Is Motherhood Important? Imprisoned Women’s Maternal Experiences Before and During Confinement and Their Postrelease Expectations
Sandra L. Barnes and Ebonie Cunningham Stringer

Feminist Criminology 2014 9: 3
DOI: 10.1177/1557085113504450

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://fcx.sagepub.com/content/9/1/3

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
Division on Women and Crime of The American Society of Criminology

Additional services and information for Feminist Criminology can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://fcx.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://fcx.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
Citations: http://fcx.sagepub.com/content/9/1/3.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Dec 1, 2013
What is This?
Is Motherhood Important? 
Imprisoned Women’s 
Maternal Experiences Before 
and During Confinement 
and Their Postrelease 
Expectations

Sandra L. Barnes¹ and Ebonie Cunningham Stringer²

Abstract
In recent years, sharp increases in the female prison population have landed more mothers behind bars. While the experiences of imprisoned women may differ substantially from free mothers, studies suggest that motherhood is important for many imprisoned mothers. The current study uses a sample of 210 imprisoned mothers and multivariate modeling to investigate how familial relationships before and during imprisonment and mothers’ postrelease expectations influence the salience of maternal identity. Findings suggest that regardless of demographic factors, close mother–caregiver relationships, contact with family during imprisonment, and expecting to have custody of children upon release positively impacts imprisoned women’s mothering identities.

Keywords
prison, women, mothers, identity, family

While feminists debate the contemporary features of the maternal role and identity, motherhood has historically been viewed as a central feature of femininity. Receiving social cues from dominant family models, many girls are socialized from a young age to internalize conventional roles that present mothers as sensitive, ever-present nurturers, problem solvers, and teachers (Collins, 2000; O’Reilly, 2006). Women who embrace and perform this role well often enjoy praise and enhanced social status. Given the nature of gendered socialization and the associated social rewards, mothering can

¹Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA
²Wingate University, Wingate, NC, USA

Corresponding Author:
Sandra L. Barnes, Department of Human and Organizational Development and the Divinity School
Peabody #90, 230 Appleton Place, Nashville, TN 37203-5721.
Email: sandra.l.barnes@Vanderbilt.Edu
be central to the identities of women who have children (Simon, 1992). While imprisoned mothers are at a disadvantage in many regards, they may not differ from other mothers in highly esteeming their maternal identities (Hairston, 2002, 1999).

While a limited body of research examines the challenges of mothering while incarcerated (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Dalley, 2002; Enos, 2001; Hairston, 1999, 2002; Henriques, 1982; Johnston, 1995a, 1995b; Richie, 2002; Snyder, Carlo, & Mullins, 2001; Stanton, 1980), few studies investigate maternal identity specifically. While not exhaustive, this study considers some of the mothering attitudes and behaviors believed to be important in existing research and indicators that help explain mothering identity for this specific population. Using a sample of 210 imprisoned mothers, we use bivariate and multivariate techniques to investigate factors associated with identity salience among imprisoned women. Specifically, we explore whether demographic features such as race and age, family relationships and arrangements prior to and during imprisonment, and postrelease projections about parenting explain differences in identity salience among mothers. Findings enhance our understanding of maternal identity and may inform practitioners serving imprisoned women who face multiple challenges in conjunction with motherhood.

**Imprisoned Women and Motherhood**

Contemporary drug laws and sentencing protocols are landing more women in prison for longer periods of time (Beck, 2000; Bloom & Brown, 2011). Racial minorities are overrepresented in state prisons with Black non-Hispanics (48%) and Hispanics (15%) comprising the majority of the prison population. Most of these women have never married and are between the ages of 25 and 34 years. More than half (56%) have completed high school or its equivalent. About 60% are unemployed or underemployed at the time of arrest (Greenfield & Snell, 1999; Mumola, 2000). In a study of women convicted of crimes in Texas, over half of the respondents reported legal employment prior to entering prison or jail. However, nearly as many reported income from an illegal activity before incarceration. In total, 22% of respondents reported that they received most or all of their income from illegitimate sources (La Vigne, Brooks, & Shollenberger, 2009). These findings imply that unemployed and underemployed women (those who do not earn a living wage) may use illegal means to supplement their income. The majority of these women have a history of precarious family life and many are reared in homes headed by single parents (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004, 2009). Imprisoned women often struggle with addictions and are under the influence of drugs or alcohol when they commit their crimes (Snell & Morton, 1994). Last, imprisoned women have often experienced sexual and physical abuse in childhood and adulthood (Harlow, 1999). In sum, imprisoned women tend to be minorities, poorly educated, and economically marginalized, and have precarious family and personal histories (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004, 2009). Researchers estimate that 60% to 80% of these women are mothers to about 200,000 dependent-aged children in the United States (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Greene, Haney, & Hurtado, 2000; Henriques, 1996).
The number of children with an imprisoned mother has increased by 131% since 1991, a growth rate that surpasses fathers. Black children are seven and a half times more likely than White children to have an imprisoned parent (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). However, many imprisoned Black mothers maintain close relationships with relatives and are able to identify familial support and resources in arranging for the care of their children during and following incarceration (Bresler & Lewis, 1983; Enos, 2001; Hairston, 2002; Snell & Morton, 1994). Imprisoned mothers are more likely than imprisoned fathers to have been living with their children prior to incarceration (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Regrettably, imprisonment can be permanently injurious to a woman’s role as a mother (Hairston, 2002; Richie, 2002).

