.

After reflecting on her responses, Cynthia gave the following summation of what she had learned about herself. She said,

I've learned sometimes I have those periods of time where I think of myself as weak. You know, I've always thought of myself being strong because I have dealt with a lot, but it's been during the time I felt like I was weak, just weak, couldn't handle it, couldn't cope with it mentally, emotionally weak at times. But I quickly came back to myself 'cause I had to keep moving. I had to keep moving so, I just think that I am a hell of a lot stronger than I think I am, but I just need to learn how to temper it more. Sometimes I used to think I was so hard. I went from being emotionally weak, to beating myself up, crying intermittently, trying to see what I did wrong, what could I have tweaked, and now I didn't feel like, thanks to [her imprisoned son] releasing me, I don't think I did anything wrong.

Two of the mothers, Donna and Alice, questioned whether they would have volunteered to be the main source of support instead of allowing other family members to shoulder the responsibility. Donna, who had taken the hard-nosed approach of not

providing support to her son during his imprisonment, indicated she would have waited longer to see how her son would have handled taking care of his children. She stated,

I would never have picked them [grandchildren] up ... Like I told my husband, I should have waited to see what he [her son] was gonna do. I don't care if he had to go live in the Red Cross or he had to go live somewhere in a home or something with his kids to see how far he would have taken it, really pushed him. I should have waited and see how far he was gonna let it take him... I would have left those kids with him to see what he would have done.

Alice felt she was her brother's only financial and emotional support, but had second thoughts about the level of support rendered. She stated,

I wouldn't want to take in another person and take this ride with them even though I know that half the time people make a mistake and go to prison, they didn't intend to. A lot of times people intended to, but a lot of times they don't intend to and don't know the consequences and I just wouldn't want to accept anybody else in with us... I wouldn't, I mean you have to have somebody, but I wouldn't want to volunteer first.

We learn from our experiences, and the responsibilities of having a son in prison caused some of the mothers to look back on the decisions made as a result of their sons' incarceration. Irene, Leona and Josephine believed if they had known better, they would have provided other than financial support to their sons. Donna and Alice felt the responsibility to support their sons; however, both questioned whether they would be the first to volunteer to provide support—one by taking in her brother to live with her and her husband, and the other by picking up her two grandchildren and raising them. Two of the

mothers, Irene and Cynthia, said the lesson they learned was that they should have accepted the responsibility of raising their sons as single mothers.

Summary of Theme One

Theme one focused on what the participants said they would have done differently if they had foresight to their sons' incarcerations. The theme also focused on the mothers' expectations, the roles played, and what they had learned from going through the process with their sons. Irene, Donna, and Cynthia indicated they expected their sons to show support to them during their middle and late adulthood years instead of their sons remaining so dependent on them for support. Also, the mothers expected to play a supplemental role as grandmothers instead of the role of primary supporter. Permeating through the responses was the view that while the mothers believed their sons required some support while they were incarcerated, they considered the money sent to the sons during imprisonment as somewhat wasted. They would not have put as much or any money on their financial accounts because they thought by doing so, they may have enabled their sons and thereby made the condition of imprisonment too comfortable for their sons. Theme Two focuses on how the mothers adapted to their sons' imprisonment, the changes/impact to their self-perception and relationships, and their sources of strength used in surviving their sons' imprisonment.

Adaptation—I Became Stronger

With learning comes change, and in some cases, strength. Tennant (as cited by Wilson and Hayes, 2000) indicates, "In midlife, relationships are reappraised and this takes the form of a struggle between the polarities of attachment and separateness" (p. 87). In developing their strength, the mothers sometimes struggled to find the balance

between their own needs and the needs of their sons. The second theme that emerged from the data related more to the mothers' experiences of having a son incarcerated and the adaptations they made in response to changes to themselves and their relationships. This section also focuses on understanding the mothers' sources of strength and revelations experienced along the way.

Change happened. This section examines the changes the mothers experienced in their self-perception and to their relationships, both personal and professional, as a result of having a son incarcerated. The journeys the mothers travelled allowed them to examine how they viewed themselves and how they thought others viewed them. They also came face-to-face with the impact their sons' incarceration had on their relationships, both personal and professional.

Self-perception. The mothers' expressions of how they viewed themselves gave the researcher insight into the various mechanisms used to survive their sons' incarceration. Some of the mothers initially thought they had not changed, but upon reflection, realized even minute changes made a difference in their self-perceptions. Three of the mothers, Katherine, Leona and Cynthia, indicated that they had not changed, but Leona and Cynthia then admitted to having some moments of doubt. Katherine said, "It's been less stressful," while her son has been in prison. Before his imprisonment, Katherine described herself as ambitious and a hard worker and thought her self-perception held fast during her son's imprisonment. She said,

Well, I was like – I was a single mom. I'd say I was ambitious – I always worked. Sometimes I worked two jobs so I could take care of my kids. I don't know, my parents sort of raised me to be independent so I think I was independent, so I

worked a lot, went to church, took care of my kids, socialized with family and friends, sort of like, I sort of like went on with my life. While he was in prison, the only impact was, like writing to him, and like, maybe sending him money every once in a while. But other than that, I just worked and continued with my life.

Leona said, “I think I am the same person I was before he got incarcerated.”

However, like Katherine, Leona admitted she worried less about her son while he was imprisoned. She stated,

Well, I don’t worry about him as much ... and so sometimes I think this could have saved his life, might have prolonged his life a little longer. But then I still, he’s still there and you got to think about him every day and what’s going on with him in there. But I do worry a little less, but I do know where he is, you know what I mean. I put it that way.

Cynthia said, “I’ve never changed,” but revealed she had maintained a façade of strength to help get her through the experience of having a son incarcerated. She stated,

There’ve been times when I’ve been real sad about it, but my front is strong. My front is real strong and I’ve never changed ‘cause in my life if you are not the source of my pain, I’m not going to take it out on you. But if you are the source of my pain, then I’m going to deal with you with a vengeance, you see what I’m saying.

Irene, Donna, Deborah, Josephine and Alice had positive views of themselves before their sons’ imprisonments, but expressed feelings of vulnerability along their journeys of developing mental strength, growth, determination and acceptance. Irene

said she was hopeful before her sons were incarcerated. She later viewed herself as being nervous, naïve and ashamed, but eventually thought the experiences made her stronger.

She said,

Before they went to prison I had hope....During it I might have been a bit nerved up, upset because, you know, it's hard to believe something when one son is going through it, but when you have both of them going through it, it's really unnerving. Afterwards, it's almost like you get used to it and just say, why me, why me—not again....Afterwards, it started to make me mad because they were wasting my money. I talked about it a lot to help me through it. I didn't let them bring me down though. I believe I was naïve maybe before and afterwards it just kind of realized this was just making me mad and something I really didn't want to deal with, but had to....At first, I was ashamed, but if you talk to other people, you begin to see you are not alone... You find that it's a common thing....So, in the long run, I think I've become I'll say stronger, mentally, even though for a moment you get down, but you think about it and you just say there's nothing you can do about it. Go on with your life. They are doing what they want to do—why sacrifice.

Like Katherine and Leona, Donna thought she did not have to worry about her son while he was imprisoned. Donna perceived herself as being strong before her son's imprisonment, but vulnerable and ready to crumble during his imprisonment. Her vulnerable stage was followed by a period of renewed growth. She said,

Before he left I was strong but didn't really recognize the strength that I had, even more so because at first I thought I was going to crumble. I thought I was going

to be that kind of mother that was going to run up there to him and try to give him that same mother comfort, but I said to myself he don't need that now. He need that stern hand...And I had to get that toughness in myself to say there's still love, the child but not the behavior, you know...my arms still open but not aching like they used to. They used to ache to hold him, but not anymore. It's, I don't know, I have this peacefulness, this calmness that I don't have to worry about him anymore...Now I am this person. I'm very open and vulnerable. I used to think there was some weakness in that, but no, that's where the strength come from...Making myself open to anything good that's coming in because if I try to block out, try to block out everything, I am not going to let the good in. I mean, if I want to know what love is, I've got to know what the pain is 'cause, like they always said, 'no pain, no gain.' And that's why I say, with the pain of dealing with him not here, more than when he was here, it have grown me up....Now, I see myself someone very wise and positive.

Like some of the other mothers, Deborah indicated her brother's imprisonment had made her stronger, and she became more determined to not make the same mistakes he did. She stated,

I think it's made me a stronger person and not want to do stuff to go to jail, from doing anything wrong, not that I ever thought about stuff to go to jail anyway, but it made me never want to ever be in jail because I can see myself where they talking about being in a cell, going out one hour a day if they let them out. And if they do something, get in a argument or something, then they put them in a little cell with just a little door sliding...make me never want to go to jail.

Josephine said that her happiness was deeply affected for a while when her son went to prison. She said that before his imprisonment she was “happy as a lark.” She had to work on her feelings, but eventually came to the point of acceptance. She described an incident in which her son had taken her truck without her permission.

That was murdering time, you know. I’m very softhearted in a way, but I was very quick tempered, and if he would have been in sight, if I would have had any kind of weapon, I would hurt him, you know, at that time. But when I seen him, I was so glad. I didn’t tell my daughters. I didn’t tell them, but I was so glad. I said, ‘Lord have mercy, just help me with him.’ He came home and he asked for something, and I said, ‘No son. Nothing in here belong to you. You want to be on the street, you go.’ And he took his little self, his bag and went out. And he put his self in jail. He turned his own self in. And I called around, asking somebody if they could find him, seen him and everything, and I called down town. They did not have him...two nights. The next day I prayed; the phone rang. I answered the phone. ‘Mrs. Josephine?’ ‘Yes, this is her.’ You were inquiring about your son.’ I didn’t even get excited. I said, ‘Where’d you find him, how’d you find him? He’s in lockup.’ I said, ‘thank you’ and hung up and from then on, smooth sailing....I’m fine with it now, every thing’s great.

