

Fathering from Prison: an exploration of the  
experiences and perceptions of a group of men in  
Mountjoy prison

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## Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in consideration for any degree. This thesis is the result of my own investigations.

Signed ..... (candidate)

Date.....

## **Abstract**

This study explores the experiences and perceptions of ten male prisoners who are fathers held in Mountjoy prison, in relation to the roles and responsibilities of fatherhood. It also investigates the factors that constrain or enables their involvement as fathers. Through a qualitative research design, ten male prisoners were interviewed using an in-depth, unstructured 'conversational interview approach' (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). The challenges of conducting research in a closed and secure environment are discussed. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using Ritchie et al's (2003) 'thematic framework'. This study will illustrate how addiction issues, fragility in co-partner relationships, and sporadic involvement as fathers were dominant experiences. Prisoners were highly dependent on co-partners to facilitate their involvement as fathers. Prisoners who felt secure in their co-partner relationships, referred to family life as a source of support in prison, while men in strained relationships displayed more diverse, ambivalent and conflicting views in relation to their role. This study will show how prisoners managed to reconcile the stigma of imprisonment with the authority and status of a father. The dominance of the 'nurturing' model of fatherhood will also be illustrated as a cultural reference of ideal fatherhood.

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# Chapter 1 : Introduction

This study aims to explore the experience and perceptions of male prisoners who are fathers, in relation to the roles and responsibilities of fatherhood, and to investigate the factors that constrain or enable their involvement as fathers.

As a result of complex changes influencing family life within Irish society, the cultural landscape of contemporary fatherhood is fraught with contradiction. With the numbers of births outside marriage, and rates of separation and divorce increasing in Ireland (CSO, 2007), a growing minority of men live apart from their children, and appear to remain on the periphery of family life. Ironically, cultural expectations in relation to the role and responsibilities of fathers have simultaneously increased. Contemporary fatherhood is associated with high levels of involvement, in addition to nurturing and breadwinning activities (Coltrane, 2004). These changes have prompted scholars to seek to understand the factors which may influence a father's involvement or withdrawal from the relationship with his children (Doherty et al, 1996). Other scholars (Marsiglio et al, 2000, Parke, 2002) have called for small scale, qualitative research with separated and non-resident fathers to help further this understanding.

Although no official statistics are gathered in relation to the parental status of prisoners, estimates suggest that approximately three quarters of the male prisoners in Irish prisons are fathers (O'Mahony, 1997). While interest in their experiences as fathers can be related to the changes discussed above, this attention can also be linked to rising prisoner populations in western society. The Irish prison population has increased by roughly 50% within the last ten years through a combination of an increase in the use of longer sentences, and a reduction in the use of both early release and remand (O'Donnell, 2006, IPS, 2005). Yet, with a daily average of 3,200 prisoners, the Irish prisoner population remains a fraction of the size of the UK and US prison populations, which stand at approximately 86 thousand people in Britain<sup>1</sup>, and over two million in the USA (Walmsley, 2007). As a result of these sizable populations, a significant amount of research has emerged from both the UK (Morris, 1967, McDermot and King, 1992, Boswell and Wedge, 2002, Clarke et al, 2005) and USA (Nurse, 2001, Ardeti et al, 2005) exploring prisoners

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<sup>1</sup> The figure for Britain includes England, Wales and Scotland and excludes Northern Ireland.

experiences as fathers. In contrast, only one Irish study (Looney, 2001) has examined the experiences of prisoners specifically in relation to fatherhood.

Looney's Irish (2001) research found significant diversity in how prisoners felt their role as a father was affected by imprisonment. Some men felt their role was unaffected by imprisonment, others withdrew from involvement, while for other prisoners, their role as a father had become all the more significant while imprisoned. Irish research also suggests that prisoner's family ties are more fragile than those of men in the wider population, with separation and relationship breakdown commonplace (O'Mahony, 1997, Looney, 2001).

Research with non-resident fathers (Corcoran, 2005) and separated fathers in the UK (Lunt, 1987), has suggested that the co-parent relationship and the father's emotional well being are key factors which influence their involvement post separation. These factors have also emerged in research with prisoners. Clarke et al (2005) referred specifically to the quality of the co-partner relationship as a factor influencing a prisoners contact with his children, while a number of other studies have highlighted the importance of a prisoners emotional well being as a factor which may lead to withdrawal (Nurse, 2001, Boswell and Wedge, 2002, Ardetti et al, 2005). Given the prevalence of addiction within the prisoner population, the additional pressures of social stigma, and the restrictions imposed by the prison environment, it appears that prisoners will provide a particularly unique view of separation.

### **How the aims of this study will be achieved**

In order to achieve the study aims, this research will explore the context of contemporary fatherhood in Irish society, the nature of a father's role and responsibilities, and the personal and interpersonal factors which can influence a father's involvement with his children. Irish (O'Mahony, 1997, Looney, 2001) and international literature (Clarke et al, 2005, Ardetti et al, 2005, Nurse 2001, Boswell and Wedge, 2002) will be examined, to illustrate the predominately fragile nature of prisoner's relationships as fathers. This literature will highlight how the prisoner's co-partner relationship, their emotional well-being, and addiction status are key factors that can exert considerable influence on a prisoner's involvement as a father.



Qualitative research methods, including a small sample size and an in-depth ‘conversational interview approach’ (Rubin and Rubin, 1995) will be utilised to gather, analyse and synthesise the experiences and perspectives of a sample of prisoners who are fathers within Mountjoy prison. The perspectives and experiences of these prisoners will be presented and discussed in relation to the pre-established theory on prisoners and fatherhood.

### **The background to the study**

My interest in the topic of ‘fatherhood in prison’ was stimulated through previous work in the youth and community sector with both young men and male adults. Initially I worked as a youth worker for a regional youth service, which involved working with both young men and women who were frequently involved in ‘anti-social’ behaviour. Subsequently, through my role as a project co-coordinator in a Community Development Project, I became involved in the early stages of a multi-agency project working to set up a men’s work programme. This programme aimed to engage and support marginalised men in a small town in the south-east, who were struggling with issues of alcohol addiction, poor health and long term unemployment. Through my work at the Community Development project I became aware of a scholarship offered by the Waterford Institute of Technology to support a MA through research, on the topic of ‘fathering from prison’. This topic seemed to be a natural progression from my previous work experience and I was fortunate to be accepted for this scholarship.

While the broad topic area of ‘fathering from prison’ was prescribed through the terms of the scholarship, the particular focus of the study and methods used to gather data were of course entirely open. As will be discussed in chapter four, the decision to base this study within Mountjoy was influenced by time and access constraints; nevertheless Mountjoy prison holds an important place within the Irish Prison Service as the main committal prison for the state. Mountjoy prison is also unique in terms of the visitors centre and drug treatment facilities attached to the prison, and for the high level of controversy it attracts, due in part to the outdated facilities within the prison and the high levels of drug use (Burke, Sunday Tribune, 2006, Brady, Irish Independent, 2007).

From previous experience of working directly with individuals and groups in the community sector, I was certain that that marginalised men such as prisoners would require a particularly informal and non-judgemental approach to secure their participation in the

research. It was this awareness that prompted me to consider the ‘conversational interview approach’ (Rubin and Rubin, 1995) as a suitable interview method for this study.

## **Outline of the subsequent chapters:-**

### **Chapter two**

This chapter explores the nature of fatherhood in contemporary Irish society. The concepts of ‘involvement’ and ‘commitment’ are explored to illustrate how fatherhood must be considered in relation to the mother’s role, the co-parent relationship, and the wider economic and cultural context in which they are located. This chapter will show how expectations regarding the father’s role and responsibilities have shifted from the more distant authority figure of the ‘traditional’ father, towards the more accessible ‘nurturing’ father. At the same time, due to significant changes in family formation in Irish society, an increasing number of fathers live apart from their children. It will be shown that, while the involvement of non-resident fathers can be diverse, a number of personal, interpersonal and contextual factors can support or undermine their involvement in the lives of their children.

### **Chapter three**

This chapter will examine Irish and international research on prisoners to illustrate the predominately fragile nature of their relationships as fathers. Irish research (Looney, 2001) will highlight how the prison context inhibits family communication and the enactment of a father’s role, but will show that prisoners perceive these restrictions to their role very differently. Research from the UK and USA (Morris, 1967, McDermott and King, 1992, Nurse, 2001, Boswell and Wedge, 2002, Clarke et al, 2005, Ardeti et al, 2005) will illustrate the importance of the co-parent relationship, and the prisoner’s emotional wellbeing as further factors which influence a prisoner’s involvement with his children. Literature which examines the impact of addiction on relationships will also be discussed, to demonstrate that addiction is a significant factor that has generally been omitted from both Irish, and international research on prisoner’s relationships as fathers.

### **Chapter four**

Will present an overview of the research design used to gather and analyse the data for this study. This chapter will illustrate how an interpretive foundation and qualitative approach are consistent with the aims of the study. A description of the typical and atypical features of Mountjoy prison will demonstrate the unique characteristics of the research site. The

sampling criteria used, and both the practical and ethical issues which arose from the use of gatekeepers to recruit and select participants will be discussed. Additional ethical issues relating to the conditions of access awarded by the Irish Prison service, are also addressed. Individual interviews were carried out with ten male prisoners using an informal unstructured ‘conversational interview’ (Rubin and Rubin, 1995) approach. This chapter will explore the techniques used to encourage participation and overcome social divisions, in addition to the challenges raised by the ‘conversational’ interview approach, and those which arose through conducting research in a prison. The procedures used to record, transcribe and analyse the data, and in particular the use of Ritchie et al’s ‘thematic framework’ for data analysis, are presented in detail.

### **Chapter five**

This chapter will present the data generated from this study in the form of an analysis of extracts from the interviews, and summarised data in tables. This will be presented to include the following themes:- the sentencing, addiction and family profile of the study participants to illustrate the context to their experiences of fatherhood. The impact of the co-parent relationship on prisoners perceptions of fatherhood, the range of responses to fathering within addiction, prisoners diverging experience of visits and reasons for discouraging visits. The deception of children and related issues, and prisoner’s perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of fatherhood are also discussed.

### **Chapter six**

This chapter explores the relationship between the findings presented in the previous chapter, and the themes which emerged in the literature reviewed in chapters two and three, to illustrate how the aims of this study were met. This chapter will also provide a conclusion which will re-address the main research question and attempt to summarise and conclude the whole study. The limitations of this study will also be addressed in this section. This chapter will illustrate how addiction issues, fragility in co-partner relationships, and sporadic involvement as fathers were dominant experiences. Prisoners were highly dependent on co-partners to facilitate their involvement as fathers. Men who felt secure in co-partner relationships, referred to family life as a source of support in prison, while men in strained relationships displayed more ambivalent and conflicting views in relation to their role. This study will show how prisoners managed to reconciled the stigma of imprisonment with the authority and status of a father. The dominance of the

'nurturing' model of fatherhood will also be illustrated as a cultural reference of ideal fatherhood.

## **Chapter 2 : Fatherhood in Irish society; an examination of the factors that constrain or enable a fathers' involvement**

This chapter sets out to establish the context of contemporary fatherhood in Irish Society, as a background to the experiences and perceptions of prisoners as fathers. It will show how a father's role encompasses behavioural, social and psychological elements, which are enacted through involvement and influenced by commitment. Discussion of these concepts will illustrate the forces which can push or pull a father towards greater involvement. This discussion will also highlight the ecological nature of the father's role which must be considered within the context of the mother / child dyad, and the wider economic and social environment.

Exploration of the changing roles and responsibilities of fathers will demonstrate the complex and contradictory nature of contemporary fatherhood. As will be shown, traditional fathers in Irish society were expected to be the moral authority and providers within families, and expectations of their involvement in the domestic sphere were low. However the wide-scale entry of women into the work force and the influence of child development theories have placed different expectations on fathers. While the contemporary 'ideal' of fatherhood depicts a highly involved nurturer, this ideal seems slow to translate into practice. Available Irish research will show the majority of women carry the main bulk of responsibility for childcare and domestic tasks and for many fathers, the provider role remains as a powerful measure of 'ideal' fatherhood.

Against this background of the nurturing and breadwinning ideal, recent changes in family formation will be explored to illustrate further contradictions. Due to increases in marital breakdown, cohabitation and lone parent families, an increasing minority of fathers appeared to be involved on the periphery of family life. However Corcoran's Irish research with 'non-resident' fathers will be explored to show that fathers who live apart from their children are diverse in terms of their involvement. Non-resident fathers can experience a range of emotional, practical and legal barriers in maintaining their relationships with their children. In particular, the parental and guardianship rights of unmarried fathers are particularly weak in relation to their children. Finally, an ecological model (Doherty et al,

1996) illustrating the range of individual, interpersonal and contextual factors which can constrain or enable a father's involvement with his children will be discussed.