While there are some noteworthy exceptions (in prisons like Bedford Hills and Indiana Women’s Prison), correctional institutions often lack programs and policies that support women in their parental relationships (Beckerman, 1994; Hairston, 2002; Morash, Bynum, & Koons, 1998). Nonetheless, many desire to resume or assume mothering responsibility during and following their imprisonment (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Clark, 1995; Fessler, 1991; Henriques, 1982; La Vigne et al., 2009; Morton & Williams, 1998; Young & Smith, 2000). As one imprisoned mother recounts, “[While in prison] . . . I lived for when I would get out and could be with my baby again” (Archibald, 2010). Children’s caregivers may also anticipate the time when mothers can assume/resume custody of their children. Such caregivers may make efforts to support these mothers in their roles and may enhance women’s feelings about themselves as mothers. However, women whose children have been placed in foster care may find the goal of reunification elusive. It can be difficult for mothers to demonstrate their ability to care for themselves and make adequate provisions for their children. Likewise, for women who do not have formal custody or have lost parental rights, the likelihood of future reunification or even contact with their children is greatly diminished (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003). Mothers are often not aware of how these legal issues impact their families’ futures. While the idea of reuniting with children is lauded during imprisonment, unanticipated barriers such as strained relationships, unemployment, addiction, and the stresses of full-time caregiving may obstruct or make difficult the path to conventional motherhood (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Michalsen, 2011). Notwithstanding these impending challenges, many women continue to view themselves as maternal figures and believe that they will be reunited with their children.

Identity Salience and Motherhood

Identity is linked to the roles individuals are socialized to play and how they view themselves in those roles (Stryker, 1980). Though people hold multiple identities, not all identities are equally important. Rather, identities are arranged in a salience hierarchy. Those identities that rank high in the hierarchy are said to be most salient and influential in organizing an individual’s interactions and self-presentation. Moreover, identities that rank higher in the hierarchy are more likely to be invoked than those that rank lower (McCall & Simmons, 1966; Stryker, 1980). As individuals fulfill multiple
and potentially conflicting roles such as “mother” and “prisoner,” the arrangement of
the salience hierarchy determines which identities are more likely to be embraced and
performed.

*Identity salience* is broadly understood as the probability that a particular identity
will be invoked across various situations—even spaces that are not conventional sites
for such identities. Generally, salient identities are those that we attempt to incorporate
frequently into our interactions (McCall & Simmons, 1966; Nuttbrock & Freudiger,
The latter concept refers to emotional responses to self and social evaluations of
whether an individual performs satisfactorily in particular roles (McCall & Simmons,
1966). Nuttbrock and Freudiger (1991) suggest that identity salience covaries with
feelings associated with being either a “good” or “bad” mother. Moreover, identity
salience is linked to a role commitment that includes both the *number* and *quality* of
relationships tied to an identity (Stryker, 1987). Thus, mothers who have more chil-
dren and/or believe that they have close (quality) relationships with their children,
children’s caregivers, and other relatives are expected to have more salient mother
identities. Identity salience also refers to the degree to which persons allow a particular
identity to guide their behavior and interactions (Stryker, 1968, 1980). Women for
whom “mother” is a salient identity are expected to play roles that are consistent with
traditional mothering ideals such as nurturing, teaching, and taking responsibility for
children.

Studies have investigated whether women in prison embrace traditional feminine
identities such as mothering. In her qualitative study, Bosworth (1999) argues that
imprisoned women are simultaneously subject to traditional feminine ideals and a
prison culture. The women in her study relied heavily on idealized feminine identities
to survive and use agency within the constraints of prison life. Identity is believed to
be a vital link between individuals and society. Consequently, whether a woman views
herself as a mother and the intensity of her maternal identity can become a determinant
of how she comports and views herself overall. Although a woman can hold multiple
roles and identities, the degree to which she allows her maternal identity to guide her
choices and behavior is an indicator of the salience she assigns to this role.

Although motherhood is conventionally modeled, it is carried out with consider-
able variation. For instance, single and poor mothers may rely on community resources
and networks for childcare and parenting support (Billingsley, 1992; Stack, 1974).
Likewise, many minority women are socialized to value extended family and fictive
kin who can share in maternal responsibilities (Billingsley, 1992; Collins, 1994, 2000;
Stack, 1974). Though imprisonment forces most mothers to relinquish primary care-
giving for children, ascribing to alternative mothering models may allow a salient
maternal identity to persist despite imprisonment.

*Identity Salience and Imprisoned Mothers*

We apply an identity framework to the experiences of imprisoned mothers and
describe some of the beliefs (i.e., attitudes) they espouse and behaviors they may use
(i.e., actions and strategies) to maintain mothering as a salient part of their identities. We are aware that the quality of mothering varies among imprisoned mothers as it does in the free population. Some women recognize their parental inadequacies or come to the attention of child welfare agencies prior to their imprisonment. In such cases, relatives or community agencies may intervene (Richie, 2002). While some women are committed to mothering before imprisonment, others commit to the role while serving time (Clark, 1995; Henriques, 1982). In her book, Enos (2001) discusses mothers who claim mothering identities and espouse attitudes associated with good mothers (i.e., expressing love and concern for children). However, when these proclamations do not translate into choices and behaviors that connote mothering, mothers are said to be “talking the talk” without “walking the walk.” Such mothers may fail to take advantage of existing opportunities to maintain mother–child relationships or prepare for family reunification after release. Conversely, women who “walk the walk” demonstrate identity salience by allowing their maternal identity to guide their behaviors and choices to the extent possible. This includes mail and/or phone correspondence with children, caregivers, and involved agencies, and participation in family programs (when available) that may provide and enhance mothering experiences during and following imprisonment. Such women demonstrate to their children, other imprisoned women, state agencies, and children’s caregivers that they are vested as mothers (Enos, 2001).