Alice described herself as having more patience as a result of her brother’s incarceration and takes opportunities to inform other family members about the consequences of making bad choices. She expressed,

I have a little bit more patience, and I do a little bit more research just to see what’s out there for him... I think I’m slowing down looking at the reality of this

and it's making me reach out a little further and also to other members of my family, like younger guys, girls, you know. I try to let them know this is the consequence if you do this. It's not hard to get caught up. It's not hard to, you know, get on this track, you know. It's not hard, you know.

This section discussed how the mothers thought their self-perceptions had been impacted by their sons' incarcerations. The next section offers a brief insight on how the mothers thought others perceived they had changed as a result of their sons' imprisonment.

Participants' Perception of How Others Viewed Them. The mothers offered varied responses when asked to reflect on how they thought their family and friends perceived them as a result of their sons' incarceration. Leona, Cynthia and Donna indicated others saw no change in them. Leona said, "They would describe me about the same being a person, you know, personality wise." Cynthia said, "So they would say she's very resilient. They would say she's never changed." Donna said,

The same, 'cause as far as I know, I'm about the same; 'cause when he was in jail, I really wasn't upset. I mean, I was upset, but at him; and when he got out, I was the same when he got out.

On the other hand, Irene thought her friends perceived that she was, "Easy going at first." However, during the experience of having both sons incarcerated, she thought her nervousness and anxiety were displayed. She said, "Doing it, I might have been a bit nerved up—upset...It's really unnerving."

Josephine indicated she tried to not let her son's incarceration affect her work negatively. She thought others would perceive her favorably during her experiences. She said,

I don't know. I could not tell how others would describe me at all because they say, well, she's quiet, she's peaceful, she's to herself all the time. Well, my work people would say she was the best on the job or one might say, well, she tried to make herself look good, you know how that goes. But, fairly well, they would say she was a pretty good person. During his imprisonment, I don't even think some people know.

The mothers' self-perceptions varied in how they had changed as a result of their sons' incarceration. Katherine said she was ambitious and a hard worker even when some of her family members tried to make her feel guilty about not providing more support to her son. Irene said she viewed herself before her sons' imprisonments as hopeful while other viewed her as easy going, but hope turned to resignation and nervousness. Donna indicated her son's imprisonment caused her to grow up and even though she still loved her son, she no longer had that ache to hold him in her arms. She believed others viewed her as becoming stronger as a result of her experience. Leona indicated she remains the same person and worried less about her son because she did not have to worry about where he was. Josephine was "happy as a lark" before her son's imprisonment, but like Irene, she was now resigned and less softhearted about her son. Alice indicated that she did not pay much attention to the penal system before her brother's imprisonment, but she is now more patient and more aware of the limitations of those involved in the system. Deborah raised her brothers, so she saw herself as the

person who had to try to keep her brothers in line. She expressed anger during her experience, but was grateful her brother had at least learned a trade while he was imprisoned. Cynthia said that while sometimes she felt sad, her resilience has kept her the same throughout the experience. It became clear while discussing how the mothers perceived themselves and how they thought others perceived them that some of the mothers' relationships had been impacted. The next section discusses how the imprisonment of their sons impacted the mothers' personal and professional relationships.

Relationships with Others. One of the guiding questions in this study focused on changes made to the mothers' identities and their personal, professional, and community relationships. This section discusses some of the challenges to the mothers' relationships as a result of their sons' incarceration—guilt and hypocrisy, family support, secrecy, and stigma—as well as the benefits achieved. Katherine and Alice discovered that family and friends could not always be counted on for support. Katherine indicated that during one of the times her son was released, her family tried to make her feel guilty when she decided not to provide housing for her son after two prison stays. She stated,

When he got, he lived with me for a while and but I couldn't take him because we would get in arguments all the time because when he cursed me out, that's when he was really in trouble, and I wasn't going to stand for that. He wasn't going to disrespect me or curse me and live with me, so he went to live with one of my sisters. And, boy, she, she sort of took him in. And they always tried to make me feel guilty about not taking him back in, but I didn't because I said, 'I've given him a chance. I can't do it.' I think I took him in, I took him in, I, I took him in

two times, two times afterwards, and after that I said no more. He didn't change or anything, nothing changed. He didn't change so I didn't take him in anymore so he went to live with one of my sisters.

Family and friends appeared to be of little support to Alice. She said some of her friends were in denial and she got mixed reactions from family when it she tried to talk to them about her brother's incarceration. She stated,

Well a lot of friends, they like, I can't believe that, but a lot of people they give you that I can't believe that story and they have that in their family, but yours is just publicized 'cause you chose to talk about it because you need somebody to talk to.... People didn't really want to talk about it. I don't quite understand why. They kind of like treated it like, oh no, you know, or you serious, you serious, you know, so that was kind of hard, you know, because I thought I could talk to this person or talk to that person but they in denial about life as well. And then my relationships with my family - it's like everybody tried to tell you or that person that's been incarcerated how to do it or what they should do, but they don't know the challenges. They don't know the doors that's being slammed. They don't know. They just don't know unless you walking with that person, you can't really identify with the struggle. You just can't.

The relationships between the mothers and their spouses and other children were affected by the sons' incarceration. One of the mothers indicated she and her spouse rarely discussed their son's incarceration and that she hid from her daughters the level of support she gave her son while he was imprisoned. Two of the mothers indicated opposite levels of support shown by their spouses and how it had affected their

relationships and their ability to cope during their sons' imprisonment. Another mother experienced a lower level of tolerance with men as a result of her son's imprisonment.

Deborah's positive support from her husband encouraged her to provide assistance to her brother while he was imprisoned. She said,

My husband just tell me do what I need to help him because he is family and if he needed the money send it to him if he wanted it, and that's all he said because family sticks together no matter what. And so it didn't really. Most of all I was pissed off at him for being stupid, you know, but it didn't really. It might of bond us even closer together with some of my relatives.

On the other hand, Irene had a different experience with her husband. She indicated that while her relationship with her friends remained unaffected, her husband insisted she not use any of his money on her son while he was incarcerated. She stated,

Oh, with husband, being the stepdad of the family, it was a bit rough because as a mom you want to do for your children, but you still have to deal with the stepdad....First of all, at the time, some of the time, I was not working, and of course the spouse says, 'Do not use my money on them.' That's tension. It just causes a riff, so you get out there and get a job to try to help the one who you think is going to do right. But, you know, every time you are helping them, they find some woman and they are trying to help them and it just blows your mind. It just becomes very discouraging, but you still have that little hope. One of them at least is working. He's working. You finally get him on his own, then like I said gosh, what happened to that job or he gets a vehicle, just all things. Everything goes wrong all at one time so you are starting over again and it's still more

tension in the household....But as far as other friends, family, whatever, I just had someone to talk to that just made it easier.

Cynthia indicated her tolerance for relationships with men had changed and she was less willing to deal with men, preferring to focus on restoring her family. She said, I never have been the type of woman to take a lot off a man. And I'm thinking him being incarcerated, I take a little less [laughter] 'cause I'm dealing with this and I can't let you deal with that, so I think I take a little less. I'm very happy being by myself. I would love to be in a relationship—just got out of one a month ago, as a matter of fact—almost a month ago. But it rocked me a little bit, it hurt me and everything, but every day goes by, I'm better because my focus has got to be on restoring my family...I don't want to be by myself, but at the same time if you giving me drama, I can walk away. I can walk away because my family has got to be restored before I go home...I can say I take less tolerance. My tolerance is a little bit lower 'cause if they [her sons] was out, you know, if he was out, if they were out...they would help me cope. They would help me be more tolerable.

Josephine indicated that her husband rarely talked about their son's incarceration. She said, "He never talked about it. He'd go to see him and he'd be just as happy as a lark. He would come home and wouldn't say the boy look good, he don't look good." Josephine also indicated she chose to be more secretive when it came to her relationships with her daughters. She said,

I had to keep it separate from my daughters where I'm doing more for one than I'm doing for the other. I didn't want them to think that he was, like I said, in a hotel or something getting money from mom and they still struggling in school

and trying to make things go for them and I'm taking all my time. That was a challenge because sometimes I had not, I did not tell them a certain thing or wanted to do that I got to send him money or something like that. I would kind of like keep that from them.

Josephine felt that her son actually benefitted from her working relationships. She said, I was mostly on the dock around the shrimp company and the fish company and I was working there and some of the guys helped me there. In fact, when my boss knew he was there and he had a way to get out, they was offering him job, and they offered him jobs that he can get out early. He had gone for like maybe four, five years, and if he had a job, they could send him home. And that's how he got home on these first two tries because he always had somebody to call on to get him a job and if they give him a job, they'd let him come on home.

Stigma. The topic of stigma was placed at the center of my conceptual map prior to data collection and the responses from the other mothers may have alluded to stigma. However, only two of the mothers indicated they had experienced stigma and negative judgment as a result of their sons' incarceration, either overtly or subtly. Irene indicated she felt stigmatized and judged as a result of the actions of her sons that involved her church members and when she went to counseling sessions. She said,

I kind of felt embarrassed because they would go to the, my church members, and call them in the middle of the night and it kind of makes you feel awkward, you know, it felt like a stigma for awhile. But the members understood, because, you know, that's just a part of life, and they understood sometimes that happens.... So, it was depressing for a while, because, you know, you go to group sessions,

and you know, seems like they always blame the mothers. It's the mother's fault. It puts a downer on you so you just have to get over it.... They, going to counseling for the oldest one who was always continuously in the halfway house, they wanted you to attend the group sessions, and it's like, they always blamed the mother. It's like, why? They are grown men.... It's like they would say, your lifestyle, and of course, for me, I have been married, what, five times, so you have the different husbands going through, not good examples... They didn't come out and say that, but you felt like they were saying it was your fault.... Since it's your fault, you have to do more, and then you do more, and it doesn't help. It's not your fault. It's not my fault.... I had to say it wasn't myself. It wasn't my fault. Forgive yourself, and move on.