### **Defining fatherhood**

Any discussion of contemporary fatherhood must begin with a definition of the nature of fatherhood. The paternal view of the concept of a 'father' focuses on the biological relationship between a father and child, where paternity may be reflected in physical resemblance and genetic inheritance. A paternal father retains his status as the biological parent of a child regardless of the level of subsequent contact or involvement in the child's life. However, as will be discussed in more detail in the latter part of this chapter, since 1966 in Irish law, it has been clarified that a paternal or 'natural' father has no automatic parental rights in relation to his child, simply on the basis of a biological relationship (McKeown, 2000, Constitution Review Group 1996). Also, as McKeown et al (1998) point out, some fathers such as 'step' or 'adoptive' fathers may have no biological links with a child but fulfil legal and practical responsibilities as a parent.

Therefore, it seems widely accepted that a father's role encompasses some level of relationship with, and responsibility towards a dependent child. Although the biological relationship can be an important aspect of fatherhood, it is not the sole determining factor that defines contemporary notions of a 'father'. In an attempt to clarify the nature of fatherhood, some scholars (McKeown et al 1998, Ferguson and Hogan 2004, Marsiglio and Pleck 2005) have suggested that while biological links may exist within the relationship, a father's role primarily encompasses emotional, psychological and behavioural elements within the relationship between a male adult and child.

### **Defining paternal involvement**

Further definition of the nature of fatherhood has been achieved through examination of the concept of a father's 'involvement' with his children. According to Lamb (1987), paternal involvement involves engagement, accessibility and responsibility. Engagement describes the direct contact between father and child through caretaking, play or shared activities (Lamb, 1987). Accessibility refers to a father's potential availability for interaction through being accessible to the child, for example in situations when the father is the same house or room as the child but not directly engaged in interaction with the child. Finally, responsibility is defined as the actions and decisions a father may take which affect the

welfare of the child (Lamb, 1987). Lamb's (1987) three elements were developed during the 1980's when the debate about the fathers' level of involvement in child care and domestic tasks was a dominant theme in the academic literature debating the nature of fatherhood. This tri-part definition was developed to allow researchers to measure the behavioural element of the fathers role (Lamb, 1987), and so minimised the more nebulous, emotional and psychological element of the parent / child relationship.

While Lamb's et al's (1987) definition remains popular in the literature, a slightly broader definition of father involvement has been offered by Ihinger-Tallman's et al (1995) as

behaviours that promote interaction with and reflect a commitment to a child, including among other activities face to face contact, phoning or writing, physical caretaking and providing financial support (Ihinger-Tallman, 2005, p58).

This definition still emphasises behaviour, but incorporates the psychological and social element of the role through the idea of the fathers' behaviour reflecting his commitment to the child. Economic provision has also been included in this definition. As shall be explored below, economic provision has been an important traditional role for fathers. This slightly broader definition is also more easily applied to non-resident fathers (fathers who live apart from their children) and is therefore more appropriate to experience of fathers in prison.

### **The nature of commitment**

It is clear then from this definition that a father's involvement is influenced by the concept of commitment. Commitment is a complex concept which has been defined in a number of ways. One definition of commitment emphasis notions of duty and obligation, for example Tallman, Gray and Leikk (1991), cited in Ihinger-Tallman, (1995, p17) define commitment as "an obligation to remain in and maintain a relationship over time". This view fits well with conceptions of fatherhood, for it is common for the fathers' role to be discussed in terms of the social and financial obligations it entails, and how these have evolved over time (Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda, 2004, Marsiglio 1995, Mckeown et al, 1998, Pleck, 1987). Indeed much of this chapter involves a discussion of this nature.

However Beckers' (1960) definition discusses commitment in terms of rewards and costs to the individual. Becker (1960) has defined commitment as "consistent lines of behaviour resulting from an actors assessment of the balance of costs over rewards" (Becker, 1960,

cited in Ihinger-Tallman, 1995). Applying this definition to the father's role suggests that the pleasure, satisfaction, emotional support and social recognition derived from interaction with children and partner, are the possible benefits. Therefore, feelings of love, pleasure, satisfaction and emotional support may be derived through positive interaction with their child and partner. Social recognition is transmitted through the approval of partners and family. This in turn is influenced by the wider cultural expectations of fatherhood current within the individuals' family, community or wider society. The costs therefore are the responsibilities associated with the role which may vary according to the expectations within the family unit. These costs could include loyalty to the partner relationship, economic provision, emotional support, positive interaction with children and practical nurturing tasks. These are similarly influenced by the wider cultural expectations fathers and the conditions in which the family is located.

It is possible that an individual's perception of the duties attached to the father's role, will influence the level of satisfaction they derive from their involvement. Therefore Becker's (1960) idea of rewards and costs can be linked to Tallman, Gray and Leikk's (1991) idea of obligations. Conceptualising commitment in this way may help us to understand why a father may withdraw from his role. As will be explored in relation to non-resident fathers below, co-parent conflict, emotional turmoil and barriers of access can become overwhelming for some fathers and lead to withdrawal from their parental relationship. Similarly, a father who is unable to provide economically for his family, when expected to do so, can also experience considerable strain (Moss and Brannen, 1987). This discussion of the nature of commitment illustrates the systemic nature of fatherhood (Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda, 2005, Amato and Sobolewski, 2004, Doherty et al, 1996, Ihinger-Tallman et al, 1995). For it is widely agreed that the fathers role cannot be understood in isolation from the relationship with his partner and child, their mutual expectations of each other and the environmental and cultural context in which they are located.

## **Fatherhood and parental roles**

Traditional notions of parental roles and responsibilities have relied on a relatively strict division of labour based on gender. These ideas are based on a 'biological essentialist' view of gender which sees parental roles as based on the natural capacity of the sexes. Differences between male and female roles are seen as fixed, natural and stem directly from



innate biological differences between the sexes. Within this view, men are considered to be naturally aggressive, competitive and inherently unsuited to a nurturing or caring role. These innate male characteristics reflect the father's greater suitability to the role of economic provider within families. Women on the other hand, in addition to their child bearing capacity, are seen to be more naturally emotional and caring than men, and are therefore more naturally suited to a nurturing role. For discussion of this debate see (Bilton, 1996, Connell, 1995, Lupton and Barclay, 1997, Marsiglio and Pleck, 2005). The 'essentialist' view of fatherhood is strongly reflected in the more 'traditional' models of fatherhood.

### **The moral overseer role of the father**

Traditionally fathers were considered to be the moral and religious authority within the family and the family unit was based upon marriage (Pleck 1987). This was consistent with the unquestioned power and status of men within nineteenth century society. The 'moral overseer' father was assured of his authority and status as head of the family (Pleck 1987). Whether the family depended on farming or trade, economic activity tended to be located in or around the home. The entire family including the children were expected to work toward their economic wellbeing (Pleck, 1987, Gerson, 1993). While mothers were primarily responsible for the care of younger children, fathers had a significant role in relation to the moral and religious education of their older children (Pleck, 1987). The 'ideal' father in this period therefore fulfilled the role of authority figure, protector and moral leader within his family.

### **The moral overseer in Irish society**

Within Irish society this 'moral overseer' model is reflected in an ethnographic account of rural Irish family life from the 1930's (Arensberg and Kimball, 1968). Similar to Pleck's (1987) American model, sons and fathers were responsible for the heavy farm work, while mothers and daughters were responsible for the rearing of small children, other domestic tasks and lighter farm work (Arensberg and Kimball, 1968). The rural Irish father retained unquestioned moral authority over his (male) children well into their middle-age, and the use of corporal punishment as a form of discipline was considered quite acceptable (Arensberg and Kimball, 1968).

Indeed the father is the court of last resort, which dispenses punishment for deviations from the norm of conduct in all spheres. Within the bounds of custom and law he has the full power to exercise discipline. Corporal punishment is not a thing of the past in Ireland (Aresnberg and Kimball, 1968, p55).

Although the father did not leave the home to provide economically for the family, parental roles were still clearly separate in relation to child care and domestic tasks.

### **The traditional breadwinning role of the father**

The second important traditional role for fathers illustrates a continuing division of domestic responsibilities within the family. The father's role as breadwinner emerged with the separation of work and home that occurred through industrialisation (Pleck, 1987, Gerson, 1993). Agriculture and trade declined as the primary home-based economy and the emphasis shifted towards industrial centres as the main provider of employment. Fathers now spent the vast majority of the day outside of the home and away from their families. The emphasis changed in the father's role from 'moral overseer' towards provider of resources and security within the family, with the mother continuing as carer of children (Pleck, 1987).

### **The father's breadwinning role and Irish society**

Within the conservative and deeply catholic fledgling Irish state, it is hardly surprising that the gendered division of parental roles was strongly supported. The Constitution of 1937 enshrined the importance of the married family (Constitution of Ireland, 41:1) and the importance of the mother's role as carer of children for the benefit of Irish society.

In particular the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. (Constitution of Ireland, 41:2:1, 1937)

The State shall, therefore endeavour to ensure that mothers' shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home. (Constitution of Ireland, 41:2:2, 1937)

While the father's role is not specified in the Constitution, McKeown et al (1998) have argued that by omission the implication is clear, that the father's role lies outside of the home as provider and breadwinner (McKeown et al, p18, 1998). However in terms of education, the constitution specifies that the family and parents are the "primary and natural

educator of the child” which suggests that the father in addition to the mother, has a role in the “religious, moral, intellectual and physical or social education of the child” (Constitution of Ireland, 42:1). Therefore, it could be argued that both the ‘moral overseerer’ and ‘breadwinner’ models of fatherhood are supported within the Irish Constitution.

The separation of parental roles in terms of father as provider and mother as carer, was further reinforced by a piece of legislation commonly referred to as the ‘marriage bar’ (Kennedy, 2001, Fahey, 1995). This policy, revoked in 1973, required women who were employed within banking and the public service sector (for example, education, health), to leave once they became married (Kennedy, 2001). Both pieces of legislation reflect the importance of separate parental roles within Irish society, with the father as breadwinner and the mother maintained as carer within the domestic sphere.

### **The changing role of the Father**

Over the last 30 years however, it has become accepted within academic analysis of fatherhood that gender and parental roles are socially constructed rather than biologically determined, and therefore are subject to the influence of changing social and economic forces in society (Lamb and Tamis-LeMonda, 2004, Marsiglio 1995, McKeown et al, 1998, Pleck, 1987). While no one will ignore a mother’s child bearing capacity, the idea that fathers are inherently unsuited to nurturing no longer holds sway with a wide body of fatherhood scholars and is reflected in more recent ‘ideals’ of fatherhood. The ‘involved father’ is the most recent model of ‘ideal’ fatherhood that has risen in popularity over the previous three decades, (Pleck, 1987, McKeown, 1998, Marsiglio, 1995). This image depicts the ‘ideal’ father as being affectionate, loving and playful, who provides guidance, support and encouragement to his children, and takes a far greater share of involvement in childcare and domestic tasks than previous fathers. (Lamb, 1987, Kimmel, 1987, Pleck, 1987, McKeown, 1998, Coltrane, 2004).

### **‘Authoritative’ parenting and the expectations of fathers**

More recent developments within the field of child psychology can be linked to these contemporary ideas of what constitutes ‘good’ fathering. Child psychologists have argued that ‘authoritative’ parenting practices enable children to develop as confident,

independent, assertive and socially competent adults (Baumrind, 1966 cited in Mosley and Thomson, 1995). The authoritative approach emphasises an appropriate balance between positive and encouraging behaviour (as in encouragement, warmth and communication) and controlling behaviour (as in the provision of behavioural boundaries or discipline). Parenting practices which over-use punishment are held to erode a child's confidence and inhibit psychological development. As a result of this influence, a good father is expected to be demonstrative and loving towards his children (McKeown, 1998). As an expression of this principle, through the Children's Act 2004 in the UK, physical punishment such as slapping of children is no longer considered an acceptable method of control (The Children's Act, [2004], ch 31, 58, 1- 3).

### **Women's employment and expectations of fathers**

A further factor which has contributed to the popularity of the nurturing father as the contemporary 'ideal' of fathering is the wide-scale entry of women into the labour market (Coltrane, 2004, McKeown, 1998). In Irish Society the proportion of women engaged in employment has expanded dramatically from 7.5% in 1970, to stand at 47% in 2006 (CSO, 2007). This shifted the father's traditional position as sole breadwinner in families and prompted debate about the gendered division of household labour (McKeown, 1998, Griswold, 1993). As greater numbers of women worked and contributed to household earnings, established notions about women's sole responsibility for childcare and domestic labour were questioned. Men were increasingly expected to have a greater share of involvement in domestic tasks and in the care of their children (Lamb, 1987, Griswold, 1993, McKeown 1998, Coltrane 2004). Although the 'involved father' image is a popular contemporary ideal, it appears that evidence of this behaviour in practice is limited to certain groups of fathers.