Previous research illuminates the critical nature of mother–child(ren) contact in fostering positive views about mothering. Opportunities to mother may be sought or perceived through letter writing, phone calls, and participation in child visitation programs (Enos, 2001; Hairston, 2002). These interactions are often voluntary and mother initiated. However, making the decision to be in contact with children often requires emotional readiness for what can follow. This can include rejection from children and caregivers, having to explain their absence to children, or learning that they have lost parental rights. Mothers must also be prepared to receive unanticipated news about their children’s health, behavior, or legal status. Yet the desire and intention to sustain a mothering role cannot be considered apart from the structural forces of prison life that may undermine such intentions. Many prisons, for example, do not allow children or lack child-friendly policies. Visits can become antagonizing for mothers and young children who must meet in crowded visiting rooms or when physical affection (i.e., holding hands, hugs) is prohibited. The costs of transportation for visits and collect calls from prison are often much more than families can afford. These factors greatly impede regular contact with children and relatives. While imprisoned women have little control over these factors, they may greatly diminish mother–child relationships and mothering identity. An inability to perform the mothering role when it is salient can result in frustration, diminished salience, and eventually role exit (surrendering the role). Frustration with the inability to do mothering is reduced when women can engage in mothering activities made available through family-friendly programs and policies (Berry & Eigenberg, 2003). Unfortunately, quality programs of this sort are not always available (Merlo & Pollock, 2006; Morash et al., 1998). Even where such programs exist, women are confronted with more challenges. Because of imprisoned
mothers’ situation, they depart from social convention. Relatives, prison staff, and social agencies often cast these mothers as fundamentally deviant, irresponsible, and immoral—least of all mothers (Collins, 1994; Henriques, 1982; Schram, 1999; Stewart, 1999). If internalized and acted upon, these views can diminish maternal identity.

**Familial Relationships, Childcare Arrangements, and Maternal Expectations: Dynamics Before, During, and After Imprisonment**

Many mothers were primary caretakers to their children suggesting that motherhood was central to their lives prior to imprisonment (Clark, 1995; Dalley, 2002; Datesman & Cales, 1983; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Greene et al., 2000). Women who live with their children prior to imprisonment report fewer personal and social challenges while serving time. They also participate in more prosocial activities such as work and programs for prerelease planning, parenting, employment, and education (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). In general, close family ties provide both emotional benefits and favorable childcare arrangements during mothers’ imprisonment (Bresler & Lewis, 1983; Enos, 2001; Hairston, 2002; Hairston & Rollin, 2003). Black women are more likely than White women to have been living with their children prior to imprisonment, to report at least monthly visits from nonadult children, and to have more frequent phone communication with their children (Bresler & Lewis, 1983; Snell & Morton, 1994). Given the financial expense and time required to maintain such contact, families who invest in imprisoned mothers are likely to value their family role and have closer relationships. According to Hairston and Rollin (2003), many Black families are willing to make such investments and probably expect that these women will contribute to the family when they return home. These conditions are expected to enhance maternal identity. Consequently, being Black, living with children prior to imprisonment, and close family relations are expected to be positively associated with a salient mothering identity.

Mother–caregiver relationships can impact mother–child relationships and have implications for reunification following imprisonment (Johnston, 1995a; Meyers, Smarth, Amlund-Hager, & Kennon, 1999; Moses, 2006). Children’s living arrangements during a mother’s incarceration can vary by race. Women of color are more likely than their White counterparts to have children in living arrangements with the children’s grandparents and other relatives (Enos, 1998; Young & Smith 2000). The children of White women are more likely to have fathers who are willing to assume caregiving roles than are the children of African American women. They are also more likely than African American women’s children to have one or more child placed in foster care (Enos, 1998). However, the majority of all imprisoned mothers’ children are placed with grandparents and other relatives (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Henriques, 1982; Johnston, 1995a, 1995b). Many mothers prefer grandparents, relatives, or other caregivers with whom they and their children already enjoy a positive relationship (Enos, 2001; Henriques, 1982). By making such arrangements, imprisoned mothers
hope to demonstrate that they are good mothers, minimize loss of control over children, and sustain parent–child bonds. These outcomes have been supported empirically (Enos, 2001; Henriques, 1982; Johnston 1995a, 1995b; Mackintosh, Myers, & Kennon, 2006; Miller, 2006). For example, Johnston (1995a) found that mothers whose children were living with the maternal grandmother enjoyed better relationships with caregivers. Moreover, women with children in these living arrangements often have more opportunities to negotiate parental involvement and power (Enos, 2001; Hairston, 2002; Henriques, 1982; Johnston, 1995b). However, placements with relatives may not be problem free, especially when family relationships and resources become strained (Enos, 2001; Henriques, 1982). When mother–caregiver relationships are marked by conflict, mothers are less likely to have visits and phone contact with their children and are more likely to experience depressive symptoms (Poehlmann, 2005; Poehlmann, Shlafer, Maes, & Hanneman, 2008). Research on children’s placement in foster care and state custody is less positive. These placements increase the likelihood that moms will have less child contact; be unaware of their children’s emotional, academic, or behavior concerns; and miss important court dates. These factors can lead to the termination of parental rights (Beckerman, 1991, 1994; Moses, 2006). Thus, children’s living arrangements, mothers’ relationships with caregivers, and the extent of familial contact are expected to influence identity salience.