Cynthia also expressed the stigma associated with her son's imprisonment. She said,

[I]t is a negative stigma for most women. They want to seem ok. And everybody want to stick their chest out and say my son is going to college or my son graduated from high school, or my son is working. I want, you know, I want to do that, too. I want to do that, too, but it was a delay. It doesn't mean it's not going to happen. It doesn't mean it's not going to happen.

Broadened View of Felons and the Legal System. Irene and Cynthia indicated while their personal relationships with their husbands and male friends were affected, they had developed compassion for those who were affected by the penal system. Through it all, Irene indicated she had developed greater compassion for other felons who were going through this experience. She stated,

I see other people out there that has been in the system, and some of them, they do well for a while, and you try to be, I don't want to say nice, but, greet them in a way that you would want others to greet your sons as someone who has been in the system, and try to give them a chance. Or if they are trying, go up and say, 'Good job.' They fall, but they get up again. Before, you would look at it and say, no, you don't want to get involved in that situation with anybody, but you have to try and give them a chance.

Cynthia responded she had developed more compassion in her relationship with others, including ex-felons that she works with and their families. She also felt her experience of having a son involved in the penal system had added more valuable to her professional and personal relationships. She stated,

Get to know a person's story, you know. Just because a person been in prison, I used to say, 'Ooh uh huh, I can't, you got issues.' But now I say, 'Really, what you were in prison for?' It's just a matter of fact conversation... You never know where your help is going to come from and it doesn't pay to be judgmental towards anybody, anybody, so that's the impression I'll take to my grave, and that also the impression I tell people all the time, you never know where your help is going to come from. Be careful how you treat other people.... I'm more compassionate now. I already had a high level of compassion, but I'm more. I'm able to help another woman go through that trauma more so than I was before. When that child gets in trouble at school or that child has to go to [juvenile center] or they're just having issues with their children, I'm just very compassionate

about that and try to teach them to be strong and hold on for the ride because it may get worse before it gets better.

So I try to work with people to get them mentally prepared ... tell them how they need to cope with it and pray that the child doesn't get killed in the process.... For the job that I do I don't think you can really be affected by it unless you have experienced it. I have used that ... to help other children with that and to help parents cope with that and to tell them that, you know, and I'm very open with them. I'm very open with them about my own experiences 'cause a lot of time when you sitting on this side of the desk and they on the other side of the desk they are thinking this lady don't possibly know what I'm going through. They don't know what I'm dealing with, so my life is transparent in that respect.... I think it helped me because of the experiences I've gone through in dealing with a child who's gone to prison, and I see these kids going in that direction so I can tell them some things and tell the parents some things, things they could do to turn the behavior around... The only reason I'm good on the job is because I've experienced all these things, you know. I think it's really helped me in my profession.

The experiences of having loved ones involved in the penal system allowed two of the mothers to express how their views of the legal system had changed. Alice reflected on the limitations placed on felons and Deborah shared a positive outcome as a result of her brother's imprisonment. Alice indicated she had become more aware of the legal system while her brother was imprisoned and was concerned about the limitations placed on felons upon their release. She stated,

Before his imprisonment I never even paid attention to the jail system or how it went or anything like that. While he was in there it started touching me because he needed money, you know, and he was far away, and we needed extra gas and extra money of our extra money and gas to go see him and it's just everything is so structural in that process. It's just really stressful and structural in that process. I don't know, you learn to cope with it but it's not an easy thing to cope with it. A lot come with it, the way you have to take money in there, you know, for them to buy chips, you know. It's almost like an animal them being an animal on the other side and then they scared 'cause they never been in trouble and they back there with some real people with some real problems, you know, that's bigger than his and probably never get out. So, I was thinking about all that while he was in there and sleeping and having crazy dreams. When he got out it was a different story. Ok, I'm glad you out... Now I'm worried about what you are going to do. It's a limitation on jobs and everything, so it's almost like having a baby no matter what age in your life forever unless you give up on them and if everybody gives up on them, the natural thing—well not the natural thing, but the most common thing—a person will do is go back to crime, not particular that crime, but because they won't have the stress of worrying about what they gone to eat, where they gone to sleep, and you know how they gone to get here and what people thinking about them and so I think about all that along with him, you know. It wears me out a lot.

On the other hand, Deborah chose to focus on a positive outcome of her brother's imprisonment. She stated,

He got his GED 'cause he did drop out of school. He got his trades because actually some of the stuff he using now he learned when he was in jail, he's using now when he work his odd jobs, and that's how he found his jobs. And he did better probably than if he wouldn't have gone to jail.

This section discussed some of the challenges on the mothers' relationships as a result of their sons' incarceration. It also included a discussion on stigma and reflections on the legal system. The next section highlights some of the resources the mothers drew on the help them cope with their sons' imprisonment.

Sources of strength. Mothers who are dealing with the ramifications associated with having adult sons who are imprisoned sometimes face many challenges or stressful situations. Having some outlet to help them navigate through the difficult times is important in maintaining some degree of redefined normalcy. The eight participants in this study called on their religion/faith, family and friends, and determination when dealing with the pressures of their sons' imprisonments. The church and prayer helped sustain four of the mothers, Leona, Katherine, Josephine and Alice. Leona said she stays involved in church-related activities to cope with her son's imprisonment. She said, "Well, I keep myself busy, involved in things—going to church more often, involved in church things activities that the church has going on—stuff like, things like that." Katherine indicated her faith played an important role in how she coped with her son's imprisonment. She said,

Well, I think I am a stronger person. I don't worry about a lot of stuff. I have become a better Christian. I pray about a lot of things. Sort of wait for God to

answer, that's what I do. So that's basically the way I feel about it... He is always on the prayer list.

Josephine indicated personal prayer and the continuous prayer of her church members provided the strength she needed to survive her ordeal. She stated,

How I coped with it and dealt with it is, well let's see, these old knees. I've got one black spot still there (laughter) and that's the other one, that's all [she slaps her other knee]. That's all you can do... keep praying, church praying 'cause I didn't mind telling them he's in prison. No fault of mine; it's all his. Take the responsible, but continue to pray for him.

Alice indicated prayer, positive communication, and volunteer work were important sources of strength for her and her brother. She said,

We do a lot of praying and a lot of communicating... We just, we keep trying to talk positively and just praying and trying to do positive things. We go and volunteer just trying to keep him hopeful, just trying to keep me hopeful, you know... It wears me out a lot, you know, but like I say, my faith keeps me going.

Donna said reading her Bible was important in providing self-counseling, but knowing that her son was stable while in prison provided the additional support she needed to help her cope. She stated,

I'd say self-counseling and like I said, counseling is reading that Bible, 'cause I study all the time. Not just study, I write stuff down. I do a lot of writing to get, to understand people period. You know, understand ourselves, why do we do what we do? Why we kind of constantly go back to the same stuff where we know it's not going to help?... I cope with knowing the truth no matter how much

it hurt, no matter how much work I've got to do... Can I cope with him being the way he was all that time? Why not 'cause when he wasn't locked up, he still wasn't doing what's right by his kids. He wasn't doing right by himself. So that's why I can say, I can cope with that 'cause right now more so I know where he's at. I know he is still breathing. I know he is still being fed. I know he is at a place where he could learn and change. I mean sometime, like I said, I can cope with that, you know. I can't change it. I got to come to grip that's where he's at, but he's to a place I know he's there. He's stable.

Irene said she rarely called on her church family and preferred to call on friends and family to provide the additional support she needed to help her cope with having two sons incarcerated. She said,

I've tried to psyche myself into saying that, deal with it, it's nothing you can do about it, do whatever you can, but if you can't change it, you just have to live with it and still talk with others. When you are feeling low, pick up the phone and call somebody—mostly friends and family, very few church members. One person you can talk with. Well, we have church members who say, we all have problems. It may not be the same, but we all have problems with our sons; it's just a part of life.

The majority of the mothers indicated the importance of relying on religious faith; however, two of the mothers relied on personal determination to help them get through their journeys of having sons who were incarcerated. One was determined to keep a deathbed promise she made to her mother and the other was determined to look keep a positive outlook.

Deborah indicated she did not need coping strategies, but the promise she made to her mother to take care of her brothers remained with her. She said,

What coping strategies? None, because I told him if he go to jail, I'm not helping him no more... I say, 'Look at you. You 40 something years old; you still living in the house with me. When you not working, who feeds you, take care of you?' Been taking him buying clothes and everything. And I say, 'Seriously you need to change.' So I gets mad at him and then, I don't know why I feel guilty sometimes. I get mad at him, but I guess 'cause I promised my mom that night and I think that's it, 'cause he still my baby brother, and even after my mom died he called me mom,... and so I guess I look at it as he is my baby brother and like one of the kids... I guess it was out of love because that's the way I was raised, I guess.

Cynthia indicated her positive outlook was the major resource used to help her cope through her son's imprisonment. She said,

I call those things that be, not as though they were... I speak with the end in mind. I speak with him as if he's coming home tomorrow. That's my coping skill... I speak with them where they are going to be and not where they are 'cause I know the foundation is there and I know the foundation is not there for nothing. It's not there for nothing, it's there for a reason. So that's what I do. That's my coping skill.

Lasting impact. Part of the learning process involves reflecting on the impact that particular experiences have made on one's self. The mothers were asked to share how they thought their lives had been impacted by the experiences of having adult sons

imprisoned. Four of the mothers' views on the topic are shared in this section. Irene said she had come to the realization that her sons were old enough to know better and that life goes on with the help of prayer. She said,

Well, ever so often, I wonder was I to blame, then I say, well, they are grown men now, so whatever problems they are having, it's on them, because they are old enough to know better – past old enough to know better, and should be at the point where they should have been giving me a little something for lunch [laughter]. It's just that I get tired sometimes and say why me, but then there are so many others out there and – hey, life goes on. Course, it will always be a problem in my marriage, but, *se la vie*. No matter what, life goes on, and it's best to go on keep your courage up and turn it over to the Lord. Pray about it and just do the best you can without dragging yourself down.