### **Research on father's involvement in childcare and domestic tasks**

Wide-scale Irish research on fathers' involvement in domestic activities is relatively limited. Both wide-scale Irish studies (Nugent, 1987, Kiely, 1996) show that mothers continue to have the vast bulk of responsibility in terms of domestic tasks compared to fathers. Within Kiely's (1996) Irish study the most commonly reported form of father's involvement related to engagement in pleasurable activities such as play or leisure. Kiely's (1996) finding has been supported by Pleck's (Pleck, 1997, Pleck and Masciadrelli, 2004) more recent analysis of a number of studies on US paternal involvement.

In terms of childcare however, the Irish research (Nugent, 1987, Kiely, 1996) found slightly higher levels of involvement with younger fathers and in middle class families where both parents worked. More recent international research conducted in the US, Canada and the Netherlands has found that father's levels of involvement have increased slightly since the 1980's (Pleck and Masciadrelli, 2004), therefore it is possible that more recent changes have occurred in Ireland. Brewster (in Coltrane, 2004) has suggested that American fathers tended to use their free time for leisure activities in the 1970's and 1980's, but are more likely to be engaged in child care since the 1990's. Rising private childcare and housing costs in Irish society may also mean that more fathers are involved through economic necessity, in the care of their children, illustrating the influence of economic forces on the father's involvement and the socially constructed nature of fatherhood.

### **The dominance of the breadwinning role**

Many women earn less than men or combine part-time work with child care responsibilities, so for some families the father is still the main breadwinner (Coltrane 2004). Some writers argue that the dominant culture within the workplace includes an expectation of total commitment to work, often at the expense of family life (Gerson, 1993, Lamb et al, 1987). Lamb et al (1987) point to the possibility of diminished career prospects and earnings as a cost of greater paternal involvement. Given that professional achievement has been a traditional measure of success and fulfilment for men, greater involvement may seem an unattractive option. Some research has shown that fathers who are stripped of the breadwinner role (through unemployment) can feel a strong sense of failure and suffer psychological distress due to the erosion of this identity (Moss and Brannen, 1987). It seems as though the 'good provider' or 'breadwinner' 'ideal' is still a powerful measure of successful fatherhood in Irish society.

### **Working class fathers and breadwinning**

A father's investment in the breadwinning role may however, also depend on patterns within the wider family and community environment (Doherty et al, 1996). Historical analysis of fatherhood has shown that working class fathers were not always able to support their families on one wage and mothers frequently had to work supplement the family income (Coltrane, 2004, Gerson, 1993). For working-class fathers then, the identity of the 'sole' breadwinner may not be traditionally as strong as middle class fathers. Both McLlanahan and Carlson's study (2004) in the US, and Ferguson and Hogan's (2004) Irish

research involving unmarried fathers found that disadvantaged fathers are more likely to experience barriers of low wage, low educational attainment and many struggled to provide financially for their families. In Furstenberg's (1995) study of inner-city working class fathers, due to their struggles to provide, mothers tended to place greater emphasis on the fathers availability for nurturing rather than providing financial resources. Therefore, fathers who cannot provide financially for their families may still fulfil their role through other forms of involvement.

### **The influence of social change on family structure and fathers**

It has been shown that cultural 'ideals' of fatherhood have been influenced by a range of social and economic forces. However, a further set of social forces have influenced patterns in family formation and the father's position in relation to family life. The combination of pressure for equality for women from the feminist movement, widespread access to media in the 1970's, availability of contraception, economic prosperity and declining influence of catholic ideology have created conditions for attitudinal changes in relation to marriage, family formation and sexual activity outside of marriage (Kennedy, 2001, McKeown et al 1998). As shall be explored below, growing numbers of families are forming outside of the married two parent family structure, and increasing numbers of fathers live apart from their children. It seems ironic that the economically providing, nurturing father is a popular contemporary ideal for fathers at a time when fragility in family life is increasing. Coltrane (2004) highlights these diverging forces as a 'paradox' for American fathers, which can equally apply to Irish fathers

### **Marital breakdown in Irish Society**

Although over 70% of all families in Ireland are comprised of married couples with or without children, marital breakdown through separation or divorce has increased. As divorce was not available in Ireland until 1997, family breakdown tended to be shown through the numbers of separated individuals. This increased substantially between the mid-eighties and mid-nineties, increasing from approximately 37,000 in 1986 to 107,000 separated individuals in 2006 (CSO, 2007). However the overall population also increased during this period so, if taken as a percentage of the population, the increase appears less dramatic. So, from 1986 to 2006 the percentage of the population who were separated

increased from 2.10% to 3.17%, which represents a relatively minor, but increasing proportion of the population (see table 1).

Recent census figures also show an increase in divorce over the previous ten years. The numbers of divorced individuals increased from 9,800 in 1996 to 59,500 individuals in 2006 (CSO, 2007). As a percentage of the overall population the numbers of divorced individuals increased five fold from 0.35% to 1.75% of the population. Again, while this shows a clear increase, those who are divorced also represent a relatively small proportion of the population. Given that divorce has only been available for a relatively short period of time in Ireland, it is possible that current rates may well stabilise over the following decade.

**Table 1 : Divorce and separation in Ireland**

	<b>1986</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>2006</b>
<b>Numbers of separated individuals</b>	37,200	78,800	107,000
<b>Separated individuals as a % of the overall population</b>	2.1%	2.8%	3.17%
<b>Divorced individuals</b>	Not known	9,800	59,500
<b>Divorced individuals as a % of the overall population</b>	-----	0.35%	1.76%

Source: CSO, 2007 and Commission on the Family (1998) (1986 figures).

### **Re-marriage in Ireland**

However not all divorced individuals remain single as remarriage also appears to be increasing in Ireland. The 2006 Census figures shows that 2% of all married individuals were re-married following disillusion of their previous marriages. Data which would show changes in this trend are not available due to difficulties extracting data from the marriage registration system (CSO, 2005). As divorced couples may only re-marry within the

registry office, one possible indicator of the increase in re-marriage is the amount of civil marriages. As a proportion of all marriages, civil marriages increased from 3% in 1996 to 18% in 2002. The Central Statistics office (2007) suggests this indicates an increase in re-marriage following the availability of divorce. Therefore although separation and divorce are increasing in Ireland, re-marriage is also rising which indicates that for many individuals, marriage remains as an important gateway for family formation.

### **Cohabitation in Ireland**

Although the vast majority of children are born to married couples, cohabitation outside of marriage is increasing (CSO, 2007, Fahey and Russell, 2001). One indicator of this is the number of births outside of marriage, which increased from 5% of all births in 1980, to just over 31% of all births in 2004 (CSO, 2007). In addition cohabitating couples accounted for 3.9% of all family units in 1996, but increased to stand at 11.5% of all family units in 2006 (CSO, 2007). Some commentators in the USA argue that cohabitating couples are more prone to separation than married couples and this is part of the general trend towards more fragile and fluid family ties (Doherty et al, 1996). For instance in their US study McLanahan and Carlson (2004) found that unmarried fathers were twice as likely to have children by multiple partners than married fathers, which suggests fragility in previous relationships. Also Bradshaw et al's (1999) UK research on non-resident fathers found that ex-married fathers were more likely to remain in contact with their children than ex-cohabitees. In the Irish context it has been suggested that co-habitation may be a pre-cursor to marriage for many couples (Fahey and Russell, 2001). For example, McKeown (1998) has cited one study from the late eighties which suggested that a large proportion of lone parents ceased claiming 'unmarried mother's allowance' because they married (O'Grady, 1992 in Mckeown 2001a). Indeed, marriage rates did decline in Ireland in the mid nineties but have increased in more recent years (CSO, 2007) which may suggest that cohabitation is a transitory phase prior to marriage for some couples.

### **Lone parent families and fathers**

Part of the concerns around these changes in family demographics relate to increases in the number of lone parent families. Mainly through the combination of marital breakdown and births outside marriage, the numbers of lone parent families has increased in Ireland. For example, lone parent families as a percentage of all families increased from 10.7% in 1991 to 16% in 2002. As a reflection of the primacy of the mother's role as carer, in the event of



separation or divorce, the vast majority of children reside with their mothers. Therefore the vast majority of lone parent families are headed by women. For example the proportion of lone parent households with children under 15 that are headed by women, is fourteen times higher than those households headed by men (CSO, 2007). Although the numbers of lone parent households has clearly increased, it is difficult to estimate what this means for the involvement of fathers.

### **Lone parents and father's involvement**

Social welfare supports to lone parents were set up to provide financial security to families cut off from the breadwinning role of a father. Indeed the original names for these allowances illustrate these origins with the 'deserted wives' and 'unmarried mothers' allowance being eventually replaced by the Lone Parents Allowance in 1990, and becoming the One-Parent Family Payment (OPFP) in 1997 (DSFA, 2001). In order to qualify for this payment a lone parent may not cohabit with a partner. Indeed a couple who marry or declare their cohabitation, risk losing their secondary benefits of medical card and rent allowance in addition to the loss of the OPF payment. Many lone parents have much lower levels of education than their married counterparts and are unable to earn a sufficient income to replace these valuable welfare payments (DSFA, 2006). This situation may also illustrate a growing fragility in relationships, for if either party were uncertain about the long-term life of the relationship, it may entail less economic disruption to remain living in separate accommodation.

A number of reports have raised concerns that this current system discourages the formation of new relationships and the involvement of fathers (Fahey and Russell, 2001, McKeown, 2001a, Ferguson and Hogan, 2004, DSFA, 2006). For example in 2001, Fahey and Russell (2001) suggested that many families were actively concealing the presence of the father or living in separate homes in order to continue to qualify for this income support. As a result many fathers have been pushed to the periphery of family life, through their 'unofficial' presence that constitutes a risk to the family income. This issue has been raised in two recent Irish studies on fathers (Corcoran, 2005, Ferguson and Hogan, 2004). Concerns about this situation have led to the recent announcement that the OPFP system will be replaced by the new 'Parental allowance' payment which will be introduced on a phased basis over the next few years, and also the abolition of the cohabitation rule

(DSFA, 2006). Until this new system is in place however, many fathers will continue to remain on the periphery of family life.

### **Family breakdown and father contact**

While it is clear that family breakdown is increasing, it is difficult to estimate the extent or nature of contact between fathers and children after the break-up of a family relationship. Estimates of contact between fathers and their children are available from the UK and USA (Bradshaw et al, 1999, Amato and Sobolewski, 2005). Although, levels of family breakdown and births outside marriage in both these countries began to increase at a much earlier and rapid rate than in Ireland. Therefore the statistics for loss of contact may be more extreme than in Ireland. Recent estimates from the US suggest that between one quarter and one third of divorced fathers will lose contact with their children in the USA (Amato and Sobolewski, 2005). In the UK, one major wide scale study of non-resident fathers estimated that 31% saw their children once or twice a year or less, while nearly half saw their children weekly (Bradshaw et al, 1999).

### **The range of non-residential fatherhood**

Recent small scale Irish research showed how the levels of involvement of non-resident fathers, or those who live apart from their children, can vary widely. Corcoran's (2005) Irish study used focus groups to gather the views of approximately forty fathers, predominately from the Dublin area. While these fathers were from a wide social spectrum, a large proportion were young and from a disadvantaged, working class background. The participants of this study included fathers recruited from support and advocacy groups for non-resident fathers and from educational and youth services in Dublin. Given that these fathers had sought support around their paternal role and relationships, it is possible that they represent a sub-set of fathers who have had particularly negative experiences.

This study illustrated the many ways a father can become a non-resident father, including fathers who had been in married, cohabitating long-term or short-term and in non-cohabitating relationships (McKeown et al, 1998). The levels of involvement of non-resident fathers were found to be diverse, and were dependent on the history of the co-parent relationship. Some fathers were totally estranged from their children, some had sporadic and irregular contact, while some were very close and actively involved. It was

found that fathers who had co-habited as a family, or had been married were much more likely to remain involved in regular and continuous relationship with their children and tended to show greater levels of commitment and motivation to be involved (Corcoran, 2005). Conversely, men who became fathers through casual sexual encounters were more likely to have very limited involvement or be totally estranged from their children.

The young men in Corcoran's (2005) study who claimed to have become fathers through casual sexual encounters were young, and from disadvantaged, working class backgrounds. Many of these sexual encounters occurred under the influence of alcohol, and the men said, due to the mothers' sexual promiscuity; these young men often questioned their claims of paternity. Corcoran (2005) also noted how these relationships seemed particularly fluid, with subsequent pregnancies with new partners relatively commonplace. Given that focus groups were used to gather data for this study, it is possible that these young fathers were exaggerating their attitudes and sexual conquests in response to peer pressure within the group (Finch and Lewis, 2003). This may also be a way of legitimising non-involvement by questioning the moral integrity of the child's mother. Despite these issues, this study does illustrate the diverse range of attitudes and experiences of non-resident fathers.