Finally, parenting expectations for life after prison may influence identity salience. At least one study found that some imprisoned mothers do not intend to reunite with their children after release (Baunach, 1985). A woman’s mothering identity may also be relinquished involuntarily when her parental rights are legally terminated. In such cases, women may not be permitted to see or contact their children during or following imprisonment. These postrelease projections are assumed to be detrimental to a mother’s identity.

**Hypotheses**

**Family and Childcare Relationships Preimprisonment**

**Hypothesis 1:** Mothers who were living with their children prior to imprisonment will have more salient mothering identities than mothers who did not.

**Hypothesis 2:** Mothers who believe that they are a part of a close-knit family will have more salient mothering identities than mothers who do not.

**Family Relationships and Childcare Arrangements During Imprisonment**

**Hypothesis 3:** Mothers whose children are living with grandparents will have more salient mothering identities than mothers with children in other living arrangements.

**Hypothesis 4:** Mothers who believe they have a good relationship with their children’s caregivers will have more salient mothering identities than mothers who do not perceive such relationships.
Hypothesis 5: Mothers who have regular contact with their family will have more salient mothering identities than mothers who do not.

Childcare Postrelease Expectations

Hypothesis 6: Mothers whose parental rights have been terminated or do not expect to have custody of their children upon release will have less salient mothering identities than mothers who retain parental rights and expect to have custody.

Hypothesis 7: Mothers who believe that they will return to prison will have less salient mothering identities than mothers who do not anticipate recidivating.

Method

Participants

This analysis is based on data collected during a larger project on imprisoned mothers and their experiences. At the time of data collection, participants were housed in one of the nation’s oldest all-female prisons. The institution houses residents with long- and short-term sentences and “special population” residents including expectant mothers, the chronically and terminally ill, persons with mental and physical disabilities, and youthful offenders aged 14 to 21 years who have been convicted as adults. Given national trends (Greenfield & Snell, 1999), the population under study appears to be similar to other populations of imprisoned women. Furthermore, the prison’s family program makes it an ideal research site. The family program allows women with children under age 18 to engage as mothers through special visitation in a child-centered area stocked with toys and game. Participants also take part in holiday parties and family summer camps. Any mother who completes a parenting class and is able to demonstrate appropriate mothering skills can participate. This study was approved by the university institutional review board and the state’s Department of Correction.

Instrument

In November 2003, a questionnaire was administered to the entire resident population ($N = 288$) by a team of five persons which included two researchers, two residents, and one prison staff member. There was a 100% response rate. All respondents gave their written informed consent to participate and did not appear to do so under the pressure of the staff or guards who were present. The four-part questionnaire asked respondents to report demographic information as well as information about their family histories, mothering experiences, attitudes about mothering, perceptions about themselves as mothers, and current relationships with their children and relatives. Items were developed based on a review of the existing literature on mothering and women’s incarceration. Save demographic queries, a Likert scale was used to capture responses. The current analysis is based on the group of 210 women who reported having children.
Measures

**Dependent variable: Mothering identity salience.** Mothering identity salience is assessed based on an 11-item scale referred to as Identity Salience. Higher scores indicate a more salient maternal identity. The scale includes the following 11 questions and statements: (1) Have you participated in summer camp? (2) Do you participate in the family program? (3) I help make decisions in my children’s lives, (4) Mothering is not important to me now that I am imprisoned, (5) I talk to my children by phone regularly, (6) I write letters to my children regularly, (7) I can make a difference in the quality of my children’s lives even though I am imprisoned, (8) Although I am imprisoned, it is my responsibility to make sure that my children are raised properly, (9) I have a voice (some authority) in family decisions while I am imprisoned, (10) My children visit me on a regular basis, and (11) I rarely have the opportunity to bond with my children. Items 1 and 2 are dichotomous variables (1 = yes, 2 = no). The remaining items are scored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 for “strongly disagree” to 5 for “strongly agree.” Each of these items was correlated at the bivariate level. Questions 4 and 11 were originally reversed scored, but were converted to the aforementioned pattern for this analysis. A principle components factor analysis without rotation suggests unidimensionality (eigenvalue = 4.32) and Cronbach’s alpha (0.84) supports construct reliability (N = 185). Loads range from 0.45 to 0.79. Scores range from −2.69 to 1.64, but the scale was standardized (M = 0, SD = 1) to minimize multicollinearity.

**Independent variables.** Four groups of independent variables are tested based on (1) controls, (2) preimprisonment family relationships and general familial relations, (3) family and caregiver relationships during imprisonment, and (4) mothers’ postrelease expectations. Demographic variables that identify race (i.e., Black, White, other), length of sentence, being single, education, number of children, and age of each mother are assessed first. Next, we examine mothers’ family relationships and family structure prior to imprisonment. The analysis then considers respondents’ family relationships and family structure during imprisonment. Specifically, we are interested in the living arrangements of children during imprisonment, mothers’ relationships with their children’s caregivers, and mothers’ contact with their families. Last, three indicators are used to assess postrelease projections. They include whether parental rights have been terminated, whether mothers plan to resume custody of their children on release, and whether they believe that they will return to prison after release. A total of 14 independent indicators are included. Bivariate correlations provide upon request.