Donna said she had learned to channel anger to more positive energy and to look at the realities of life. She said,

I was angry, and more than angry, I was afraid... But now I come to the point, say no, let go. It's just wasted energy. That's why I tell people today, if you get angry, take that anger and use it for something positive. You know, learn how to take that energy and place it on something that's going to work for you ... look at it for what it really is and not for what you imagine it to be.

Alice indicated she felt mentally tired from worrying about her brother as he faced the limitations as a result of his imprisonment. She also thought this interview process provided her needed relief from her experiences. She said,

A lot of time I feel mentally tired and drained and I have a lot of sleepless nights and it's a combination of what we're offering there and also will he ever, will he give up and get back in trouble because this is so exhausting for him as well, you know, because I get up and go to work and, you know, I got an agenda. His agenda is limited so it gives him more time to think about negative stuff even though he don't want to and so I carry that a lot with me—just saying, you know. Is he going to give up today?...So that's my hope—to keep him from thinking that...It's a struggle—it's a struggle, and I don't think that all the time incarceration is the answer. I'm not saying people should not pay for their crimes. I'm just saying it's should be more open doors to give hope...I kind of felt good about doing this actual interview. It feels really good to relieve some of this out and hopefully maybe one of these days some of this will change and give people a chance back into society. It just felt good. It's kind of like therapy to talk about this and to share this, so I really, I needed this. I liked it. I did.

And finally, Cynthia indicated that her experiences have reinforced her commitment to helping others who may go through similar challenges. She said,

I think the lasting impact these experiences have had on me is I want to do what I can do with what little I can do to help a parent with a child avoid what I've gone through. I feel that's what I'm here for, not just for my family, but for other people's children as well... The legacy I want to leave for my family, for my kids, is to always reach back and help somebody who is not as fortunate as you are 'cause you've been through a lot and you've come through, so reach back and help someone. Don't be judgmental of anyone, don't – reach back and help.

Needed community support. The mothers were asked during the interviews what they thought the community and educators can or should do to assist mothers who have sons imprisoned. The responses varied from providing no support to facilitating counseling sessions or clubs to allow the mothers to share information. Josephine indicated educators needed to develop programs to help the mothers before their children got too deeply involved in the system. She stated,

I don't see them with programs that could help the mothers with the children before they get to prison. I would love to see a program... that don't wait until he get so deep in his problem before you tell the mama. The minute the little rascal do something wrong the parent should know and then, along the line of that, you send him to a special program.

Leona indicated the educators could provide a club-like setting for the mothers to share information. She said, "Well, they can find out who, how many mothers and people, you know, that's incarcerated, and maybe they can get together and whatnot, form a group of people and meet ever so often. Alice said,

[The educators should] "be more understanding than open with the mothers and people going through this...and could provide some kind of psychology, or psychiatrist or some kind of support groups or something like that—confidential, though. I think that would be a good thing."

Several of the other mothers said some type of counseling setting would be useful in providing an outlet for the mothers going through similar experiences. Donna said a "strong spiritual educator" was needed and Irene thought educators needed to remind the mothers that their sons are indeed adults. She said,

Well, I guess they could have someone talk to the mothers and let them know, really, let it go, [laughter] you know, that we are not responsible for grown, adult, male children. They are doing what they want to do... I guess if someone could go around and educate them with that. You might start out thinking you can help them, but in the long run, it's up to that person.

Deborah thought some form of counseling sessions would benefit the mothers.

She said,

I never thought about it 'cause some people are not as strong as others so maybe if they could get a program mentally, you know, to help cope with this while they are in there... But maybe, you know, if they could get something so they could go talk to somebody if they get too stressed thinking about it maybe some kind of program mentally, but that's about it.

While Deborah said, "I don't think it's their responsibility really," some of the mothers indicated it was important to have some level of support by the community.

Katherine thought the community could provide counseling and access to information "about how they can find information and offering referrals and things like that." Irene thought the programs provided did not adequately support the felons' reentry into society.

She highlighted some of the obstacles facing felons upon their release. She said,

With my first son, when problems first arose, I tried to find help through the system. But for some reason, I could not find help. I noticed some people are able to find help for their sons, but for some reason, I wasn't able to. I went through a whole lot of things, systems. Programs where you can send a problem child, which he was from an early age and I couldn't find any place that would

help.... With the second one, well, he just did his time. And, they have this program, the Rio program, but for some reason, it doesn't really work. These people, when they get out of jail, they send you, put you through this process; but it's hard for a criminal with a, I guess, with a felon, I guess, to get any job. You can't be around money and all of that stuff, so it's just hard when they get out and it puts stress on the family. So, as of yet, I'm waiting for a good program where they can really be helped... Financially, find a place to stay. I realize some of them get food stamps when they first get out. But they also need to go to a place where they can gradually rehab back into society... They expected you to pay, and how can you pay if you don't have a job? So who had to pay? The family. So everything costs. So if you have all of this cost, expense on the person that just get out and don't have a job, how is that helping?

Alice also thought that having decent jobs was an important resource the community could provide in helping the felons become viable citizens. She said, I can go big on the job; getting a job that pays more than the minimum wage, depending on their crime. I'm not saying stick them anywhere, you know, 'cause you got to keep people safe as well. But, just give them more opportunities 'cause they can always have bills just like everybody else. They always need to eat, other life issues that come about.

Leona and Donna thought the community could share information about the realities of imprisonment. Leona said, "Well, the community could maybe get together and form a little club or something where they meet sometimes and discuss these things and give each other maybe some ideas or something like that." Donna said,

A lot of us need to come together to learn from one another, you know, what you have experienced with your child. Even though its imprisonment, it's still gone be something different, you know, how you have dealt with your child, what you have said to your child, what you still could, may do for your child, or the ones that are out of prison. Once they get out of prison because that is the test.

Tapping the community to provide moral support and help raise children was important to Josephine and Cynthia. Josephine indicated the community could be an important resource to provide, as she said, "moral support for the parent if they ask for it. You are there to help and give them the best and don't forget your knees." Cynthia said,

Well, I really wish, I really wish we could really go back to the time when I was growing up where if the neighbors saw me doing something, they go tell my mama and then my mama whipped my butt. The neighbor was like an extended family member. I wish the community could bridge the gap like that with these kids... Parents need to be more trusting of the community, the neighbors -get to know the people your children interact with, have the right attitude, and the community will be good to you, you good to the community. I really believe that.

Summary of Theme Two

The second theme discussed the mothers' experiences of having a son incarcerated, adaptations the mothers made in response to changes to themselves and their relationships. The mothers' self-perceptions and how they perceived others viewed them varied. Katherine indicated she remained the ambitious, hardworking single mothers and her relationships had not been affected. Irene's view of herself ran from depressed to mentally strong and she felt others viewed her as easy going by others

before her sons' imprisonments, but hope turned to resignation and nervousness. Her relationship with her husband was affected, but like most of the other mothers, her faith kept her going. Donna indicated her son's imprisonment caused her to grow up and even though she still loved her son, she no longer had that ache to hold him in her arms. She viewed herself as stronger as a result of her experience, and while her relationship with friends and family didn't change, her son's imprisonment aborted her opportunity to return to school. Leona indicated she remains the same person and worried less about her son because she did not have to worry about where he was. She felt that her relationships had not been affected, and she called on outside activities and her church family to help her cope with her son's imprisonment. Josephine was "happy as a lark" before her son's imprisonment, but like Irene, she was now resigned and less softhearted about her son. Her husband rarely spoke about their son's incarceration, and she was secretive with her daughters about the level of support she have her son during his imprisonment.

Alice indicated before her brother's imprisonment, she did not pay attention to the penal system, but she is now more patient and more aware of the limitations of those involved in the penal system. Her husband was supportive in that he allowed her brother to live with them upon his release from prison, but some of her relatives appeared in denial when it came to talking about her brother's imprisonment. Alice's faith sustained her through the ordeal of imprisonment. Deborah indicated she had not really changed through the ordeal of her brother's imprisonment because she remained the person who had to try to keep her brothers in line. She experienced anger during her experience, but was grateful her brother had at least learned a trade while he was imprisoned. Cynthia said that while sometimes she felt sad and lonely her resilience kept her the same

throughout the incarceration. Like Irene, she expressed a greater sense of compassion to other felons as a result of her son's imprisonment.

Chapter IV presented a discussion of the participants in the study and the key findings obtained through the in-depth interview process. The first theme focused on the experiences the mothers had and what if anything they would have done differently given their expectations and the resultant reality of their sons' imprisonment. The second theme delved into the mothers' relationships, the resources they employed to adapt to the challenges, and the lasting impact on them as a result of having sons involved in the penal system. The mothers' also shared remarks about how the community and educators can or should help, which is also part of the discussion presented in Chapter V.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview of the Study

The *National Blueprint for Reentry* states,

It was estimated that in the year 2008, approximately 700,000 individuals would reenter communities from prisons around the nation. Most of these individuals will need assistance connecting to jobs, increasing their education, or accessing other essential social services in order to successfully reintegrate into society and improve their lives (H.I.R.E., 2008, p. 2).

Oftentimes, felons depend on families and friends to help them while they seek employment, housing, and tend to other physical and social needs (Holzer, Raphael, & Stoll, 2004); and it is the felons' mothers who provide a major portion of the support.

The purposes of this phenomenological study included: (1) adding to the knowledge base by gaining a better understanding of the experiences of mothers of sons who have been imprisoned as felons and how these women learn to adapt to the many challenges in their lives associated with this experience, and (2) identifying implications for educational practices and social policies that affect the lives of families of felons.

The research questions guiding the study were:

1. What are the experiences of African-American mothers of adult sons who have been incarcerated as felons?

- a. What are some of the roles assumed by mothers of adult sons who have been imprisoned as felons?
 - b. How have the mothers' identities and personal, professional, and community relationships been affected during and after the imprisonment of their sons?
2. What coping strategies and resources do mothers of incarcerated sons report using (a) initially following imprisonment, and (b) as time goes on?
 3. How have mothers engaged in learning over time as they adapt to the challenges of having a son who has been incarcerated as a felon?