### **Dealing with the emotional trauma of separation**

Lunt's (1987) study on divorced fathers highlighted the importance of the father's ability to deal with the emotions generated by divorce or separation. Unlike Corcoran's (2005) study, which focused primarily on father's, Lunt's (1987) study included thirty separated or divorced couples from the UK. Similar to Corcoran's (2005) study, Lunt (1987) found that the initial process of separation generated strong feelings of grief, anger and guilt for fathers, and that the absence of daily routine contact with children reinforced these feelings of loss. For many families the initial visits post separation were very emotional, however as these visits continued they became part of an established routine, and both parents and the children tended to adjust to them.

Lunt (1987) found that the minority of fathers who had completely lost contact with their children tended to have unresolved feelings about the separation, found it difficult to deal with the emotions of visiting, and believed that a 'clean break' was the most beneficial outcome for their children. Lunt (1987) observed of the fathers who had lost contact: "these men were emotionally ill-equipped to deal with the complex feelings of separation

and did not get past the grief, guilt or resentment that can interfere with visiting children” (Lunt, 1987, p216). The ability to deal with the emotional trauma of separation appears to be crucial to the continuation of the relationship with the child, but of course the nature of the relationship between the co-parents will also influence if and how tensions are resolved.

### **Maternal Gatekeeping**

As explored previously, the vast majority of children reside with their mothers post separation, and a significant theme in a wide range of literature relates to the issue of ‘maternal gatekeeping’. This describes the mothers’ attempts to undermine or inhibit a father’s relationship with his children by blocking access to their children or influencing their children perception of their father in a negative way. This type of behaviour is commonly associated with conflict in relationships, typically involving non-payment of maintenance (Lunt 1987, Furstenberg, 1995, Doherty et al, 1996, Paisley and Minton, 1997, Bradshaw et al, 1999, Corcoran, 2005, Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda, 2004, Amato and Sobolewski, 2004).

Some authors within the fatherhood literature tend to discuss this as a behaviour characteristic of women (see Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda, 2005, Doherty et al, 1996). However Paisley and Minton (1997) argue that this behaviour is symptomatic of a power struggle within the co-parent relationship. In the event of conflict in a relationship, individuals will attempt to exert control through whatever means are at their disposal, including access to children, or payment of child support (Paisley and Minton, 1997). It is clear that these behaviours will exacerbate tension and resentment between both parties. However as the majority of children reside with their mothers post separation, mothers are in a unique role in mediating the father’s relationship with and access to his children. In Corcoran’s (2005) study some fathers discussed how they withdrew from involvement with their children because they were unable to negotiate access to their children or were unable to deal with the anger and resentment generated by this experience. In the event of severe post-separation conflict and difficulties negotiating access, fathers who have low levels of commitment, or difficulties dealing with the emotional turmoil generated, may be inclined to withdraw from their relationship with their children.

## **The legal position of Irish fathers in relation to their children**

For some Irish fathers, additional legal barriers may be encountered in maintaining a relationship with their child in the event of co-parent conflict. While married fathers are relatively well protected in relation to their parenting and guardianship rights within Article 40.3 of the Irish Constitution, unmarried fathers are particularly vulnerable in this regard.

The Rights of the cohabitating family were recognised by the European Court of Human Rights in 1996 by their reference to the formation of a 'secure' relationship between parents before or after the birth of the child (McKeown, 2000). Despite this recognition by the European Court of Human Rights, and similar recommendations from the Constitution Review Group (1996), no constitutional change has been made to accommodate unmarried fathers within cohabitating families. It may be due to the difficulties in defining or proving the existence of a stable relationship that the constitutional position of the unmarried father remains unacknowledged.

Indeed, the Constitution Review Group (1996) highlighted concerns that a change in the law would allow the biological fathers of children conceived from rape, incest or sperm donorship, equal rights as fathers who have a prior social and psychological relationship with their child. However as the law stands, unless an unmarried father has been in a stable relationship with the mother of his child since birth, he may find it difficult to secure legal rights of access or decision making. For example, if a relationship broke down between an unmarried couple after conception, and the father wished to establish a relationship with the child against the mother's wishes, he will have to apply to the court for rights of access or guardianship.

Guardianship is automatically provided to *married* parents and provides them with equal rights to make decisions affecting the welfare of their child. These rights refer to the child's welfare, education, living arrangements and healthcare (McKeown, 2000). Within unmarried couples, guardianship is automatically awarded to the mother of the child <sup>2</sup> however an unmarried father may apply to the District Court for guardianship under the Status of Children Act (1987).

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<sup>2</sup> This was provided through the Guardianship of Infants Act, 1964 (section 6).

In recent years there has been a stable increase in the number of applications to the court by unmarried fathers for guardianship, which McKeown (2001) suggests, reflects a growing interest in more ‘involved fathering’. However this is a tenuous claim to make given that these applications for guardianship still account for only a fraction of all unmarried births (See Table 2). Given the increasing level of cohabitation discussed above, it is possible that the vast majority of unmarried parents are in a harmonious relationship. McKeown (2001) has suggested that families who seek resolution through the courts represent “the more conflicted and acrimonious subset” of families (McKeown, 2001, p23). Most unmarried fathers may not see the need to seek legal enforcement of their guardianship rights unless they experience relationship conflict and subsequent access difficulties. It is also possible, given the diverse range of involvement of non-resident fathers discussed above, that some fathers are willing to relinquish their guardianship rights or at least unwilling to pursue clarification of their rights.

**Table 2 : Applications for guardianship by non-marital fathers 2002 – 2005**

Year	Applications dealt with	Granted	Refused	Withdrawn or struck out	No of births outside of marriage
2005	1734	1266	48	420	19,528
2004	1237	862	38	337	19,938
2003	1276	960	39	277	19,313
2002	1059	812	38	209	18,815

Source :- Courts Service, Annual Reports, various years, CSO, 2007

In Corcoran’s (2005) Irish study, fathers who had pursued their rights to access through the courts, felt very embittered about their treatment within the legal system. They perceived the legal system as being strongly biased in favour of the mother. Further, these fathers felt that their financial responsibilities were the only contribution valued and that their relationship with their children was deemed less important (Corcoran, 2005). Given this negative perception found within this and other studies (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004) it is possible that other fathers are unwilling to pursue the solidification of their rights because they believe they will be unsuccessful. It is possible that the legal costs and emotional turmoil associated with legal procedures act as a disincentive to unmarried fathers to seek

guardianship rights. Given these financial and emotional costs, it seems that significant levels of commitment are needed to pursue this course of action.

### **The factors that influence a father's involvement**

At the beginning of this chapter the idea of the ecological and systemic nature of the fathers' role was illustrated through consideration of the concept of commitment. It was highlighted that a fathers' commitment can be influenced by a range of personal, interpersonal and contextual factors. However, as has been illustrated throughout this chapter, in addition to his commitment to the role, similar factors will influence his actual involvement with his child. It is suggested that due to the fluid nature of the father's role, his involvement is more sensitive to the influence of these interpersonal and contextual factors than a mothers (Doherty et al, 1996).

This ecological view was developed initially in relation to parenting by Belsky et al (1984) (cited in Lamb et al, 1985), adapted to fatherhood by Lamb et al (1985), and developed further by Doherty et al (1996). However, a number of other writers have indicated how a very similar range factors influence a fathers' involvement (Ihinger-Tallman's et al, 1995, Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda, 2004, Amato and Sobolewskis 2004). Doherty et al (1996) suggest that paternal involvement is influenced by the individual characteristics of the father, mother and child, the quality of the co-parent relationship, and the wider social and environmental context. Due to limitations of space, this discussion will focus on the fathers' personal factors, the influence of the co-parent relationship, and contextual factors. This model is interactive and additive, in that low levels of commitment combined with low expectations from others would lead to low involvement, whereas high levels of commitment as a parent may help to overcome practical barriers such as separate residence from the child or parental conflict.

#### **The father's individual factors**

At the centre of the model lie the father's personal characteristics. These are comprised of the strength of commitment to his role, his knowledge and skills in parenting and his level of motivation for involvement (Doherty et al, 1996). These in turn are influenced by his relationship with his own father, psychological health, employment and residential status. Doherty et al (1996) suggests that fathers tend to either identify with their own fathers or

compensate for their lapses. They also suggest that psychological health is linked to positive and consistent parental interaction. The impact of the fathers' emotional health on his involvement was illustrated in the discussion of the negative experiences of non-resident fathers, and their difficulties dealing with the emotions of separation (Lunt, 1987). Emotional health can also be influenced by employment status as job loss and economic distress can undermine psychological health (Moss and Brannen, 1987). As was shown in the discussion of non-residential fathers experiences (Corcoran, 2005), the fathers residential status in relation to his child will also influence the nature and frequency of involvement.

### **The influence of the co-parent relationship**

The quality of the co-parent relationship is the second significant factor which exerts a strong influence on the father's relationship with his children. Doherty et al (1996) suggest that relationships which illustrate negotiation, mutual support and collaboration are linked to higher levels of involvement from fathers, although it is difficult to know if this stems from or leads to interpersonal cooperation. As was explored, fathers have been shown to withdraw from involvement during post-separation conflict, or may have difficulty maintaining access to children in the event of a relationship breakdown (Corcoran, 2005, Lund, 1987). Doherty et al (1996) suggest that the expectation of the mother within this dyad are paramount, however it would seem that mutual expectations of *both* parties will influence behaviour within a relationship. The extent of mutual commitment will determine the strength and durability of a co-parent relationship. While Doherty et al (1996) suggest marital status is an important influencing factor, given the rise in cohabitating families within Irish society, it is suggested that mutual commitment within a relationship is the most important factor.

### **Contextual factors**

Contextual factors which influence these personal and interpersonal relationships are the cultural expectations of fathers, the economic environment and the social supports available for fathers. As was shown in the discussion above, the cultural images of fatherhood emphasise particular aspects of the fathers' role according to the prevailing economic and social conditions. This has been illustrated through the moral overseer, breadwinner and nurturing roles explored within Irish society. This model suggests the cultural expectations of the father, will in turn influence the expectations placed on fathers by themselves and



others. The wider economic environment can provide employment, and in this way influence a fathers' ability to provide economic support. A lack of income and poor occupational opportunities can have a negative impact on the fathers' sense of self worth, as the cultural expectations for providing are so strong. As was explored above, breadwinning and nurturing are two strong cultural 'ideals' of contemporary fatherhood and may influence how a father and wider family perceives how he should perform his role. Social supports can include institutional practices such as flexible working hours in the area of employment, however Doherty et al (1996) also include the influence of the wider family who can support involvement through encouragement, care, communication or resources.

**Table 3 : Doherty et al's (1996) Influences on fatherhood; a conceptual model**

<b>Factors about the father</b>	<b>Factors about their co-parent relationship</b>	<b>Contextual factors</b>
Identification with a parenting role (commitment / motivation)  Knowledge, skills and commitment to parenting.  Psychological well being.  Relationship with their own father  Employment characteristics  Residential status	Custodial arrangement.  Relationship commitment.  Co-operation, mutual support, conflict	Economic factors.  Cultural expectations.  Social supports.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the nature of fatherhood and through this, defined key terms associated with the roles and responsibilities of a father. It has been shown that a father's role can be formed through biological links, but must also encompass a behavioural, psychological and social relationship. The concepts of involvement and commitment illustrate the ecological nature of fatherhood, and how the father's role must be examined in

the context of the mother's role, the co-parent relationship and the environmental and cultural context in which they are located.

Examination of the cultural context of fatherhood illustrates the complex and contradictory nature of contemporary fatherhood. Fathers in recent history had relatively separate roles in comparison to those of mothers. These fathers acted as 'moral authority' figures and 'providers' within households and did not generally have a role in the care of children. More recent changes in the economic activity within families, and knowledge of child development have led to the nurturing, highly involved father image as the contemporary 'ideal'. While Irish fathers appear to have limited levels of involvement in childcare, international research suggests the possibility of wider change. At the same time, the provider role continues as a powerful measure of achievement for some fathers, although for some working class men this role may prove problematic.

Paradoxically, while the image of the nurturing, involved father remains popular, more recent changes in family formation have led to greater fragility within family life. Martial breakdown, cohabitation, and lone parent families remain the minority of family forms but nevertheless are increasing in number. As a result, it has become harder to gauge the presence of fathers in families. Irish research has shown that fathers who are classed as 'non-resident' are highly diverse in their involvement with their children. It has also been shown that 'non-resident' fathers can experience a range of traumatic emotional and practical difficulties in maintaining their relationships with their children. In addition, the parental rights of unmarried fathers are unprotected in Irish law, which can act as a further barrier to maintaining parental relationships. The discussion is drawn to a close with reiteration of the individual, interpersonal and contextual factors which can work to constrain or enable a fathers' involvement with his children. The next chapter of this study will examine Irish and international research to consider how these forces reflect in the experiences and perceptions of prisoners as fathers.