**Procedure**

Table 1 includes a summary of the study variables. In Table 2, Identity Salience is examined using nested models. Because the dependent variable considers a continuous range of possible values, linear regression analysis is used. In each step, the dependent
Table 1. Mothering Salience Identity and Independent Variables (N = 210).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mothering scores (M, SD)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothering scores (% scored, n)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-3.00 to -1.00</td>
<td>0.20 (37)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-0.99 to 0.00</td>
<td>0.26 (49)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.01 to 0.50</td>
<td>0.17 (32)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.51 to 1.00</td>
<td>0.17 (31)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.01 or more</td>
<td>0.19 (36)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black (%, n)</td>
<td>30.5 (64)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison term (M, SD)</td>
<td>18.4 (19.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single (% yes, n)</td>
<td>33.8 (71)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest education (% vocation or greater, n)</td>
<td>33.9 (71)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (M, SD)</td>
<td>36 (12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children (M, SD, range)</td>
<td>3.0 (2, 1-8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preimprisonment experience and general family relations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with children (% yes, n)</td>
<td>70.0 (135)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close-knit family (% strongly agree, n)</td>
<td>36.2 (102)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imprisonment experiences, family relationships, and childcare arrangements</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live with grandparents (% yes, n)</td>
<td>33.7 (68)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good relationship with caregivers (% strongly agree, n)</td>
<td>48.9 (92)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular contact with family (% strongly agree, n)</td>
<td>42.1 (118)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postrelease experiences and expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental rights terminated (% yes, n)</td>
<td>17.7 (37)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expect custody (% yes, n)</td>
<td>59.5 (119)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expect to return to prison (% strongly disagree, n)</td>
<td>84.2 (170)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

Demographic Profile

A summary of the analysis indicators is presented in Table 1. When the dependent variable Identity Salience was examined, although about 20% of mothers scored
Table 2. Linear Regression Models for Mothering Identity Salience Among Imprisoned Mothers (N = 210).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control variables</td>
<td>Preimprisonment experiences</td>
<td>Imprisonment experiences</td>
<td>Postimprisonment expectations</td>
<td>All variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black (1 = yes)</td>
<td>.21 (.16)</td>
<td>.17 (.14)</td>
<td>.08 (.11)</td>
<td>.16 (.15)</td>
<td>.02 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison term (0-65 years or more)</td>
<td>.01 (.00)*</td>
<td>.01 (.00)*</td>
<td>.01 (.00)*</td>
<td>.01 (.00)*</td>
<td>.01 (.00)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single (1 = yes)</td>
<td>.13 (.17)</td>
<td>.11 (.15)</td>
<td>.09 (.12)</td>
<td>.16 (.15)</td>
<td>.13 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8th grade-master’s degree or more)</td>
<td>.10 (.04)**</td>
<td>.07 (.03)*</td>
<td>.04 (.03)</td>
<td>.10 (.03)**</td>
<td>.04 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (19-75 years or more)</td>
<td>−.02 (.01)**</td>
<td>−.02 (.01)**</td>
<td>.00 (.01)</td>
<td>−.01 (.01)</td>
<td>.01 (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of children (0 to 8+)</td>
<td>.09 (.05)</td>
<td>.05 (.04)</td>
<td>.01 (.04)</td>
<td>.04 (.05)</td>
<td>−.02 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preimprisonment experiences and general family relations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live with children (1 = yes)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.47 (.14)**</td>
<td></td>
<td>.11 (.12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close-knit family (1 = sd, 5 = sa)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.39 (.05)**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imprisonment experiences, family relationships, and childcare arrangements</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live with grandparents (1 = yes)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.24 (.12)*</td>
<td></td>
<td>.12 (.12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good mother–caregiver relationship (1 = sd, 5 = sa)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.37 (.04)**</td>
<td></td>
<td>.33 (.05)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular family contact (1 = sd, 5 = sa)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.27 (.04)**</td>
<td></td>
<td>.20 (.05)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postimprisonment experiences and expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental rights terminated (1 = yes)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>−.23 (.19)</td>
<td>.20 (.13)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expect custody (1 = yes)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.85 (.18)**</td>
<td>.52 (.14)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expect to return to prison (1 = sd, 5 = sa)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.20 (.13)</td>
<td>.19 (.10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>−1.79</td>
<td>−2.96</td>
<td>−2.14</td>
<td>−4.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$n$</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. sa = strongly disagree; sd = strongly agree. Robust standard errors are given in parentheses. 
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. 

Downloaded from fcx.sagepub.com at OhioLink on December 30, 2013
below −1.00 (i.e., lower mothering salience), almost 40% scored above 0.51—suggesting a more salient mothering identity. As in previous studies, a disproportionate percentage (about 30%) of imprisoned mothers was Black. The mean prison term was about 18 years ($SD = 19.8$), which is substantially higher than national trends (Beck, 2000). About 34% of respondents had never been married and about 34% had earned at least a vocational education. The average age was 36 years ($SD = 12$ years); most had roughly three children ($SD = 2$; range = 1-8 children). When preimprisonment dynamics were examined, 70% of respondents lived with their children prior to being imprisoned. About 36% considered their families to be close knit. Nearly 34% of their children lived with their grandparents and almost 50% of mothers strongly believed that they had good relationships with their children’s caregivers. Moreover, over 42% had regular contact with family members. Although the majority of sample mothers expected to have custody of their children on release (59.5%), almost 18% had lost parental rights to their children. A vast majority of participants (84%) did not believe that they would return to prison on release. In light of these results, we considered the potential simultaneous effects of the study variables on mothering identity salience.