In order to address the primary research questions and sub-questions, I interviewed eight women who served in maternal roles (mothers, foster mothers, sisters) of adult sons who reside in Texas. Snowball sampling was used to select the participants, and data from this study was collected during one to three individually held, face-to-face interviews.

As outlined previously, Chapter II focused on a review of literature on the plight of the adult male felon during imprisonment and upon release, the stigma of imprisonment as it affects the felon and his family, and the mothers' roles in complex and challenging situations. The review included discussions of identity, coping strategies, and isolation to help understand the experiences of the mothers of adult sons who have been incarcerated. Adult learning is analyzed extensively in prior research and a brief review of adult learning is included in this study to set the stage for later discussions in this chapter. Chapter III provided a detailed description of the methods used in conducting this study. This chapter described the theoretical framework used in guiding

the study, the research design, methods of recruitment and selection, and the role of the researcher, data collection and analysis strategies, and trustworthiness. Chapter IV introduced the participants in the study and the key findings obtained through the in-depth interview process. The first theme, *Adult Learning—I Would Have Done Things Differently*, focused on the experiences the mothers had and what, if anything, they may have done differently given their expectations and the reality of their sons' imprisonment. The second theme, *Adaptation—I Became Stronger*, delved into the mothers' relationships and the resources they employed to adapt to the challenges of having sons involved in the penal system. The remainder of this chapter presents a discussion of the key findings and how they relate to the literature reviewed and the theoretical frameworks presented. The chapter also offers conclusions, recommended practices for involvement by the community, educators, and government, followed by recommendations for future research.

Discussion of Key Findings

This section discusses the major themes in relation to the literature review, theoretical framework and primary questions. The first primary research question, What are the experiences of African-American mothers of adult sons who have been incarcerated as felons, ties in with Theme One, *Adult Learning—I Would Have Done Things Differently*, which included discussions about the mothers' expectations, roles played and what the mothers learned from their experiences.

Roles

Hilton (2005) poignantly discusses the tremendous toll that having an incarcerated son takes on mothers. The high rate of incarceration of African-American males means

that more Black mothers than any other group are affected. Hilton's study focuses on the Black mother/Black son relationship and states that, "it is usually the mother who faces the immediate repercussions of supporting this person in prison" (p. 15). This current research study supports Hilton's findings in that the eight participants indicated they had provided either financial or emotional support to their sons and/or their sons' children, which resulted in various degrees of distress on the mothers. The support provided during imprisonment included writing letters, making visits, sending money, and accepting telephone calls. Katherine indicated she wrote to her son and sent him money while he was in prison. Irene, Leona and Josephine visited their sons during imprisonment, and provided financial support, housing, clothing, and food upon their sons' release. Josephine's son, a three-time repeat offender, continued to rely on her to visit him during imprisonment and to provide food and shelter upon his release. Alice, Deborah, and Cynthia indicated they felt obligated for various reasons to remain the felons' main source of support. Alice offered her brother housing and other support upon his release because she felt no other family member would assume that responsibility. Deborah was motivated to honor a deathbed promise to her mother to help her brother. Cynthia felt it was her responsibility to stick by her sons' sides during their incarcerations and to continue to help motivate them.

Irene, Cynthia and Donna indicated they fully expected in their later years that their sons would assist them instead of their having to continue to provide financial support to their adult sons. Their expectations of enjoying their social lives without the major responsibilities of motherhood were interrupted by their sons' imprisonment. Some of the participants felt they were their sons' only means of support; however, the

mothers expressed frustration at providing financial support to adult sons, and some mothers thought that it was a waste of their resources.

In addition, the role of grandmother took on an extended meaning when the mothers sometimes had to raise their grandchildren in the absence of their sons. Leona, Cynthia, Irene and Donna indicated their roles as grandmothers increased during their sons' imprisonment. Of these four, all but Donna took their grandchildren to visit their fathers in prison. Donna believed any resources she would have used to help her son instead needed to be diverted to his two children, whom she had to raise as a result of his imprisonment. The mothers indicated they often felt the financial and emotional burdens, which corroborates the findings by other researchers (Conger et al., 2002) that participants sometimes felt anger, frustration, and stressful emotions as a result of having to provide financial support because of their sons' incarceration.

Some of the mothers also expressed concern about their own health as a result of the stress of dealing with the responsibilities of their sons' incarceration. Katherine felt she had to maintain a distance from her son to relieve some of the stress and to avoid becoming ill over the situation. Leona had to temper her frustration in order to control her blood pressure, and Irene's nerves and anxiety during her sons' imprisonment were causes for concern.

In Theme Two, *I Became Stronger*, findings about change, self-perception, relationships, and sources of strength are discussed, which primarily address research questions two and three: What coping strategies and resources do mothers of incarcerated sons report using, and how have mothers engaged in learning over time as they adapt to the challenges of having a son who has been incarcerated as a felon?

Identity

The theory of symbolic interactionism as discussed in Chapter II purports that how people view and present themselves is fluid and transitory depending on the situation and the times (Sandstrom et al., 2003). Who we are depends on our perception of how society views us, how we want to be viewed and our determination of how safe the environment is for that particular, conceptualized self. Mothers are particularly cognizant of how society views their children and some wear the robe of the felonious child, stigmatized as though they themselves had committed the offense (Sandstrom et al., 2003).

Assumption one of this study stated that people generally interact with others by placing them in pre-conceived categories, which may or may not present reality (Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2003). Only two of the participants spoke directly of stigma; however, I perceived expressions of self-doubt in the mothers' body language as they told their stories—for example, arms folded and down-cast eyes. Just as families of children with disabilities are affected by stigma (Koro-Ljungberg & Bussing, 2009), mothers with imprisoned sons sometimes experience fear, shame and discrimination resulting in defense mechanisms as a means of coping. Irene indicated she felt stigmatized when her sons' behaviors were displayed to her church members and she had to experience the embarrassment of their actions. She especially felt that she was being blamed and judged during counseling sessions that she participated in as a condition of her son's release. She indicated the counselors implied she, the mother, was to blame for her son's behavior, which lead to imprisonment. Cynthia indicated that negative stigma associated with her son's imprisonment has caused her to avoid boasting about his

accomplishments, although she still holds the belief that her son will eventually become a contributing citizen.

Three of the participants felt their identities had not changed, while most acknowledged feeling nervous, ashamed, and vulnerable. Katherine, Leona and Cynthia initially indicated that they had not changed, but later Leona and Cynthia admitted to having some moments of doubt. Irene, Donna, Deborah, Josephine and Alice had positive views of themselves before their sons' imprisonments, but feelings of vulnerability were evident along their journeys of developing mental strength, growth, determination and acceptance. Irene said she was hopeful before her sons were incarcerated, but later viewed herself as being nervous, naïve and ashamed.

Relationships

Assumption two of this study stated that people act toward others based on negotiated meanings derived from social interactions (Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2003). It is important to understand how mothers have endured the pain and heartbreak of seeing a son go through events that led them to involvement in the penal system and how mothers have endured changes in family dynamics and feelings of powerlessness, low self-esteem, unworthiness, and hopelessness. Unfortunately, mothers of felons often are both single and on the lower socioeconomic levels, and the burden placed on mothers with incarcerated adult sons results in added financial distress (Green, Ensminger, Robertson, & Juon, 2006). None of the mothers indicated their professional relationships were affected adversely by their sons' imprisonment, although one indicated her experience helped her relate professionally to clients in situations similar to that of her sons or herself. Several of the mothers indicated there was stress in their relationships

with their families. One mother, Katherine, indicated that sometimes she had to take a second job in order to provide for her children, but was made to feel guilty when she stopped providing housing to her son upon his release. Irene expressed tension between her husband and her when he forbade her to use his money, which resulted in her having to take a job in order to send financial support to her sons. One of the mothers, Josephine, indicated she had to be careful when speaking to her daughters about her son because she did not want them to feel as though they were being treated unfairly. This same mother indicated she and her husband experienced stress when communicating about their son while he was imprisoned. One of the participants, Cynthia, indicated her tolerance for men had changed in that she was less willing to deal with personal conflict.

Sources of Strength

Assumption three of this study stated that people would make adjustments in their lives based on prior knowledge and experiences in order to deal with challenging situations (Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2003). Two of the mothers, Deborah and Cynthia, relied on self-motivation to get through the journey of having sons who have been imprisoned. Deborah was determined to keep the deathbed promise she made to her mother to take care of her brother, while Cynthia indicated sometimes she maintained a façade of strength to help her get through the experience.

Four of the participants called on their religious resources for strength. Leona, Katherine, Josephine and Alice called upon their church family to pray for their sons, became more involved in church activities to keep them occupied, and spent time reading the Bible. The study by Miltiades and Pruchno (2002), in which *subjective caregiving burden* was introduced, concluded Blacks relied on religion and reported a higher level of

satisfaction in caring for their child, but they also sustained a higher level of burden because of socio-economic levels and poor health. This current study supports the findings by Miltiades and Pruchno in that while the participants felt burdened by the financial and some health-related stressors, half of the participants in this study indicated their spirituality, faith, church, and prayer were major sources of strength while dealing with the incarceration of their sons.

Miltiades and Pruchno (2002) also suggested in their study that Blacks might be able to cope with care-giving situations because of having to overcome greater past adversarial conditions, relying on their cultural traditions to see them through difficult situations. The cultural tradition of relying heavily on religion in challenging times crosses over to Yosso's (2005) theoretical framework of community cultural wealth, in which culture is referred to as "behaviors and values that are learned, shared, and exhibited by a group of people" (p. 75) who, in difficulty circumstances, band together to learn necessary coping strategies while maintaining some degree of hope. Yosso further indicates that contrary to deficit thinking in which the victim is blamed for the circumstances, the theory of cultural wealth embraces the positive aspects of the group. The participants in this current study are part of a growing group of mothers who share the community connection of having adult sons who have been imprisoned. They have accepted the challenge of providing continued support to their sons while using spiritual and other resources to help them maintain their strength and relationships while seeking to overcome sometimes seemingly insurmountable barriers.

