Predictors of Relationship Continuity in Families with Incarcerated Fathers
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**Background**

- The nation’s growing prison population raises many concerns about the welfare of families. Paternal incarceration has clear and direct impacts on family stability and relationship quality, two critical factors impacting children’s wellbeing (Arndt et al., 2003; Geller et al., 2012).
- According to family stress theory (Patterson, 1988), families engage in active processes to balance family demands with family capabilities in interaction with family meanings to achieve family adaptation (Patterson, 2002). Among families with incarcerated fathers, family-level demands are non-normative stressors that come from a father’s incarceration.
- Family capabilities can be conceptualized as mothers’ and fathers’ tangible resources (i.e., instrumental social support) and psychosocial resources (i.e., self-efficacy), while family meanings can be the perceptions mothers have of the quality of their romantic relationships with the fathers.
- During incarceration, some, but not all romantic relationships dissolve between parents (Nurse, 2002). It is, however, not well understood which factors increase the likelihood of relationship continuity, despite these often ambiguous and abrupt separations due to incarceration.

**Research Question and Hypothesis**

RQ: What factors are associated with parental romantic relationship continuity in families with an incarcerated father?

H1: Greater tangible and psychosocial resources and perceived pre-incarceration romantic relationship quality will increase the odds of romantic relationship continuity between parents.

**Methods**

**Participants**

- The study uses a subsample of mothers with incarcerated fathers (N=116) drawn from two waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal study of low-income families from large U.S. cities followed from birth (see Reichman et al., 2001).
- We included only families in which mothers were in a romantic relationship with the biological father at the second Wave, but then either remained in a relationship (n=57) or separated (n=59) after a father’s incarceration by the third Wave of the study (child age 3 years).
- Some fathers were incarcerated in both second and third Waves of the study (28%).
- The majority of parents in the sample were non-Hispanic Black (86%).
- Reasons for paternal incarceration ranged from serious assault to domestic violence.
- Most fathers (86%) maintained contact with the child while incarcerated.

**Measures**

**Family Capabilities**

- Economic Hardship (10 items; α=.76; Conger et al., 1994)
- Instrumental Social Support (4 items; α=.65)
- Self-Efficacy (5 items; α=.74; Mastery Scale; Pearlin & Schoerner, 1978)
- Depressive Symptomatology (13 items; α=.90; Major Depressive Episode; Kessler et al., 1998)

**Family Meanings**

- Mothers’ perceived (Multi-dimensional Support Scale; Winefield et al., 2000):
  - Relationship Quality (5 items; α=.75)
  - Relationship Conflict and Violence (7 items; α=.76)

**Results**

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<thead>
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<th>Variables</th>
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<th>S.E.</th>
<th>Exp(B)</th>
<th>Wald’s</th>
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Nagelkerke R²: .49
χ²: 17.43*

Note. Mother in current relationship with incarcerated father: Yes = 1, No = 0. *p < .05.

**Conclusions and Implications**

- Correlations results indicate complex associations with paternal incarceration and family resources:
  - negative association between paternal history of incarceration and mothers’ perceived instrumental social support
  - positive association between paternal incarceration and paternal depressive symptomatology
- Interestingly, regression findings show:
  - Prior history of incarceration predicted relationship continuity during the current incarceration.
  - Mothers’ perceived relationship quality with the father prior to incarceration is an important predictor of relationship continuity.
  - No tangible or psychosocial resources predicted an enduring relationship.
- These findings illustrate the potential protective mechanisms of family meanings over family capabilities for mothers in overcoming the risks of relationship dissolution associated with paternal incarceration, and in promoting family adaptation.

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