**Salience of Mothering Identity: Linear Regression Modeling Results**

Nested linear regression models test how experiences before and during respondents’ prison term as well as postrelease expectations impacted the salience of mothering identity for them (see Table 2). The control variables are included in Model 1. Three of the five indicators helped explain mothering salience (adjusted $R^2 = 0.07$). Although neither race, marital status, nor number of children influence scores, mothers with longer prison terms tended to score higher on the mothering salience scale than those serving shorter sentences ($b = 0.01, p < .05$). A direct relationship was evident between education and mothering salience ($b = 0.10, p < .01$). However, older mothers tended to have lower mothering salience than their younger counterparts ($b = −0.02, p < .01$).

Model 2 included two indicators to assess the influence of preimprisonment experiences and general sentiments about families. Our results suggest the continued importance of prison term, education, and age from the baseline model. The two new variables were predictive and result in an over fivefold increase in the model’s explanatory power over the baseline test (adjusted $R^2 = 0.36$). When mothers lived with their children prior to imprisonment ($b = 0.47, p < .001$) and believed they had a close-knit family ($b = 0.39, p < .001$), mothering identities tended to be more salient.

As illustrated in Model 3, childcare and familial dynamics during imprisonment directly influenced salience of the mothering role. With the inclusion of the three new variables, none of the demographic variables, save prison sentence ($b = 0.01, p < .05$), were significant. When children were being cared for by grandparents ($b = 0.24, p < .05$), sample mothers scored higher on the mothering salience scale. Next, when respondents reported good mother–caregiver relationships, mothering identity appeared to be more salient ($b = 0.37, p < .001$). Last, when respondents believed that they had close contact with family members ($b = 0.27, p < .001$), scores in mothering
salience increased. The influence of familial support and caregiving ties resulted in an eightfold increase in the model’s predictive power over the baseline test (adjusted $R^2 = 0.56$).

Model 4 examined postimprisonment expectations. Only one of the three additional indicators was predictive. A review of the controls shows that only respondents’ sentence and educational level significantly and positively affected mothering scores. Mothers who retained parental rights or who did not foresee returning to prison did not score higher in mothering identity salience than those whose parental rights had been terminated or believed that they would eventually return to prison. However, mothers who anticipated having custody of their children on release scored higher on the mothering Identity Salience scale than their counterparts who did not ($b = 0.85, p < .001$). This indicator is the strongest predictor in this model and results in substantial improvement over Model 1 (adjusted $R^2 = 0.24$). The final model examined the potential effect of all of the study indicators. This resulted in an almost ninefold increase in adjusted $R^2$ from the initial test (Model 5, adjusted $R^2 = 0.62$). Only one of the demographic controls, prison term, was predictive and continued to directly influence mothering scores. Preimprisonment experiences were no longer predictive. However, both quality mother–caregiver relationship and regular family contact during imprisonment continued to be positively influential. Last, expectations about future custody continued to increase mothering identity salience scores.

**Discussion**

When all variables were considered, good mother–caregiver relationships, regular family contact, and expecting to have custody of children best predicted identity salience. Our findings show partial support for Hypotheses 1 and 2. Although mothers who were living with their children prior to imprisonment had more salient mothering identities than those who did not, this relationship did not hold true when all the indicators were tested simultaneously. Similarly, mothers who believe that they are a part of a close-knit family had more salient mothering identities than their counterparts who do not believe they are a part of a close-knit family. This effect is only apparent in Model 2. Next, these results illuminated the potentially crucial implications of family and caregiving relationships during a mother’s imprisonment. Hypothesis 3 is supported by our findings; imprisoned mothers whose children were living with their grandparents scored higher on the salience scale than mothers with children in other living arrangements. However, this relationship was no longer evident in our final test. Hypotheses 4 and 5 were consistently supported. Mothers who believed they had a good relationship with their children’s caregivers had more salient mothering identities than mothers who did not (Hypothesis 4). Moreover, results suggested that family contact fosters a more salient mothering identity (Hypothesis 5). Only one of the indicators associated with postrelease projections was predictive, and shows that mothers who expect to have custody of their children on release have more salient mothering identities than those who do not (Hypothesis 6). Our results did not support hypotheses
related to parental rights and recidivism (Hypotheses 6 and 7). Mothers who retained parental rights or did not anticipate recidivating did not score significantly higher on mothering salience than those whose parental rights had been terminated or who believed that they will return to prison.