Learning That Took Place

The conceptual map presented in Chapter II of this study included transformative learning as one of its components and thus one of the questions guiding the study is, “How have mothers engaged in learning over time as they adapt to the challenges of having a son who has been incarcerated as a felon?” The current study focuses on adults from their mid-40s to 80, and as Levinson (1978) views Midlife, it is,

A period where one needs to redress the dominance of attachment to the external world: to find a better balance between the needs of the self and the needs of society—a greater integration of separateness and attachment: “Greater individuation allows him to be more separate from the world, to be more independent and self generating. But it also gives him the confidence and understanding to have more intense attachments in the world and to feel more fully a part of it” (p. 195).

Levinson further discussed transitioning from middle adulthood (age forty to sixty-five) to late adulthood (age sixty on) in which one attempts to modify one’s life structure according to the imagined self compared with the world as it is lived.

The final assumption of this study stated that people often experience transformational learning when facing challenging situations (Mezirow, 2000). “Transformative learning shapes people. They are different afterward in ways both they and others can recognize” (Clark, 1993, p. 47). According to the participants, transformation did happen in how they viewed themselves and also how others saw them after they had gone through the challenges of having sons incarcerated; for example, the participants indicated they had changed their perspectives about providing financial

support to their sons. Some of the mothers indicated in retrospect they would not have provided financial support to their sons while they were in prison because sending money to their sons during their incarceration was akin to enabling them, making it too easy for them in prison. As Josephine said, “I think I kind of enabled him, being as young as he was...But then one, two, three you out, three strikes...I would cut off his financing from the git go. I would not send him anything.”

Development in some situations is difficult to define. Mezirow (1991) indicates that development is central to transformational learning, and “Individuals at the final stage of reflective judgment can offer a perspective about their own perspective, an essential condition for transformative learning” (Mezirow, 2003, p. 61). Smith (1999) indicates in his article that development often refers to a progression through certain stages of maturity, which causes changes in actions in different situations. A sense of developmental change over time can be seen in the way several of the participants reported lasting impacts and indicated they felt strong before their sons were imprisoned, then vulnerable during the imprisonment, but somehow found renewed growth as a result of the imprisonment. Merriam (2004), in quoting Mezirow, indicated that development is central to transformational learning:

An essential point made in many studies, including my own (Mezirow, 1978), is that transformation can lead developmentally toward a more inclusive, differentiated, permeable, and integrated perspective and that, in so far as it is possible, we all naturally move toward such an orientation. This is what development means in adulthood.... (p. 155).

All of the mothers were challenged by their experiences; however, some indicated a broadening of their viewpoints, including those held toward the legal system and other felons as a result of enduring the challenges of having sons incarcerated. The mothers became “more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 7). The interview process itself also seemed to serve a role in prompting greater reflection on personal change for some participants. Alice indicated that participating in this study’s interview process provided her needed relief from the mental drain and sleepless nights she had experienced as a result of her brother’s imprisonment and subsequent housing with her and her husband. She said, “It just felt good. It’s kind of like therapy to talk about this and to share this, so I really, I needed this. I liked it. I did.”

The mothers’ experiences of having sons incarcerated are important; however, Merriam (2004) indicates that reflecting critically on the experience is key to transformational learning. Merriam (2004) further stated that,

Although transformative learning appears to lead to a more mature, more autonomous, more ‘developed’ level of thinking, it might also be argued that to be able to engage in the process in the first place requires a certain level of development and in particular, cognitive development (p. 61).

When asked to reflect on what they had learned, Donna indicated she had felt pain, but felt she then became more wise and more positive. Irene, Alice, and Cynthia expressed a change in their perceptions about those who had been involved in the penal system. Alice indicated she was more patient and willing to research options available for her brother whereas before, she paid little attention to the penal system. Irene expressed

empathy towards those who had gone to prison and made a point of greeting and encouraging them when she saw them at church. Cynthia indicated that before her son's imprisonment, she would not consider a relationship with men who had been imprisoned, but had developed compassion for some of the felons and was more willing to "give them a chance." She also indicated she felt more valuable to her employer and clients as a result of having gone through the experience with her son and now could better relate to their trials.

Conclusions

Several conclusions may be drawn from the findings although broad generalizability is not a goal of qualitative studies. Nonetheless, as indicated previously, the rich detail provided by the participants during the interview process allows the readers to use their own judgment in interpreting the findings and judging their potential transferability to their own situation.

Quoted in Hilton's (2005) dissertation is a heart-felt summary of the mother's role to her incarcerated son:

Mothers represent the island of relationship certainty in the ocean of insecure and changeable relationships. Mothers visit sons who are prisoners. Mothers write. Mothers remain as loyal and consistently attentive as they were prior to their son's confinement. For many mothers, the imprisonment is a continuation of earlier arrests and jailings. They have a felt and expressed commitment to offer nurturance and help to their sons (Brodsky, 1975, p. 125).

Similarly, participants in this study believed it was their responsibility to provide some level of support to their sons during and after their incarceration, either direct

support to the felon—as in depositing money in their prison accounts, writing letters, visiting—or indirect by raising or helping their sons’ children. The mothers indicated their lives were changed as a result of having sons incarcerated, which represent major non-normative influences (Tennant, 1988) on their lives. It is all about what the mothers do, feel, and experience (Stevens-Long, Schapiro, & McClintock, 2012) before, during and after the long journey of having sons incarcerated that redefines their lives and creates new meaning. As a result of their experiences, several of the participants were unsure whether providing financial support to their sons while they were incarcerated served the intended purpose. It took repeated imprisonments by their sons before several of the participants stopped providing financial support to their sons while in prison.

The participants experienced different levels of stress associated with providing support to their sons upon release because of the limitations facing them when seeking housing, jobs, and employment. Schnittker and Andrea (2007) indicate that any association with prison produces shame and anger among families, which may increase health-risk factors. O’Connor (2002) indicates stigma is a mark of disgrace or reproach, which Irene indicated she felt when her son’s behavior was made known to some of her church members. She indicated she experienced anxiety attacks and felt shame among her church members and during subsequent counseling sessions. However, as Irene indicated, the sons were old enough to know better and that life goes on with the help of prayer. Donna channeled her anger and found the strength to use the anger for something positive, while Cynthia thought her experiences reinforced her commitment to help others going through similar experiences. Several of the participants believed they needed some level of support to help them cope through the experience of having a son incarcerated,

and Alice's poignant, unsolicited expressions at the end of her interview process may be used to sum the mothers' conclusions about the usefulness of the study.

Self-directed learning was included in the original conceptual map; however, the data for this study did not provide substantial evidence of participant self-directed learning, or the processes they used to engage in such learning. Hansman (1998) describes self-directed learning as learning that occurs when the learners practice doing something, adapts it to fit their needs and only receive assistance when they ask. Alice, for example, indicated her brother's incarceration caused her to learn more about the legal system; however, she did not indicate how she had learned more. Anderson and Hayes (1996) indicate, "Self-directed learning in adulthood is a central feature of identity development and an important source of self-esteem" (p. 92). Irene indicated that attempts to gain a better understanding of her experiences during counseling sessions with her son after one of his releases resulted instead with her being made to feel as though she were the blame, thus causing her to withdraw from seeking help in that manner. This current study could serve as a basis for future research to better understand strategies mothers use to engage in self-directed learning as well as challenges they face in their learning efforts.

The participants in this study readily shared what they felt they had learned as a result of having experienced their sons' incarceration; however, it was difficult for them to express how that learning had occurred. Kelly (2009) summarized Dewey's three-stage model of experiential learning as involving (1) sizing up the situation through objective observation, (2) drawing forth knowledge by recalling similar past experiences (yours and others), and (3) judging how to proceed based on this knowledge. Kelly

Recommendations

This study presents a snapshot of the experiences of the participants whose life journeys included non-normative experiences of having sons who have been incarcerated. Non-normative events as described by Tennant (1988) are those events that have a major impact on an individual's life, but which most people escape. Some events, such as marriage and childbirth, are expected to occur along our life journeys and, as indicated by Brim and Riff (1980), are not expected to present us with undue stress. Unfortunately, in today's society, an increasing number of African-American mothers do not escape the experience of having sons incarcerated; in fact, their shared experiences may now be perceived as a new norm. According to Ohio State University Law Professor Michelle Alexander, "More African American men are in prison or jail, on probation or parole than were enslaved in 1850, before the Civil War began," (cited in Pitterson, 2011), which makes me believe that an increasing number of mothers are affected.

The participants in this study have shared their journeys. When asked how the community and educators could assist them and other mothers going through similar experiences, some thought no help was needed while others indicated some level of counseling would help. They offered very limited suggestions about how educators could help them. Their thoughts turned more often to how educators could help their children before they became deeply entrenched in the penal system than how educators could help them, the mothers. Society as a whole could help the mothers in their role as caregivers and role models by developing a culture of community rather than isolation, a culture of hope rather than blame, by working together to offer support and information when the mothers reach out in times of despair to find solutions for their sons.

Practice

A review of the literature for this study focused on the plight of the adult male in the legal system, stigma and imprisonment, mothers' roles in complex/challenging situations, and adult learning. Phenomenology served as the guiding theoretical frame, and according to Husserl (1939/1954), the research was conducted to reflect "the lived through meanings and the subjective performances that subtend human situations" (pp.148–150) based on the mothers' experiences. Not all education takes place in a formal setting—adult learning to help address change transcends traditional classrooms. Community-based forums allow mothers the opportunities to gather in a less-structured environment in which they can share experiences and life-learned lessons. However, education in more formal settings remains an important part of the discussion. I believe that continued education at all levels is the key to continued growth and offer the following recommendations:

Role of the Community. One of the questions asked during the interview process was, "What do you think the community can or should do to assist mothers who have sons imprisoned?" The general response from the mothers centered on counseling and sharing information resources.

1. The community should offer regularly scheduled and well-publicized opportunities during which mothers can gather to discuss their experiences while feeling safe and non-judged.
2. Facilitators who can empathize with the mothers during club-like counseling should lead community-based forums.