## **Chapter 3 : Prisoners and fatherhood: an exploration of research**

It has been established that a range of personal, interpersonal and contextual factors can constrain or enable a father's involvement with his children. This following chapter will examine how these factors apply to prisoners' relationships as fathers, within an Irish and international context. The first section will review data providing a sociological and criminological profile of Irish prisoners, to illustrate the context of their relationships as fathers. This data will show a significant level of fragility within prisoners' relationships as fathers.

Irish research examining the experiences of prisoners as fathers explores the constraints placed on a father's role by the prison context and the diversity in how prisoners perceive how their roles are affected by imprisonment (Looney, 2001). Research from the UK and US will illustrate a range of personal and interpersonal factors which may help to explain this diversity which have not featured in the Irish research. These factors include the importance of the co-parent relationship, the prisoner's willingness to be open about their prisoner status and their emotional well being. Due to the high levels of addiction among Irish prisoners, the impact of drug dependency on a users' well being and interpersonal relationships will be explored to highlight the additional challenges placed on a prisoner's interpersonal relationships.

### **Fathers within the Irish Prison system**

The Irish prison system contains a daily average of 3,200 prisoners, located among fourteen prisons within the State, the vast majority (97%) of which are men (Irish prison service, 2005). Data on the parental status of prisoners is not available despite the introduction in 2001 of a Prisoner Records Information System, to record a range of demographic information relating to prisoners (Irish Prison Service, 2001). One available figure comes from O'Mahony's (1997) study on Mountjoy prisoners which estimated that approximately 72% of Irish prisoners were fathers. If we accept that three quarters of Irish prisoners are fathers, then it is likely that the available information on prisoners reflects the circumstances of those who are fathers. This profile can also help us to understand the background against which these men are forming relationships as fathers and partners.

### **O'Mahonys sociological profile of prisoners**

O'Mahonys (1997) Mountjoy study highlighted significant levels of social and economic disadvantage among Irish prisoners. Prisoners were found to be drawn predominately from the lowest socio-economic groups within working class areas of Dublin. A significant proportion had a first degree relative (sibling or parent) who had also been in prison, and just under half had experienced family disruption through the death of a parent or family break-up. Many prisoners had low levels of education attainment and minimal, or no experience in employment while more than a quarter had significant literacy problems. A very high proportion had a history of serious drug addiction, and opiate use in Prison was widespread among the sample (O'Mahony, 1997).

More recent studies, involving a wider range of Irish prisons have confirmed this profile of disadvantage and addiction (Long et al, 2001, Morgan and Kett, 2003, Murphy et al, 2003, Seymour and Costello, 2005 and O'Donnell, 2006). Very high levels of drug addiction, particularly heroin addiction, have also been confirmed more recent studies (Allwright et al 1999, Hannon et al, 2000, Dillion 2001). Due mainly to the practice of intravenous drug use both prior to and during imprisonment, HIV and Hepatitis C rates have been found to be ten times higher among prisoners than the wider population (Long et al, 2001).

### **A criminological profile of Irish male prisoners**

Further information on the criminological characteristics of Irish prisoners is available from the annual committals to prison. In 2005, of the 4,686 males committed to Irish prisons, the vast majority were aged between 21 and 40 (see Table 4). Nearly two thirds of those received sentences of six months or less, while the majority were convicted of less serious crimes, for example crimes against property not involving violence, road traffic offences or 'other' offences. Over two-thirds of committal prisoners provided addresses for the Dublin, Cork or Limerick areas (Irish Prison service, 2005). Although the numbers of foreign-nationals within the prison population are increasing as a reflection of the growth in immigration in recent years, the overall proportion remains small (IPS, 2005). The Irish prison system therefore is characterised by an annual through flow of large numbers of relatively young, 'petty' offenders, from predominately urban areas of Ireland who serve relatively short sentences in Prison.

**Table 4 ; Profile of committed male prisoners in Irish prisons**

- 68% of male prisoners are aged between 21 and 40 years of age.
- 57% receive sentences of six months or less.
- 60% of males are committed for more minor ‘group four’ offences, involving drug offences, road traffic offences or ‘other’ offences.
- Two thirds provide addresses for the Dublin, Cork or Limerick areas.

All data sourced from the Irish Prison service, Annual report, 2005

Although high numbers of sentenced prisoners receive very short sentences and flow in and out of the system, it must be remembered that Irish prisons hold at any one time a significant proportion of prisoners who have committed more serious crimes, and are serving longer sentences. The annual one-day count of prisoners illustrates how prisoners who accumulate within the system are very likely to be serving sentences for offences involving violence, while two-thirds are serving sentences between 1 and 10 years in length (see Table 5 below).

**Table 5 ; Profile of sentenced male prisoners in custody on 7th December 2005**

- 51% are held in custody for group 1 and 2 offences, which are offences involving violence.
- 64 % are serving sentences between one and ten years in length.

NB : All data sourced from the Irish Prison service, Annual report, 2005

### **High levels of recidivism**

While official statistics are not collected on the previous sentences served by the prisoner population, O'Mahony's (1993) earlier research also highlighted the high levels of recidivism (repeat offending leading to imprisonment) among the Irish prisoner population. O'Mahony (1993) found that many of the prisoners in his sample had entered prison at a young age and served multiple sentences. More recent unpublished research by O'Donnell (2006) has confirmed high levels of re-offending among prisoners, particularly those among those who tend to have committed crimes not involving violence such as property crimes, motoring offences and fine defaulting.

### **Fragility of prisoner's relationships**

Overall this sociological and criminological profile suggests that Irish prisoners are likely to experience a number of significant challenges in maintaining the role and responsibilities of fatherhood, in addition to the constraints of the prison environment. For some prisoners, frequent or long periods of imprisonment, serious drug addiction and unemployment will undoubtedly place great strain on prisoners' ability to maintain long-term relationships with partners and children.

Given these circumstances, it seems hardly surprising that high levels of fragility have been found within prisoners' relationship in relation to a number of factors. O'Mahony's (1997) study found rates of marriage to be very low. Nearly half of the fathers in his study had cohabitated, compared to less than one fifth who had ever been married (O'Mahony, 1997). Approximately 15% of these fathers had children within multiple relationships, while 16% of the fathers in O'Mahony's (1997) study categorised themselves as 'single' fathers suggesting they were non-resident fathers prior to their sentence. In addition, O'Mahony (1997) found that two thirds of prisoners who had been in a formal relationship prior to imprisonment considered themselves to be permanently separated from their children and did not intend to live as a family post release (O'Mahony, 1997). These levels of fragility mirror growing trends in Irish Society in relation to cohabitation, separation, and non-residential fatherhood explored in the previous chapter. However while separation and non-residential fatherhood reflect the minority of family experiences within wider Irish society, these indicators of fragility seem dominant within the prison population.

### **Provision for family contact within the Irish Prison Service**

In many ways any 'family' policy stands in conflict with the primary aim of prison which is for the secure containment of large numbers of offenders, relying on isolation from family and society as a form of punishment (O'Mahony, 2002). However although the relationships between fathers and their children are not specifically related to within Prison service policy, it seems broadly accepted that the maintenance of family relationship supports the well being, reintegration and rehabilitation of prisoners. The Irish Prison Service Strategy Statement (2001) for instance asserts a commitment to the maintenance of links between prisoners and their families as a 'core value'. Family contact is seen as a 'critical factor' (Irish Prison Service, 2001, p15) in sustaining prisoners during their sentence and for the rehabilitation of prisoners.

Family contact is facilitated by the Prison service through a combination of visits, phone calls and letters. Convicted prisoners are allowed one 30 minute visit per week and one additional 'special' visit of 15 minute duration, both of which are awarded at the discretion of the prison governor (IPS, 2006, McDermott, 2000). Due to concerns about drug smuggling, physical contact is prohibited during visits (Looney, 2002). No limits are placed on the numbers of children who may visit, however all children must be accompanied by an adult (IPS, 2006). Visits take place up until 4pm, which can restrict children attending school from visiting. In order to receive a weekend visit, a prisoner must save their 30 minute visit for a Saturday, as additional 'special' visits are restricted at weekends (Looney, 2002). Irish prisoners are also allowed to make one phone call per day for a limited duration, and the cost of this is met by the state (McDermott, 2000). Therefore prisoners' who are maintaining parental or family ties who do not require weekend visits, could have as much as 45 minutes of face to face contact time per week to maintain relationships with partners, children and members of their wider family, in addition to a total of 35 minutes of telephone time. However prisoners may also received temporary release (TR) for short visits to the family home (Looney, 2002).

## **Irish research on prisoners as fathers**

Irish research examining the experiences of prisoners as fathers is limited<sup>3</sup>. One study carried out by the Centre for Social and Educational research (CSER), Dublin Institute of Technology (2002) examined the experiences of parents within Mountjoy Prison. The views of imprisoned parents were included in addition to the views of caregivers, the children of prisoners and staff in the prison. The experiences of fathers has for the most part been merged with those of mothers in this study (CSER, 2002). As was explored in the previous chapter, the expectations of fathers in relation to their caring responsibilities are very different from those of mothers and to avoid distortion, their experiences need to be reported separately. However, one study has explored the experiences of fathers specifically.

### **Looney's Study**

Looney's study (2001) an unpublished doctoral thesis, is the only Irish study to concentrate exclusively on the perspectives of prisoners as fathers. The experiences of 25 prisoners were gathered using semi-structured interviews, with participants randomly selected from both Mountjoy and Wheatfield prisons. Similar to O'Mahony (1997), Looney's (2001) study highlighted high levels of family fragility within prisoner's relationship. For example Looney's (2001) found that one third of the prisoners had children in multiple relationships and over two thirds of all current relationships had currently broken down. The vast majority of men in Looney's study had some form of contact with their children, through either visits, telephone contact or by letter, although this varied widely between regular and irregular contact. A small proportion of prisoners had no contact at all with their children.

### **Difficulties with visits in the Irish research**

All methods of contact including between prisoners and families were found to be problematic, particularly due to a lack of privacy (Looney, 2001). However, visits, the method of contact which offers the most opportunity for interaction, were found to be difficult in Looney's (2001) study for a number of reasons. Visits in the older Mountjoy prison were found to be more uncomfortable than in the newer Wheatfield prison, due to more cramped, crowded and unhygienic visiting facilities. Indeed one of the key findings to emerge from the CSER (2002) study was the poor quality visiting conditions in the main

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<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that two Irish studies have examined the experiences of female prisoners, including Quinlan (2003), and Carmondy and McEvoy (1996).



men's prison in Mountjoy, in comparison to the far superior conditions found in the more modern Mountjoy female prison. However, across the sample, similar difficulties with visits arose in terms of the lack of privacy within the visiting area, the short time-span of the visit, the lack of play facilities for children and lack of opportunity to express physical affection, which were all highlighted as problematic for prisoners. Looney (2001) argued these conditions produced an 'artificial' visiting environment, and undermined interaction between prisoners and their families.

### **Difficulties with visits in UK prisons**

Similar difficulties with visits were highlighted by McDermott and King's (1992) research on UK prisons in the late eighties. These conditions lead McDermot and King (1992) to conclude that family interaction was so inhibited within the prison environment that prisoners became removed from the reality of their children's and families lives. This in turn undermined their family relationships and made integration into family life more difficult on release (McDermott and King 1992). In response to these concerns about the erosion of family ties, approximately 90 of the 138 UK prisons now have some play provision for children (Pugh, 2004, cited in Clarke et al, 2005). Some prisons have also introduced parent/child visiting programmes to give prisoners the opportunity to engage with their children during longer than usual visits, and in a less restrictive environment (Clarke, 2005, Boswell and Wedge, 2002). However, concrete information on the extent of these programmes is unavailable, as they are particularly vulnerable to closure due to security and funding concerns (Boswell and Wedge, 2002).

### **An examination of differing visiting regimes**

These more flexible and interactive visiting regimes were included in two of the most recent UK studies to examine the experiences of prisoners as fathers. Both Boswell and Wedge (2002) and the more recent study by Clark et al's (2005) included prisons with the usual high security, restrictive visits similar to those found in Irish prisons, and also the longer and more interactive 'family' visit discussed above. Similar to Looney's (2001) finding in Irish prisons, within both studies the experience of 'ordinary visits' on the whole were found to be more negative, tense and stressful for prisoners and their families (Clarke et al, 2005, Boswell and Wedge, 2002). In contrast, the flexible and interactive 'family' visits were more positive in terms of supporting communication, providing opportunities for play and more 'normal' family interaction between prisoners and their families (Clarke

et al, 2005, Boswell and Wedge, 2002). However, while most men reported a positive attitude to the 'family' visits, Clarke et al (2005) found that some prisoners found these visits intense, too long and "for most quite unlike their pre-prison family routine" (Clarke et al, 2005, p234). The benefits of these more flexible visiting regimes will therefore depend on patterns of involvement previously established within the family group and will not automatically strengthen family relationships.