Contrary to our predictions and previous research, when the six demographic controls were considered, Black mothers did not score higher in mothering identity salience than other mothers (Bresler & Lewis, 1983; Enos, 2001). Perhaps the contemporary prison experience equalizes women with regard to motherhood, such that race has a less significant impact on maternal identity. Perhaps a different operationalization of identity salience would yield different results. Moreover, unlike earlier work, marital status is not predictive in any of the tests (Nuttbrock & Freudiger, 1991). However, our results support Nuttbrock and Freudiger’s (1991) findings that the number of children does not influence maternal identity salience. In addition, mother’s age was inversely related to salience in two of the five models. At least two explanations are plausible. First, older women may have older children. Because the mothering role is typically the most intense during offspring’s early childhood, this identity’s salience may diminish with age. Second, older women are more likely to have had numerous conflicts with the law. If they have served time before, perhaps they have experienced the difficulties of resuming or attempting to resume mothering after reentering the community. Each subsequent encounter with the criminal justice system may distance women from the mothering role which may be reflected in the arrangement of the identity salience hierarchy. However, this indicator becomes insignificant when familial and childcare factors during and expected after imprisonment are considered. Only mothers’ prison sentence was consistently predictive and showed that mothers with longer terms actually appeared to consider their mother identities more important than women with shorter sentences. Given that these women will be separated from their children for longer periods of time, maintenance of the mothering role may require that it be invoked often and intensely if it is to be maintained at all. Though we cannot be sure, this may have the effect of making the identity more salient. Next, mother’s education was predictive in three of the five models. In particular, it emerged as significant in the models for both pre- and postimprisonment experiences. Not only does this result support previous research suggesting that mothering is more salient for women with more education and training (Kauffman, 2001; Morton & Williams, 1998; Thompson & Harm, 2000), but it also implicates the necessity of providing educational opportunities for imprisoned mothers. However, when past and present experiences and future maternal expectations are considered in the final test, most of the controls become insignificant.

Is motherhood important to imprisoned women? Our study indicates that it is for many of our respondents. However, imprisoned women may benefit from structural and socioemotional supports that help them to maintain a salient maternal identity. Given the theoretical and empirical relationship between identity and behavior, it may be in the best interest of imprisoned women and their families for corrections agencies to encourage the development of positive identities such as “mother” among imprisoned women. Studies show that prosocial bonds with children can motivate mothers
and may play an important role in crime desistance (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Michalsen, 2011). Increased opportunities for family contact and visitation, as well as efforts to improve mother–child reunification are central to this task.

While we do not suggest that our operationalization of mothering identity is the only appropriate approach, we have considered a broad range of attitudes and behaviors shown to impact the maternal role in the literature. Aspects of our identity framework are supported by the results illustrating the utility of this perspective for understanding gendered identity among imprisoned women. Identity salience is the probability that a particular identity will be invoked even in nonconventional spaces such as prison. About 19% of sample mothers score higher (above 1.00) on the salience scale despite the prison context in which this role is being experienced. The expectation for child custody was the strongest predictor of identity salience when all variables were considered. This finding suggests that women’s perception that mothering is an identity that they will be able to incorporate into their future interactions is important to mothering salience (Berry & Eigenberg, 2003; McCall & Simmons, 1966; Nuttbrock & Freudiger, 1991). Identity prominence is characterized by emotional responses to self and external evaluations of role performance and the quality of relationships linked to a particular identity. In this study, feelings of closeness to children’s caregivers and family contact are consistently predictive of mothering salience. Given the theoretical context, we deduce that caregivers, children, and other relatives may be more likely to maintain contact and close relationships when they view mothers favorably in their roles despite imprisonment. The data in this study do not allow us to determine whether a lack of family contact is associated with social disapproval for the mothering role or other factors such as limited family resources. In reality, many caregivers may be unable to afford expensive collect calls, access to transportation, or time off from work that will allow for regular contact. In such cases, a lack of family contact does not necessarily indicate that a mother’s role is not valued. Nonetheless, we maintain that a lack of regular contact, regardless of the reason, diminishes the salience of maternal identity. Since the data do not allow us to objectively measure “regular” contact, we rely on respondents’ perceptions of this term. This measure is informative since this term may be defined differently across respondents and will affect women’s identity based on their perception of “regular” contact rather than an imposed benchmark.

Several maternal demographics, family arrangements prior to imprisonment, and general feelings about one’s family were initially informative. Caregiving by grandparents increased mothering identity salience. However, our results suggest that, ultimately, salience for the mothering identity as defined here is strongly fostered by whether imprisoned mothers are emotionally and, in some way, physically, connected to persons who are now responsible for the care of their children—irrespective of whether such persons are related to them. This is largely linked to the quality of the mother–caregiver relationship (Enos, 2001; Henriques, 1982; Poehlmann, 2005; Poehlmann et al., 2008). Close caregiver ties may indicate that mothers can be involved in parenting. These findings both directly and indirectly support the benefits of placing imprisoned women’s children with grandparents and other relatives (Bloom &
Steinhart, 1993; Dalley, 2002; Enos, 2001; Henriques, 1982; Johnston, 1995a). Also supported by our findings is the importance of a mother’s belief that she will be able to assume the mothering role after serving her time (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Fessler, 1991; Henriques, 1982). However, this anticipated future may be unlikely for some imprisoned women. Child welfare agencies and correctional institutions rarely collaborate, making it difficult for imprisoned mothers to comply with agency mandates when children become involved in the child welfare system (Beckerman, 1994; Hairston, 2002; Moses, 2006). The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 has in fact decreased the likelihood of mother–child reunification for imprisoned mothers with children in state custody. The act states that if a child lives in “foster care 15 out of the past 22 months, the state must move to terminate parental rights” (Smith, 2006, p. 15-2). Incarcerated mothers are at a disadvantage since the average prison sentence is longer than the waiting period before procedures to terminate parental rights are initiated. In some states, parental rights may be terminated “solely on the basis of . . . incarceration” (Hairston, 2002, p. 7). In Alaska, a conviction and incarceration for a felony is grounds for the termination of parental rights. Likewise, Alabama code states, “In determining whether or not the parents are unable or unwilling to discharge their responsibilities . . . and to terminate the parental rights, the juvenile court shall consider . . . conviction of and imprisonment for a felony.” The state of Utah allows for the termination of parental rights if a parent’s incarceration means that a child will be deprived of a “normal” home for more than 1 year. Though it is not entirely clear what is meant by “normal,” it is clear that this law may have adverse effects for mothers who are serving fairly short sentences (12-18 months). Parental rights can also be terminated if imprisoned women fail to maintain regular contact with their children. For reasons previously described, this is a factor that may be well beyond the control of imprisoned mothers (Hairston, 2002). Furthermore, many mothers do not know whether or when they need to appear for court hearings, or the administrative steps they must take within the prison to be present (Beckerman, 1994). Since most child welfare agencies claim to hold family reunification as a guiding principle (Smith, 2006), it may be worthwhile to reconsider the applicability of policies such as the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 to imprisoned women. Perhaps there are alternatives that can protect the best interest of children while safeguarding the rights of women who wish to take a positive and active mothering role despite their past law violations. In the interim, many imprisoned mothers may benefit from services and information that increase their legal awareness of parental rights and custody issues that might undermine future relationships with their children.