3. The community should offer workshops that facilitate sensitivity training for citizens to help understand the challenges facing mothers of adult sons who have been imprisoned; e.g., difficulties in obtaining housing, jobs and other support, which results in dependency on the mothers.

Role of Educators. I am a public school educator and I see evidence in each class the negative influences on the children as a result of having a parent imprisoned. The children sometimes share examples of the stresses placed on their mothers because the mothers are trying to support the family and the felon with limited resources. Educators from elementary to higher education are called on to provide resources to the children and their mothers. Previous studies indicate community support, collegial relations with faculty, inclusion of diverse people and perspectives, and bonding with fellow students as key factors in the transformative learning process (Stevens-Long et al., 2012).

1. All levels of educators should join with the community to continue to showcase and encourage students' academic achievements.
2. Elementary school educators should continue to encourage parental involvement in their child's education, for example, by calling the mothers when things are going well with the children instead of waiting to call when things are going wrong.
3. Elementary school educators should continue to listen to the voices of the students when they talk about their mothers, for example, taking their money to buy gas. The educators should use those opportunities as teachable moments to promote the options achievable through education.

4. High school educators should join with the community and allow mothers access to school campuses for group self-help/improvement meetings.
5. High school educators could promote informal classes, such as typing and office applications, for the mothers that may facilitate their obtaining higher paying jobs.
6. Higher education educators should join the community by serving as resource guides to the mothers who want to continue their education.
7. Community colleges and universities should offer continued education or informal courses that help the mothers feel empowered in their decisions to provide different levels of support to their sons.
8. Colleges and universities, perhaps through the social work or health-related departments, should offer more courses that allow for deeper investigation into the experiences of mothers whose sons have been incarcerated.

Role of Social Workers and Family Organizations. Social workers and family organizations serve as conduits of resources for the felon and their families. Knowing where to go to obtain critical information is important to the mothers who sometimes feel helpless when trying to navigate the legal and other systems of support.

1. Social workers and family organizations should join with community-based organizations to ensure mothers know about the resources that are available to them and their sons.
2. Social workers and family organizations should join forces to develop a centralized database that mothers can access to find needed resources when adjusting to the many roles as a result of their sons' imprisonment.

3. Social workers and family organizations should develop and publicize programs that are accessible to the mothers of the felons, such as non-judgmental counseling and group meetings.

Role of the Government. One of the mothers, Alice, expressed concerns about the limitations placed on felons upon their release from prison, the impact of which was felt by both the felons and their supporters. For example, felons are denied access to apartment leasing contracts and face hiring restrictions that limit them to lower-paying jobs when jobs are obtainable. Other mothers expressed frustration with being unable to get help with their sons before they reached the point of involvement in the legal system. One of the mothers, Irene, indicated she could not get help by going through the system.

1. Governmental officials need to reevaluate the current policies and procedures that exacerbate negatively the social impact experienced by felons and their families after their sentences have been served.
2. Governmental officials need to review the economic impact caused by the inability of ex-felons to obtain housing and employment, which may affect recidivism.
3. Governmental officials need to review policies aimed at protecting its citizens, which may have the consequence of creating a subgroup of people who are denied access to common resources even after they have served their sentences.

Research

A wealth of knowledge has been gained through research that focused on the felon (Conway, 2000; Case & Fassenfest, 2004; Chappell, 2003); however, during this

research process, I discovered a dearth of scholarly references (Byrd, 2004; Travis, 2005; Hilton, 2005) about the impact on the mothers who are increasingly called on to provide financial, social, emotional, and other forms of support to their sons who have been incarcerated. This current study adds to the resources available to other researchers who seek to understand the effects of mothers who continue to support adult sons because of imprisonment.

The results of the study indicate mothers faced many challenges, including feelings of isolation and helplessness when their sons were incarcerated, but they learned to cope with their situations by engaging their friends and family—including church family—in their journeys.

1. Future research is needed to document the experiences of those mothers who must take the difficult journey of having sons incarcerated. The cathartic release expressed by some of the participants in this study lends credence that there is value in sharing one's story.
2. The average age of the participants in this study was 60. Further research might focus on understanding the impact that continuing to provide support for an adult son who has been imprisoned has on adults in their later stages of life.
3. This research looked at only African-American participants. Future research is needed to develop an understanding of the journeys of other ethnic groups who share the experiences of having adult sons who have been imprisoned.
4. Future studies might be designed to stimulate greater in-depth discussion about the self-directed learning efforts mothers engage in while traveling down the road during their sons' incarceration.

Researcher's Final Thoughts

When I made the decision to research the topic of mothers who have adult sons who have been imprisoned, I fully intended to participate in the study. However, during the course of the study, I decided to withdraw from actually providing personal data. My own experiences are such that they lay dormant for a while, only to resurface at inopportune moments to cause havoc on my self-esteem and relationships. I have experienced what some of these mothers have gone through, what we continue to go through. I know the pain and the wasted energy used in camouflaging the fact of having an adult son who has been imprisoned, the financial commitment required, and the energy and moral commitment needed to help take care of grandchildren and others during the process. As was true for Alice, this study was cathartic for me even as a researcher. I am glad to have gone through the journey with the eight participants—perhaps as a bystander, and like them, hope this research will change some of the views of the community used in keeping our resources so limited that there is very little hope for the felons or their mothers. My experiences provide me insight into the challenges the eight mothers share. I join those mothers of adult sons who have been imprisoned who rose to give voice to their experiences. Behar (1996), expressed our thoughts when she said,

“whatever the consequences, they are bound to be better than continuing to be silent. I am tired of hiding, tired of misspent and knotted energies, tired of the hypocrisy, and tired of acting as though I have something to hide” (p. 10).

This is an important study because not only does it give a voice to those mothers who share the challenges of having sons incarcerated, it brings to the discussion table the

need for all the players to be careful when making decisions that greatly impact our society; for example, governmental decisions that encourage incarceration rather than education and never-ending penalties rather than rehabilitation, all of which affect the quality of life of mothers who are left to raise the core of our existence—our children.

The origin of the famous quote, “It takes a village to raise a child,” has been lost over time; however, the underlying message remains the same. Raising children is a societal effort. The mothers cannot do it alone. Help should come from the neighbor down the street who is unafraid to step up and question a child or inform the mother who may be unaware of happenings without fear of retaliation—sometimes by the parents. Parents should feel comfortable working with governmental officials, including the police, to develop alternatives to unacceptable behaviors when they surface initially in young children instead of after their sons have been incarcerated. Educators at all levels especially need to work with the mothers to return to the culture of pride in education and achievement instead of the mentality of defeatism and settlement.

APPENDIX A: DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions apply:

Adult is defined as one who “arrives at a self-concept of being responsible for her or his own life, of being self-motivated” (Anderson & Hayes, 1996, p. 91).

African-American Woman is defined as a Black, non-Hispanic female, born or naturalized in the United States.

Coping Strategies is defined as methods used in adapting to stressful or unusual circumstances.

Ex-felon is defined as a person released from supervision of a correctional officer and confinement in a local, state, or federal correctional institution after a period of one or more years.

Felon is defined as a person under supervision of a correctional officer and confined in a local, state, or federal correctional institution for a period of one or more years following a felony conviction.

Identity is defined as a presentation of self in relation to others in given situations (Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2003).

Imprisonment is defined as confinement in a local, state, or federal correctional institution under the supervision of correctional officers for a period one year or greater.

Role is defined as a coordination of actions with others to realize desired goals based on what is going on in a given situation (Sandstrom, et al., 2003).

Mother is defined as having primary maternal responsibility of a child either through birth, adoption, or surrogacy (e.g., grandmother, aunt, godmother, sisters).

Relationship is defined as an association with others through shared meaning, values, expectations, roles, and goals (Sandstrom, et al., 2003).

Stigma is defined as an attribute that is deeply discrediting – a blemish of individual character perceived as weak will as a result of imprisonment and unemployment, which may lead to discrimination, assumptions of inferiority and reduction in life chances (Goffman, 1963).

APPENDIX B: SOLICITATION FLYER

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled, “A look at how African-American mothers adapt to the imprisonment of an adult son and the impact on their identities and relationships.” I am a doctoral candidate at Texas State University-San Marcos, under the direction of supervision committee chair, Dr. Jovita Ross-Gordon. Approximately 8-10 participants are expected to be included in this study.

Any question about this study may be directed to Dr. Ross-Gordon at (512) 245-8084 or jross-gordon@txstate.edu. Pertinent questions about the research, research participants’ rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Jon Lasser (512-245-3413 – lasser@txstate.edu), or to Ms. Becky Northcut, Compliance Specialist (512-245-2102).

Purpose

The purposes of this study included:

- (1) adding to the knowledge base by gaining a better understanding of the experiences of mothers of sons who have been imprisoned as felons and how these women learn to adapt to the many challenges in their lives associated with this experience, and
- (2) identifying implications for educational practices and social policies that affect the lives of families of felons. As a participant, you will be asked to relate your experiences as a mother of an adult son who has been imprisoned and your coping strategies used during and after the imprisonment.

Benefits

Your participation in this research will potentially help provide insight to the community and other researchers about the experiences of mothers impacted by the incarceration of their sons. The possible benefits to you include having the opportunity to share some of the strategies you used in coping during your son’s imprisonment, highlighting the challenges facing mothers as a result of their son’s imprisonment, and also helping the community and policymakers review the need to reshape those policies that hinder a felon’s rehabilitative efforts.

Process

- Participants will be expected to complete –
 - Questionnaires (regarding your son's imprisonment)
 - Interviews
 - 2 to 3 sessions lasting approximately one hour each.
 - Questions include: (1) What year did your son first become involved in the penal system? (2) How long was he imprisoned? (3) Upon release, did he live with you, another family member, or other? (4) What strategies did you use to help you adapt to your son's imprisonment?
 - Interviews will be audio taped or received electronically.
- Your name or other identifying information will never be disclosed or referenced in any way in any written or verbal context.
- You will not receive any money for participating in this study.