### **Limitations on the father's role**

Due to the limitations inherent with imprisonment, Looney (2001) found that prisoners were very restricted in the ways they could behave as a father. Activities such as providing discipline and financial support, providing physical affection and sharing special occasions in the life of the child were all seen as important paternal roles, which were generally constrained by the prison environment. Prisoners felt they were restricted to roles involving verbal communication such as providing advice during visits, and cognitive activities such as spending time worrying or thinking about their children. The range of behaviours which could be considered as involvement, in terms of "behaviours that promote interaction with and reflect a commitment to a child" (Ihinger-Tallman's et al, 1995), as might be expected within a 'total institution' (Geoffman, 1961) of this nature, were reasonably limited through imprisonment.

### **Diverging reactions to the distress of imprisonment**

A strong theme in Looney's (2002) study was the prevalence of feelings of emotional distress, such as helplessness, frustration and guilt at the restrictions on prisoners' relationships as a father. However despite the dominance of these negative feelings, the difficulties with visits described above, and the limitations placed on their role, prisoners diverged widely in how they perceived their identity was affected by imprisonment. Some prisoners choose to withdraw from involvement because of their inability to deal with this emotional stress. Others felt their identity as a father was relatively unaffected by their imprisonment due to the strength of the bond with their children or because their biological status as a father remained unchanged. Some prisoners, who tended to express feelings of regret or a resolve for future personal change, expressed that their identity as a father had become all the more important to them as a result of their imprisonment.

Looney's (2001) study focused primarily on the influence of the prison context on how a prisoner's perceived and enacted his role as a father. While the prison context is important, as has been explored in the fathering literature, a father's commitment and subsequent involvement can also be influenced by a range of personal and interpersonal factors, including his emotional well being and the status of the co-parent relationship. Although it was stated that mothers played an important role in determining levels of contact between prisoners and their children, it was not clear if for example, those prisoners who chose to withdraw from their role were denied access or were experiencing more conflict in their partner relationships as could be expected from the literature on fathers' non-resident experiences (Lunt, 1987, Doherty et al, 1996, Corcoran, 2005).

### **The importance of the co-parent relationship in facilitating contact**

Research from other jurisdictions has highlighted some of these interpersonal issues influencing prisoner's involvement as fathers. One UK study of fathers in prison (Clarke et al, 2005) focused particularly on the influence of prisoner's co-parent relationships in relation to their experiences of fatherhood. According to Clarke et al (2005), prisoners were particularly dependent on mothers to facilitate their relationship with their children, and the quality of the co-parent relationship was central to prisoner's involvement with their children. Fathers who rated their co-parent relationships in a positive way were more likely to see their children more regularly, whereas men who rated their relationships more negatively saw their children less frequently (Clarke et al, 2005).

Given the time, effort and cost taken to travel to the prison for visits, and the discomfort of the visiting experience highlighted above, maintaining regular contact through visits must demand a certain level of commitment to the relationship on the part of the co-parent. Prisoners, who perceive their relationship to be positive with their co-partner, and see their children more regularly, may feel their paternal relationship is being supported by their partner. Indeed a number of studies (Ardevi et al, 2005, Boswell and Wedge, 2002), have noted as McDermot and King (1992) describe, how family contact helped prisoners to deal with their sentence and "provided a sense of history and a hope for a future life beyond the wall" (McDermot and King, 1992, p51).

The links between a negative co-parent relationship and maternal gatekeeping have been highlighted in the previous chapter in relation to divorced or non-resident fathers (Corcoran, 2005, Lunt, 1987). In relation to prisoners, a number of studies have highlighted how co-partner conflict or maternal gate-keeping, are frequently cited as a reason for lack of access to children (Nurse, 2001, Boswell and Wedge, 2002, Ardetti, et al, 2005). In all of these studies, prisoners who were experiencing these difficulties expressed feelings of anger, resentment and powerlessness at the control or loss of relationship in these circumstances (Nurse, 2001, Boswell and Wedge, 2002, Ardetti et al, 2005, Clarke, et al, 2005). In combination, the stress from imprisonment and stress from conflict may overwhelm a prisoner's desire for involvement and lead to withdrawal. Indeed, in Nurse's (2001) US study, when prisoners found it difficult to deal with the dual pressures of prison life and family pressures, they frequently withdrew from contact with the world outside the prison walls.

### **Co-parent relationships and pressures of imprisonment**

If conflict within co-partner relationships is linked with lower levels of contact between prisoners and their children, then prisoner's relationships as fathers are particularly vulnerable. Even if the co-partner relationship is intact prior to imprisonment, the process of imprisonment will exert a number of pressures. The stigma of imprisonment may place stress on a relationship and lead to conflict between a prisoner and his partner (Richards, 1992), although this can depend on the co-partner's attitude towards crime. Family income may be reduced and the co-partner may be left feeling isolated and unsupported (Richards, 1992).

Long periods of separation will bring different pressures. Nurse's study (2001) highlighted how prison life was dominated by a culture of mistrust towards women. This mistrust was found to heighten prisoner's fears of their partner's infidelity, and frequently lead to conflict and separation (Nurse, 2001). Clarke et al (2005) noted that relationships needed to be strong to survive the pressures of imprisonment and that cohabitating or married relationships, which showed greater levels of commitment at the start of the sentence, appeared to survive the pressures of imprisonment more successfully.

In the event of parental conflict, relationship breakdown and loss of access, prisoners relationships are made more complex by the fact that they are generally considered ‘undesirable’ as members of society and as parents (O’Mahony, 1993, Ferguson and Hogan, 2004). Given the stigma of prisoner status, the high numbers of unmarried fathers with no parental rights among the prisoner population, and the negative perception of the legal system held by many fathers highlighted in the previous chapter, prisoners seem the least likely to seek access to their children through the Courts. Among all non-resident fathers, prisoners are particularly at risk of estrangement from their children.

### **Fear of ‘discovery’ as a tension in the relationship**

A further tension can arise for fathers when their children become aware of their prisoner status. In Nurse’s (2001) US study, prisoners frequently reported feelings of shame and embarrassment during visits, particularly at their older children’s awareness of their prisoner status. Indeed from both Irish studies it seems that Irish prisoners commonly deceive their children of their imprisonment (Looney, 2001, CSER, 2002).

The previous chapter illustrated how traditionally fathers fulfilled a ‘moral authority’ role in the family, providing discipline and moral guidance to their children. Although the absolute authority of the father has changed, the expectation that fathers provide discipline remains strong. Indeed, providing discipline was one of the roles in Looney’s (2001) study that was felt to be important to Irish prisoners but was constrained by their imprisonment. There is an inherent tension in the moral position required to enforce discipline, and the status of prisoner, who is publicly acknowledged as having committed a crime. It is possible that awareness of their father’s imprisonment may undermine a father’s authority and status in the relationship with their child, indeed ‘loss of parental authority’ in the relationship with their children was one issue reported in the CSER (2002) study on the experiences of Irish imprisoned parents.

Morris (1967) noted the tendency for prisoners to deceive their children, in an effort to preserve a positive image, and because they feared rejection by the child. Deception will not be possible over long term sentences as young children develop and become more aware of their environment, particularly if visiting regularly. It is possible that some prisoners discourage contact or may even withdraw from their role to avoid the discomfort and explanation that will accompany ‘discovery’. The support of a co-parent to explain

and maintain a positive perception of the father can help to minimise the negative repercussions of such a discovery, illustrating as discussed above, how a father may feel a positive co-parent supports his relationship with his child.

### **Withdrawal as ‘evidence of care’**

Some prisoners link concerns about the negative impact of contact with their child to discouragement of visits or even withdrawal from their role as a father. Across a range of studies some common concerns are cited as reasons for discouragement of visits or withdrawal. Most commonly, prisoners cite concerns about the distress to the child caused by the emotional upheaval of visits (Boswell and Wedge, 2002, Looney, 2001, Clarke et al, 2005). Also very common is the concern that their child will become accepting of prison and criminal behaviour through regular exposure to the environment (Boswell and Wedge 2002, Looney 2001, Clarke et al, 2005) A less common theme is when a prisoner describes himself as a negative influence on the child. This theme arose in Ardetti et al’s (2005) study in relation to the prisoners’ drug addiction. Some fathers discourage contact as evidence of their care for their children (Ardetti et al , 2005).

### **The emotions of visits**

The emotional upheaval of contact emerges as a particular difficulty for prisoners and their families within a range of studies (Boswell and Wedge, 2002, Looney, 2001, Ardetti et al, Clarke et al, 2005). While concerns about the impact of this distress on their child has been discussed, sometimes the prisoner themselves is unable to cope with this upheaval and cites this as the reason for withdrawal or minimising contact (Boswell and Wedge, 2002, Arditto et al, 2005) This reaction is similar to that of the separated or divorced fathers in the previous chapter, (Lunt, 1987). Lunt (1987) had observed that fathers who withdrew from contact were unable to resolve the complex feelings which arose from separation. It seems clear that the prisoner’s ability to deal with the emotional turmoil of separation is a crucial factor in determining the continuation of his involvement during imprisonment. Given the negative impact of addiction on the emotional wellbeing of an individual, and the extent of addiction among the prisoner population, it seems clear that the prisoner’s addiction history and status will be a significant influence in their involvement as a father.

## **The lack of exploration of drug addiction and fatherhood**

The impact of addiction on a prisoner's relationship as a father has received very little attention within either Irish, or international research on prisoners. Limited references have emerged within some studies, for example in both Looney (2001) and Clarke et al's (2005) study, some prisoners expressed the desire for greater involvement with their children as a result of respite from drugs or participation in drug rehabilitation programmes. Also as explored above, drug addiction emerged in Ardeti et al's (2005) study as a reason for withdrawal from involvement. Given the strong links between addiction, criminal involvement and imprisonment (Connolly, 2006a, Keogh, 1997, Dillion, 2001), it is possible that many of the prisoners involved in the range of Irish and international studies discussed above, were drug addicts and their experiences have been merged with the range of difficulties they experience as fathers.

### **Drug Addiction among Irish prisoners**

As was found in the research on Irish prisoners, the numbers of prisoners with a history of drug addiction are very high among the Irish prison population (O'Mahony, 1997 and 2002, Allwright et al, 1999, Dillion, 2001). Also many studies show that Irish prisoners continue to use a range of illegal drugs while in prison; however heroin use seems extremely prevalent (O'Mahony, 1997, Allwright et al, 1999, Dillion, 2001). One indicator of the seriousness of heroin addiction is the large numbers of Irish prisoners who receive methadone treatment while in prison. Methadone is a synthetic form of heroin which suppresses cravings and blocks the physical effects of withdrawal (Falkowski, 2000). This is one of the primary supports offered within prison to heroin addicts, indeed according to the Irish Prison service, a daily average of 200 prisoners receive methadone in Mountjoy prison alone (IPS, 2005). Given the prevalence of previous or current heroin use among Irish prisoners, this discussion will focus on the particular difficulties which can arise from heroin addiction among fathers in prison.

### **The impact of dysfunctional drug addiction**

Drug use can range from the more occasional 'experimental', or 'recreational' levels, through to the more chronic 'dysfunctional' levels of serious use (Brill, 1981). Although many drug users may remain at the less serious levels, the large majority of addicts in

prison have committed crimes to fund their addiction (Dillion, 2001) and can be considered as having experienced a 'dysfunctional' or chronic level of addiction.

Chronic heroin use is associated with a range of problematic physical, psychological and behavioural changes (Falkowski, 2000). At the stage of chronic physical dependence, regular acquisition and consumption of the drug become compulsive. Personal or family obligations can be ignored and due to symptoms of withdrawal, addicts can experience severe mood swings. A myriad of social, family, employment, health and personal difficulties can arise from this compulsion (Falkowski, 2000). For some chronic users the constant need to acquire increasing amounts of heroin can result in criminal behaviour, imprisonment, homelessness and relationship breakdown (Dillion 2001). It is recognised that most addicts use drugs as an insulation against emotional or social problems. Episodes of relapse can often be frequent and drug users may return to drug use as a coping mechanism in moments of personal or emotional difficulty (Brill 1987).

Some heroin users who can finance their drug use through legal means may manage to maintain a relatively conventional lifestyle and therefore crime is not always an automatic route (Merchants Quay Project, 2007). Obviously the illegal nature of the drug will mean that the user risks prosecution if caught in possession. Relationship breakdown may not be an automatic route either, for example one Irish study showed that many female heroin users tended to use with their partners (Moran et al, 2001). Although in drug using relationships, it can create tension if one partner decides to try to rehabilitate and the other continues to use.