A review of the final model results illustrate the centrality of tangible, favorable familial dynamics (i.e., having family contact rather than merely perceptions about family closeness), present family-related childcare circumstances (rather than preimprisonment family dynamics), and, mothers’ perceptions about whether legal and social channels support their future roles as mothers (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Wildeman, 2009). Ultimately, regardless of the race, education, age, marital status, or number of children, mothers appear to consider this role more important if they believe that they will be able to perform it now as well as in the future (Stryker, 1980, 1987).
Among mothers behind bars, being able to “talk the talk” and “walk the walk” of parenting (Enos, 2001) increases the salience of the mothering identity.

**Future Research and Limitations**

While this study is informative, it reveals that there is still much work to be done regarding imprisoned mothers and identity. Women at our research site have access to an extensive parenting program and may differ significantly in their views about family contact and future mothering expectations from mothers who do not have access to such programs. Furthermore, the average sentence being served by our respondents is longer than the 6-year national average for women (Beck, 2000). As such, findings may be more generalizable to women serving lengthy prison terms. However, the temporal influence on mothering salience is made more complicated by another finding that warrants further study. There was consistently a direct influence of respondents’ prison sentences on identity salience. These results suggest the need to consider whether moms serving shorter sentences compartmentalize and minimize mothering with the belief that they will redeem lost time with their children once they return home (Hairston, 2002). Perhaps increased identity salience for mothers serving long sentences reflects an attempt to counter a negative identity associated with imprisonment or the reality of prolonged separation from their children. We also note that in contrast to previous research, race (i.e., being Black) was not significantly associated with the salience of maternal identity in this study. We have noted that existing studies on this topic date back to the 1980s. As such, we must ask ourselves whether this finding is unique to our respondents, or rather, a reflection of a shift in maternal identity among imprisoned Black mothers in the last 30 years. Further research is needed to explore these unanticipated findings.

**Conclusion**

Despite the myriad sociological, pop culture, and feminists notions of motherhood, many imprisoned women are staking their claims as mothers. Historically, the goal of American criminal justice has been to facilitate the process of making law violators better citizens and contributors to their communities. Many women in our study hope to resume mothering when they return home to their families and communities. Salient maternal identities can motivate mothers to pursue and maintain strong relationships with children and other relatives. When family relationships are strong and positive, the likelihood of successful community reentry is enhanced and recidivism is diminished (Dowden & Andrews, 1999; Hairston & Rollin, 2003; Michalsen, 2011). Our results illustrate in the final model that regardless of preimprisonment experiences, mothers’ present experiences and future expectations are most influential in shaping maternal identity as measured here. It is also clear that imprisoned mothers require social, familial, emotional and legal support to maintain their mothering roles during and following imprisonment. Whether through legal channels, programs, training, and/or family activities, efforts must focus on multidimensional strategies that account.
for prior and present experiences and postimprisonment expectations. Such a focus will ultimately create opportunities to empower marginalized women as mothers; insure effective nurturing, parenting, and protection for children; and enhance the overall communities into which imprisoned mothers will eventually return.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes
1. Items 5, 6, and 10 of the independent variable scale are based solely on mothers’ perceptions of what constitutes “regular” contact.
2. Only one variable (“Mothering is not important to me now that I am imprisoned”) loaded relatively lower on the factor (0.37). However, because its inclusion is strongly supported by the literature on salience of the mothering identity, we elected to retain it.
3. The accepted standard when performing regression modeling is to insure that the data include about 10 cases for every independent variable included. Based on the 14 independent variables in our analyses, our sample of 210 exceeds this broad criterion. More specifically, statistical guidelines for power tests suggest a database of at least 84 cases for sufficient power to have confidence in the modeling results (α = .05, power of 0.80, and efficiency, $f^2 = .15$; Green, 1991; Knoke et al., 2002). Our data also exceed this criterion.

References


**Author Biographies**

**Sandra L. Barnes** is a professor in the Department of Human & Organizational Development at Vanderbilt University. She focuses on race, class, and gender dynamics, the relationship between structural constraints and individual agency, and how these dynamics influence the experiences of residents in poor urban spaces.

**Ebonie Cunningham Stringer** is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice at Wingate University. Her research centers gender, race, family, prison and criminal justice policy, with an emphasis on maternal incarceration.