Criteria for Selection

- African-American mothers (including grandmothers, aunts, godmothers) of adult sons who have been imprisoned in a local, state, or federal correctional institution for at least one year.
- Residents of Texas.

Contact

If you believe you fit the criteria and are interested in participating in this study, please contact:

Patricia H. Hiller, Doctoral Candidate
Texas State University-San Marcos
San Marcos, Texas 78666
(512) 467-4005
ph1067@txstate.edu

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

IRB Approval Number 2011L18

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled, “A look at how African-American mothers adapt to the imprisonment of an adult son and the impact on their identities and relationships.” I am a doctoral candidate at Texas State University-San Marcos, under the direction of supervision committee chair, Dr. Jovita Ross-Gordon. I am asking for permission to include you in this study. Approximately 8-10 participants are expected to be included in this study.

Any question about this study may be directed to Dr. Ross-Gordon at (512) 245-8084 or jross-gordon@txstate.edu. Pertinent questions about the research, research participants’ rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Jon Lasser (512-245-3413 – lasser@txstate.edu), or to Ms. Becky Northcut, Compliance Specialist (512-245-2102).

The purposes of this study included: (1) adding to the knowledge base by gaining a better understanding of the experiences of mothers of sons who have been imprisoned as felons and how these women learn to adapt to the many challenges in their lives associated with this experience, and (2) identifying implications for educational practices and social policies that affect the lives of families of felons. Therefore, you will be asked to relate your experiences as a mother of an adult son who has been imprisoned and your coping strategies used during and after the imprisonment.

Your participation in this research will help provide insight to the community and other researchers about the experiences of mothers challenged by a family torn apart. The benefits to you include having the opportunity to share some of the strategies you used in coping during your son’s imprisonment, highlighting the challenges facing mothers as a result of their son’s imprisonment, and also helping the community and policymakers review the need to reshape those policies that hinder a felon’s rehabilitative efforts.

If you participate, you will be asked to fill out a brief questionnaire regarding your son’s imprisonment and participate in 2 to 3 interview sessions either in your home and/or at a site and time convenient to you. The interviews should last 1 to 2 hours each. Questions include: (1) What was it like to learn that your son could go to prison? (2) How do you describe the experience of having an adult son who is a felon? (3) In what ways have you learned what you needed to know along the way, for both yourself and for your son’s benefit? (4) How has your life changed as a result of your son’s imprisonment? You may choose to not answer any question for any reason.

Your interviews will be recorded on audiotape and transcribed into a written record by me. Any information obtained during this study will be kept in secured cabinets in the researcher's office while the research is being completed and for a period of two years beyond completion. Excerpts from transcripts of your interviews may be quoted in future conference papers and/or journal articles that may be written by the interviewer. However, your name or other identifying information will not be disclosed or referenced in any way in any written or verbal context. A summary of your responses will be discussed with you; and the research findings will be provided to you upon completion of the study, if requested.

You will not receive any money for participating in this study. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any point.

In the unlikely event that you may experience increased stress or anxiety after talking about your experiences, you may want to contact a local health provider, at your own expense. A sample listing of those providers is shown below:

Austin Travis County MHMR Center
1430 Collier St.
Austin, TX 78704-2911
(512) 447-4141

Spindletop MH/MR Services, South County Outpatient Services
3401 57th St.
Port Arthur, TX 77642-5902
(409) 938-6138

Spindletop MH/MR Services
2750 S. 8th St.
Beaumont, TX 77701-7719
(409) 839-1000

If you have any questions about your participation in this study, call me at (512) 467-4005 or email me at ph1067@txstate.edu.

If you are receiving this information via the Internet, please print the consent document for your records.

Participant's Name

Date

Participant's Signature

☐ *By checking this box I certify I have read the information provided above and that I have decided to participate in the study. I may discontinue my participation at any time. **You must check this box to participate in this study.***

Researcher's Name

Date

Researcher's Signature

APPENDIX D: DEMOGRAPHICS

A LOOK AT HOW AFRICAN-AMERICAN MOTHERS ADAPT TO THE IMPRISONMENT OF AN ADULT SON AND THE IMPACT ON THEIR IDENTITIES AND RELATIONSHIPS.

1. How old are you? _____
2. What is your marital status?

3. How many children do you have?

4. What are your children's ages and genders?

5. What is the highest educational degree that you have completed?

6. What is your employment status?

7. What range of income would you say you earn? (Circle one)
 - a. Less than \$25,000
 - b. \$25,000-\$35,000
 - c. \$35,000-\$50,000
 - d. \$50,000 – higher
8. How many hours a week do you work?

9. What type of work do you do?

10. How do you identify your race or ethnicity?

11. What year did your son first become involved in the penal system?

12. How old was he when he went to jail or prison?

13. How long was he imprisoned?

14. How long has he been released from prison?

15. Upon release, did he live with: (Circle one)

a. You? b. Another family member? c. If other, please explain:

16. How did your son depend on you (e.g., financial or other support) during or upon release from prison?

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW GUIDES

A LOOK AT HOW AFRICAN-AMERICAN MOTHERS ADAPT TO THE IMPRISONMENT OF AN ADULT SON AND THE IMPACT ON THEIR IDENTITIES AND RELATIONSHIPS.

Interview One:

PARTICIPANT: _____

INTERVIEWER: Patricia H. Hiller

PURPOSE: (1) Adding to the knowledge base by gaining a better understanding of the experiences of mothers of sons who have been imprisoned as felons and how these women learn to adapt to the many challenges in their lives associated with this experience, and (2) identifying implications for educational practices and social policies that affect the lives of families of felons.

METHOD: Semi-standardized open-ended interview

QUESTIONS (Focused Life History):

1. What was it like to learn that your son could go to prison?
2. How do you describe the experience of having an adult son who is a felon?
3. How do you feel about the whole experience?
4. What roles have you played in your son's life as a result of his involvement in the penal system?
 - * What factors contributed to your assuming these roles?
5. How has your life changed as a result of your son's imprisonment?

6. As an individual, how do you think you have changed?

If probing is needed:

* How would you describe yourself before your son's imprisonment?

During? After?

* How do you believe others would describe you before your son's imprisonment? During? After?

7. How about your family and friends, how have they been affected?

8. What differences have you seen in your relationships with others?

9. Have you experienced any impact on your professional opportunities as a result of your son's involvement in the penal system? (Ask for explanation if needed)

10. What challenges have you experienced as a result of your son's imprisonment?

11. What coping strategies have you used to deal with your son's imprisonment and adjustment since release?

12. In what ways have you learned those things you needed to know along the way, for both yourself and for your son's benefit?

* What would have made this learning easier?

13. If you had to go through this experience again, what would you do differently?

14. What piece of advice would you give to other mothers going through the same experience?

15. What do you think the community can or should do to assist mothers who have sons imprisoned?

16. What advice do you have for educators who may want to develop programs to assist women going through this experience?

CLOSING:

_____, you have been very helpful and I appreciate your taking the time to give such insightful comments. To help us prepare for our next interview session, please answer the following questions:

1. What additional comments would you like to make in reference to our conversation today?
2. What should I have asked during our conversation today that I did not?
3. What questions or comments do you have that we should discuss during our next interview?

Interview Two (Details of the Experiences):

During our first interview, you provided me with demographical and historical information about yourself. Today, I want you to provide specific examples about your experiences and the effects on your relationships. In other words, I want to hear your stories as you remember them while you were going through your son's ordeal.

1. Before I ask you any new questions, is there anything you have been thinking about since our last interview that you want to be sure to have a chance to share with me?

2. Can you tell me one of the most memorable incidents you had in interacting with your son while he was incarcerated? Since he has been released?
3. Can you tell me a story that you think reveals the kinds of challenges faced by an ex-felon and his family after he is no longer incarcerated?
4. Can you tell me a story that would help me understand how your relationships were affected by this experience?
5. Can you tell me a story that would help explain why a mother might choose not to talk to others outside the family about her son's status as an ex-offender?
6. Can you give me an example of any time when you have felt judged by others on the basis of your son's imprisonment?
 - * How did that make you feel?
 - * What did you do about it?
 - * What did you learn about yourself during the process?

Interview Three (Reflections on the Meaning):

During our last interview, you gave examples of some of the challenges that you experienced. Today I want to share with you some of my interpretations of what I learned from our first two interviews and give you a chance to respond.

1. Given those experiences, how do you see yourself now and in the future?
2. What lasting impact have your experiences had on you?

What other comments would you like to share with me today? Are there other questions I should have asked and have not? If so, please explain how your comment relates to your son's imprisonment.

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VITA

Patricia Hayes Hiller was born and raised in Port Arthur, Texas, the middle child of Elton Hayes, Sr., and Marion Hartman Hayes. After completing her work at Lincoln High School and Port Arthur Business College, she began her first job at Texaco, Inc., got married and began raising her family. A non-traditional student, she attended college mainly at night and during the summers while working full time and raising her four children. She earned degrees from Lamar University (1982/B.B.A., Management), Beaumont, Texas; St. Edwards University, (1990/M.B.A., Public Administration), Austin, Texas; and Texas State University-San Marcos (2007/M.Ed., Secondary Education), San Marcos, Texas. Widowed, she moved her family to Houston, Texas, where she worked as an account representative at Dean Witter Reynolds, and later as a real estate broker in Austin, Texas. After retiring in 2006 from the State Bar of Texas (where her experiences included executive management), she immediately enrolled at Texas State to earn her teacher's certification and her second masters degree. She taught business courses at MacArthur and Madison high schools (2006-2010) in San Antonio, Texas, and at Covington Middle School in Austin, Texas. She was a 2007 cohort member in the doctoral program (Adult, Professional, and Community Education).

Her leadership roles include serving as a board member and chair of the board, Capitol Credit Union (1992-2006); Southwest Regional Director and international board member (2002-2006, covering Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Arkansas), and life member,

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This dissertation was typed by Patricia Hayes Hiller.