### **Fathers as heroin addicts**

Despite the increasing interest in fatherhood in recent years there has been very little attention paid to the parenting status of drug using men, or examination of how drug use influences the involvement or parenting behaviour of fathers specifically (McMahon and Rounsaville, 2002). One Irish study (Hogan and Higgins, 2000) examined the impact of opiate use on the children of drug using parents. Although the views of mothers and fathers have been merged, given the dearth of Irish research in this area, its findings will be included in this discussion.



### **Research on parents as drug users**

Hogan and Higgins (2000) compared the experiences of drug using parents with non-drug using parents from similar socio-economic backgrounds in Dublin. The vast majority of drug using parents were heroin users. The findings from this study mirror many of the points made by Falkowski (2000) and highlight how drug use can undermine stability in family life. For example, as a result of the time spent acquiring and consuming drugs, drug using parents described episodes of financial difficulty together with periods of physical and emotional 'absence' from their children. Many drug using parents described increased levels of anxiety and intense physical discomfort during withdrawal, which increased irritability with their children. Some parents felt they could only function 'normally' as a parent once drugs had been consumed. However, for many families, greater stability was derived from the practical support and physical childcare provided by their parental family, and through access to methadone maintenance (Hogan and Higgins, 2000). It was suggested that drug using parents commonly described high levels of anxiety and guilt about the impact of their drug use on their family.

The authors highlighted some differences in the tasks allocated between drug using mothers and fathers. Drug using fathers were more commonly absent from their children's lives than drug using mothers (Hogan and Higgins, 2000). This was attributed to a range of reasons relating to their drug use such as imprisonment through engaging in crime, residential drug treatment, or hospitalisation. When both parents used drugs, women often depended on their partner to provide their supply of drugs (Hogan and Higgins, 2000). These tasks essentially mirror the division of domestic labour associated with more traditional family life. These fathers were also fulfilling a providing role through the provision of drugs while mothers again were seen as having the primary responsibility for child care.

### **Irish fathers as drug users**

As has been explored in the previous chapter, contemporary expectations of fathers as nurturers and breadwinners are generally high, although this may vary according to the family and cultural context (Doherty et al, 1996). It is clear from the discussion above that addiction will undermine a father's ability to contribute resources towards his family or may cause him to become a drain on the families resources. Depending on the

expectations of his co-partner, this may well place greater strain on the drug user's partner relationships (Niolon, 2007).

To fulfil a nurturing role a father must balance between positive and encouraging behaviour and controlling behaviour (Baumrind 1966 cited in Mosley and Tompson, 1995). Psychological health is an important factor in supporting this balance (Doherty et al, 1996) and the mood swings, physical cravings and guilt associated with dysfunctional addiction will at best prevent positive interaction, and at worst result in erratic and dysfunctional behaviour as a parent (Niolon, 2007, Hogan and Higgins 2000). Furthermore, as social expectations regarding 'ideal' fatherhood have increased (Pleck, 1987), McMahon and Rounsaville, (2002) suggest that fathers who fail to meet these expectation may experience increased feelings of failure, guilt and shame which can exacerbate psychological distress and lead to increased drug use.

Of course this discussion has focused on the 'dysfunctional' level of heroin addiction. Similar to the factors which have been found to influence fathers involvement generally in the previous chapter (Doherty et al, 1996), McMahon and Rounsaville, (2002) suggest that the involvement of drug using fathers may be mitigated by a range of interactive factors. These include user's co-parenting relationship, their level of psychological distress, the extent of social supports available, and their treatment history (McMahon and Rounsaville, 2002). As was found by Hogan and Higgins (2000), with support and resources many addicts are able to manage the responsibilities of parenthood and family life.

### **The complexity of fathering from prison within addiction**

Previous research has illustrated the challenges that prisoners can experience in maintaining their relationships as fathers from prison (Ardetti et al 2005, Clarke et al 2005, Looney 2001, Nurse 2001, Boswell and Wedge 2002). However it seems clear that prisoners struggling with addiction will face additional difficulties from the psychological, behavioural and physical problems that arise from serious addiction, and illicit drug use within a secure and controlled environment. Prisoners who continue using illicit drugs while in prison have few resources to fund their drug supply, and may rely on their families for additional resources. Depending on the expectations and attitude of their partner towards drug use, continued use may heighten conflict within their co-parent relationship. As all modes of family contact are discretionary (IPS, 2006, McDermott, 2000) prisoners

caught in possession of, or using illegal drugs in prison, can also have contact disrupted as form of punishment (Connolly, 2006b).

The psychological impact of drug use (Falkowski, 2000) may undermine a prisoner's ability to deal with the emotional distress caused by separation, guilt or imprisonment. It is possible that some prisoners may feel that with the negative stigma of both prisoner and addict, their influence as a parent is overwhelmingly poor. If coupled with co-parent conflict, disapproval, or difficulties of access, a prisoner may feel it is more beneficial for themselves and their child, to withdraw from contact, however as has been found for both drug-using and non-drug using fathers, this may well depend on extent of support within the co-parent relationship (Doherty et al, 1996, McMahon and Rounsaville, 2002). As highlighted above, as an outcome of their imprisonment some prisoners may develop a desire for drug rehabilitation, personal change and renewed family relationships (Looney, 2001, Clarke et al, 2005).

### **Access to treatment in prison**

A prisoner who chooses to seek drug rehabilitation may face a number of barriers in accessing treatment in Irish prisons. As discussed above, methadone maintenance is provided to address physical dependence to heroin, however intensive psycho-therapy is also needed to deal with underlying emotional issues which have lead to this level of drug use (Brill, 1987). Due to financial and budgeting constraints, access to both methadone and psycho-therapy are provided on a limited basis in Irish prisons (IPS, 2005). For example only prisoners with 26 months or less to serve on their sentence, or a circuit court review date less than 26 months away, can apply for either of the two drug detoxification programmes offered within Mountjoy prison (Dillion, 2001). Also, only prisoners already receiving methadone maintenance from an approved programme with an external agency can continue to receive this in prison<sup>4</sup> (Dillion, 2001). Therefore prisoners with long term sentences to serve, or no prior methadone support on entering prison may be forced to detoxify independently.

Success in drug rehabilitation can depend on a number of factors, including the extent of temptation presented by illicit drugs within the prison environment (Dillion, 2001), the

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<sup>4</sup> According to Dillion, (2001), HIV positive prisoners provided with methadone regardless of this rule.

particular stage of addiction for the individual, and their level of motivation to succeed (O'Mahony, 2002). As highlighted above, one of the few areas in which addiction has arisen in the research has been when a prisoners relationship with his children is named as a source of motivation for pursuing drug rehabilitation (Clarke et al, 2005, Looney, 2001, Dillion, 2001). Paradoxically, while addiction can undermine a father's relationship with his partner and children, this relationship seems to provide a source of motivation to achieve a drug free status for some prisoners.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that prisoners face a number of challenges in maintaining their relationships as fathers. A review of data illustrating the profile of Irish prisoners illustrates the fragility of their relationships as fathers. However, the only Irish study on prisoners as fathers showed that the vast majority of prisoners maintained some form of contact with their children, although this varied from regular to infrequent contact (Looney, 2001). Looney's (2001) research also highlighted how the prison context inhibits family communication and restricts how a prisoner can continue his role as a father while imprisoned. Despite these difficulties, Looney (2001) identified significant diversity in how prisoners felt their role as a father was affected by imprisonment.

Research from the UK (Clarke et al, 2005) would suggest that the quality of the prisoner's co-partner relationship has a huge potential to either support or undermine prisoners relationships with their children. Although additional factors such as the prisoners perception of how contact will influence his child, his ability to deal the loss of authority which may result from 'discovery' of his prisoner status, and his general emotional well being will also influence involvement. Considering the extent of addiction among Irish prisoners and the damaging effect of 'serious' addiction on a users emotional well-being and relationships, it is surprising that addiction has not been given more attention within the range of research on prisoners as fathers. This chapter has shown that a prisoner with addiction issues can face a number of additional emotional and practical challenges in maintaining their relationship as a father and partner, especially if facing a long term sentence.

## Chapter 4 : Research Design

This chapter contains a detailed explanation of the research design used to carry out this study. It will set out the aims and objectives of the study and discuss the interpretive foundations in which it is rooted. It will then go on to discuss details of the qualitative approach in terms of the research site, sampling size and sampling methods used to access participants. Individual in-depth interviews were used to collect data in this study and this chapter will discuss the theory informing the unstructured ‘conversational partnership’ (Rubin and Rubin, 1995) approach. A detailed discussion of the range of techniques to encourage participation and overcome social divisions will be provided. Methods for taping and transcribing interviews will be described and finally, to uphold concerns of transparency, the procedures used to analyse the data are described in detail.

As set out in the introduction, the research aims to explore the perceptions of a small sample of male prisoners who are fathers, in relation to the roles and responsibilities of fatherhood, and to investigate the factors that constrain or enable their involvement as fathers. In order to achieve this aim, qualitative research methods were utilised to gather, analyse and synthesise the experiences and perspectives of a sample of prisoners who are fathers within Mountjoy prison. Their experiences and perspectives are compared with the literature reviewed in the previous two chapters.

### **The interpretive theoretical foundations of this study**

Given that the aims of this study involve seeking to explore and understand the experiences and perspectives of individuals, it is appropriate that it is rooted in an ‘interpretive’ theoretical perspective. One of the key ideas within interpretivism is the importance of capturing and interpreting the viewpoint of individuals. Weber (1864-1920), a founding father within the Interpretative movement, emphasised that unlike the ‘natural’ world, human action involves a reciprocal process of interpretation and meaning. The quest to understand social life must focus on understanding the way that interpretation and meaning occurs for individuals (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997). Although, interpretivism has evolved since Weber’s early contribution (Crotty, 1998), this quest to understand and interpret the experience of individuals has remained a central principle. Given the strong links between

interpretivism and qualitative research, it is consistent that a qualitative approach was adopted for this study.

### **The nature of qualitative research**

There is much debate about the nature, definition and range of approaches within qualitative research. A wide range of schools advocating a variety of methods are all considered part of the family of qualitative research methodologies, including for example ethnography, grounded theory or narrative analysis (Crotty 1998, 2004, Padgett 1998, Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Despite the range of approaches, it is possible to provide a definition of qualitative research. Denzin and Lincoln's (2000) following definition echoes the concerns with interpretation and understanding seen within the interpretive perspective. They describe what qualitative research aims to do:

Qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p3).

However, qualitative research is also characterised by the design and methods used to meet these aims. Snape and Spencer (2003) have identified a number of essential elements within qualitative research which describe the nature of design and methods.

- Qualitative research uses methods which are flexible, developmental and facilitate close contact with research participants.
- Small samples of research participants are used and selected to represent significant criteria.
- Qualitative research uses interactive and flexible data gathering methods that generate rich, and detailed responses.
- Data analysis within qualitative research is concerned with description, classification and the identification of emergent concepts and themes (Snape and Spencer, 2003).

As will be demonstrated through this chapter, these essential elements are important features which reflect within the design, methods and outputs of this study.

## **Sampling and the process of negotiating entry to the research site**

One of the earliest decisions in the research process involves decisions about sampling relating to two areas; the selection of the research site and the selection of the individuals who will participate in the study. As highlighted above, qualitative research is characterised by samples that are small in size and that are selected on the basis of significant criteria (Snape and Spencer, 2003). The following section will discuss the sampling process relating to the research site.

Mountjoy prison was chosen as the research site for this study. This decision was partly dictated by pressure of time and because of the prisons' accessibility as a research site. Due to an administrative error, the process of obtaining ethical permission from the Irish Prison Service Research Ethics committee took seven months. By the time ethical permission was granted, nearly one year (of a two year research project) had expired. Permission to access the research site still needed to be sought from the governor in charge of the prison that would be chosen. This time delay greatly increased the pressure for access to be negotiated swiftly.

Fortunately links between the Waterford Institute of Technology and the Governor of Mountjoy prison, John Lonergan were well developed, and the opportunity arose to be introduced to the governor and request access for the research. Permission was immediately granted and the governor facilitated contact with the first Prison Officer and the subsequent gatekeepers (see below). Towards the middle of the data gathering period, a second prison was approached which utilised 'screened visits' as the only type of visit available to families. 'Screened visits' refer to glass partitions in place to prevent all physical contact between a prisoner and visitor. These types of visits had emerged in the course of the Mountjoy prison interviews as being a particular barrier to maintaining and developing relationships between prisoners and their children. However the request for access to this second prison was denied, which highlighted strongly the accessibility of Mountjoy prison as a research site.

The decision to select Mountjoy prison could be described as a convenience sampling method, which Ritchie et al (2003) criticise as being unsystematic and lacking any clear strategy. However, efforts to apply a more strategic approach, in terms of investigating a particular characteristic of interest (ie the screened visits) were frustrated due to a lack of

access. This experience illustrates how sampling decisions can be dictated by pragmatic considerations such as access and time constraints. Also, this shows how the process of negotiating access can be problematic when conducting research in a closed and restricted environment like a prison, and how pre-established links between organisations can support access to a site.

### **The validity of the research site**

Regardless of the method used to select the research site, Mountjoy prison was still a valid choice given the aims of the study are to explore the experience and perspectives of fathers in prison. Conducting the research in Mountjoy prison facilitated access to a significant number of prisoners who were fathers. This prison also provides ‘symbolic representation’ as a research site, an importance factor when sampling in qualitative research (Ritchie et al, 2003). Symbolic representation in qualitative research is not to be confused with *statistical* representation common to quantitative research (Ritchie et al, 2003). Symbolic representation helps to ensure that the sample reflects the relevant characteristics within the population under study:

Samples therefore need to be selected to ensure the inclusion of relevant constituencies, events and processes that can illuminate and inform. Units are chosen because they typify a circumstance or hold a characteristic that is expected or known to have salience to the subject matter under study (Ritchie et al, 2003, p82).

Mountjoy prison holds an important place within the ‘population’ of the Irish prisons and conducting the research there can help to ‘illuminate and inform’ (Ritchie, 2003) our understanding of many aspects of the experience of being a father in prison. In order to demonstrate the symbolic representation afforded by this prison, the ‘typical’ and ‘atypical’ features of Mountjoy prison, in relation to the wider prison system will be illustrated.

### **The key typical and atypical features of the study site**

Mountjoy Prison is located on a large site on the north side of Dublin with a number of other separate prisons. None of these other separate prisons are featured in this study as the level of response within Mountjoy prison was sufficient. To illustrate some important differences and similarities between Mountjoy prison and the other prisons within the Irish Prison service, a table presenting the profile, status and significant features of each prison



has been presented in Appendix A. One of 14 prisons in active operation under the umbrella of the Irish Prison Service<sup>5</sup>, Mountjoy prison is the main committal prison for the Courts. Therefore the vast majority of convicted prisoners within the State, who are aged over 18 and are serving sentences up to life imprisonment, are received into Mountjoy prison and are eventually distributed to other prisons in the state (IPS, 2006). Classified as a medium security, ‘closed’ Prison, Mountjoy prison has higher security and longer lock up times for prisoners than an ‘open prison’ regime (IPS, 2003).

### **Unique positive features of the prison**

Mountjoy features a number of unique services that provide supports to both prisoners and their families. The first unique feature is the Visitors centre which is operated by the Saint Vincent De Paul with the support of the Irish Prison service (CSER, 2002). Opened since 1999, the centre provides information, refreshments, a waiting area, and children’s play area for the families and visitors of prisoners awaiting their prison visit. This centre provides services for visitors to both Mountjoy prison and Dochas, the women’s prison adjacent to Mountjoy. Although waiting areas have recently been installed in Portlaoise and Limerick prisons (IPS, 2005), the Visitors centre in Mountjoy prison is unique in relation to the play facilities and information provided to visitors to Mountjoy prison.

The second unique positive feature of the prison is the range of homelessness prevention initiatives provided through the Probation and Welfare Service, in partnership with both voluntary and statutory agencies (IPS, 2005). These initiatives were set up to address the links between imprisonment and homelessness (Seymour and Costello, 2005). Services include a project to provide direct assistance and advice for prisoners, both in custody and following release, and a project providing rented accommodation to ex-prisoners (IPS, 2005). No other prison within the state features this type of homelessness prevention initiative, in part due to the high levels of homelessness within Dublin city (Seymour and Costello, 2005).

The third unique feature of the prison, in comparison to the other prisons within the state, is the level of drug treatment services. The Medical Unit is one of the central elements of drug treatment services within Mountjoy prison. This is a drug free facility set apart from

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<sup>5</sup> While 16 prisons are listed as being under the jurisdiction of the Irish Prison service, two (Fort Mitchel and The Curragh) were temporarily closed at the beginning of 2004 (Irish Prison Service, 2004).

the main prison, used mainly to house prisoners undergoing drug treatment programmes, and for those with HIV status (IPS, 2005, O'Mahony, 1997). Standards of accommodation are generally higher in the Medical Unit than the main prison, especially with the provision of in-cell sanitation (Dillion, 2001). All drug treatment programmes operate within the medical unit and prisoners held in this facility are monitored for drug use through regular urine tests (Dillion, 2001).

### **Controversial levels of drug use in Mountjoy prison**

While Mountjoy prison has many positive features, it has also attracted considerable controversy for a number of reasons. Some controversy is attracted by the level of legal and illegal drug use within the prison. As highlighted in the previous chapter, methadone maintenance is one of the main treatments used to treat heroin addiction, While both Mountjoy prison and Cloverhill prisons would hold a similar numbers of prisoners (see appendix A), the numbers of prisoners administered methadone on a daily basis in Mountjoy prison, is more than two and a half times than in Cloverhill prison (IPS, 2005). According to the most recent Mountjoy Prison Visiting committee annual report (2006), other prisons limit the numbers of methadone prisoners they admit, therefore increasing the numbers of prisoners requiring methadone within Mountjoy.

Although methadone is widely distributed within Mountjoy prison, illegal drug use dominates the culture of the Prison. According to a wide range of sources including for example, the Inspector of Prisons 2004 - 2005, the Mountjoy Prison Visiting committee reports (2006) media reports (Burke, Sunday Tribune, 2006, Brady, Irish Independent, 2007) and independent research (Dillion 2001, O'Mahony, 2002), illicit drugs are readily available within the Prison. Indeed according to the Inspector of prisons (2004 - 2005) and the Mountjoy Prison Visiting committee reports (2006), it is common for vulnerable, non-drug using prisoners to be coerced into receiving drugs during visits or procuring drugs if awarded Temporary release. Given this controversy regarding illicit drug use, it is noticeable that according to the Irish Prison service annual report (2005), considerably fewer measures are in place in Mountjoy prison to combat illegal drug use compared to some of the more stringent measures in place in Cloverhill prison, for example 'screened visits' and X-ray equipment. A number of increased security measures have been proposed by the Irish Prison service such as random urine testing and an increase in the use of screened visits (IPS, 2006), however these measures are yet to be implemented.

### **Inadequate facilities and the controversial image**

Further features of the prison which attract controversy are issues with overcrowding and outdated and inadequate facilities. Mountjoy prison was built in 1854 to accommodate a far smaller number of prisoners than current prisoner levels. The lack of in-cell sanitation means that the vast majority of Prisoners still rely on the practice of ‘slopping out’ as a method of disposal of overnight sanitary waste (IPS, 2004). Cells that were designed for single person occupancy are shared by two people (O’Mahony, 1997) and overcrowding is a continuous issue (IPS, 2004). As highlighted in the Irish research, visiting facilities are particularly inadequate and have been criticised in by the Council of Europe (2002) European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and are also described in relative detail in the NESF (2002) report on prisoner reintegration.

Some of these problematic features are also found within other older prisons in the State. For example ‘slopping out’ also occurs in Portlaoise Prison, and Cork Prison has listed constant overcrowding as a serious issue in the 2004 annual report (IPS, 2004). However the issue of inadequate facilities and overcrowding in Mountjoy are exacerbated by the prisons’ committal status, with such large numbers of prisoners received and processed on an annual basis. It has been acknowledged that Mountjoy prison is in an “outdated and unacceptable condition” (IPS, p9, 2004) and plans towards a replacement prison complex at Thornton Hall on the outskirts of Dublin are in motion (IPS, 2005). However, these inadequate facilities will continue to attract further controversy, especially when linked to issues of inter-prisoner violence, as seen in the summer of 2006. Considered in total, Mountjoy appears relatively unique within the prison system in relation to a number of ongoing controversial issues, while the support and treatment services provided to prisoners and their families are also distinctive.

### **Recruitment criteria for prisoners**

The prisoners who took part in this study were recruited on the basis of three criteria. The primary criterion was that the prisoner had experience of fatherhood. This could include biological fathers, adoptive fathers or men who may not be in any legally formalised relationship with the child but defined themselves as fulfilling a step-fathering role. This could also include non-resident fathers, who had lived from their children prior to this sentence. This first criterion reflects the wide variety of forms of fatherhood in

contemporary Ireland as illustrated in the literature, and may illuminate the experience of prisoners with either separated or intact relationships.

The second and third criteria related to the prisoners suitability for the in-depth interview used in the study. Given the relatively unstructured and interactive nature of the ‘conversational’ in-depth interview approach adopted (Legard et al, 2003, Rubin and Rubin, 1995), it was particularly important that participants were willing and comfortable to talk about their experiences, attitudes and perceptions. The psychological stability of the participants for the in-depth interview was also an important factor. Within the prison population in 2005 over 50% of prisoners were serving sentences for crimes involving violence (IPS, 2005). Although data is not available specifically about Mountjoy prisoners, it is likely that a significant proportion of the prisoners were serving sentences for crimes involving violence given the medium security, ‘closed’ status of the prison. Lewis (2003) highlights the need for researchers to be aware of the risk of violence or volatile behaviour during data collection processes. To minimise this risk, participants were sought who would be considered by the gatekeepers to be psychologically stable for the in-depth interview. Clarke et al (2005) also used a similar process of screening in their research in UK prisons. Although these second and third criteria may have brought bias to the sample, this was unavoidable given the secure nature of the research site, and the ethical considerations prescribed in this study.

### **The study sample**

Although twenty two prisoners agreed to be interviewed, twelve declined prior to the interview taking place, therefore a total of ten prisoners were interviewed in this study. This relatively small sample size is consistent with a qualitative methodology, when the data gathering process entails the generation of rich and abundant data and the group under study are relatively homogenous (Ritchie et al, 2003). Due to the unstructured interview approach adopted, the vast majority of interviews generated very in-depth and rich data. The extent of homogeneity among the sample is illustrated in more detail below.

One important consideration in relation to the sample however is the notion of ‘symbolic representation’, in that participants must be selected who ‘typify the circumstance’ of the phenomena (Ritchie et al, 2003). In relation to this study, the sample selected must reflect the ‘typical’ known characteristics of Mountjoy prisoners who are fathers. However,

typicality is not the only consideration, as according to Ritchie et al (2003), to illustrate the 'symbolic representation' among the sample, the diversity or range within the sample must also be examined. Range helps to ensure that the full diversity of factors that influence the phenomena can be identified (Ritchie, 2003).

### **The known feature of the prisoner population in Mountjoy**

Very limited information is available relating to the specific categories of offenders held within particular institutions. According to the Irish prison service prisoners held for 'immigration purposes' or 'sexual offences' tend not to be held in Mountjoy prison (IPS, 2005). It is clear that addiction levels are particularly high given the high numbers of prisoners receiving methadone maintenance as discussed above. With such limited information specifically relating to Mountjoy prison, the profile drawn from previous research and the prison population in general form the reference points for comparison.

### **Features of the study sample**

As was discussed in the previous chapter, O'Mahony's (1997) study highlighted how prisoners within Mountjoy prison shared many features of homogeneity. The sample selected for this study also reflected this homogeneity, although some range is also apparent. All prisoners were Irish and all originated from the Dublin area. Participants ranged from 21 to 38 years of age, reflecting the majority among the prisoner population. While a significant proportion had no work experience, a minority had a considerable amount of previous work experience. Although a minority were serving their first sentence, most were repeat offenders, with some spending a considerable portion of their lives in prison. All except one participant revealed a history of serious drug addiction reflecting the high levels of drug addiction found among Mountjoy prisoners (IPS, 2005). Current sentences being served ranged from one to ten years in length, although it was most common to be serving a sentence of six years or less. All prisoners in the sample were biological fathers apart from one who defined himself as a step father to his partner's son. In terms of relationships with partners, relationship breakdown, and non-residential fatherhood were common experiences although a minority planned to live with their children and partners post release.

## **The use of gatekeepers and arising ethical considerations**

Similar to other studies on prisoners as fathers (Clarke et al, 2005, Day et al, 2005) a small group of staff played a central role in selecting and recruiting prisoners for this study. The prison authorities provided contact with the initial gatekeeper and the other gatekeepers emerged in a 'snowball' effect from this initial contact (Bryman 2004,). The gatekeepers' prior relationship with prisoners was central in securing participation for several reasons. Firstly, their relationship with the prisoners enabled them to apply the selection criteria discussed above, in terms of fatherhood status, willingness to participate in an in-depth interview, and psychologically stability. Also, through their employment within the prison, these gatekeepers had access to the vast majority of areas within the prison, while an outside researcher would not. Most importantly however, some prisoners cited their trust and respect for the gatekeeper as the reason for participating in the study. This relationship is described by Dencombe (2004) as a *currency* facilitating contact between researcher and participants (Dencombe, 2004) and was found to be a vital component.

The use of staff as gatekeepers in the recruitment process can present some difficulties. According to Geoffman (1961), within all 'total institutions' like Prison's, staff and inmates tend to view each other in negative, hostile and stereotypical terms. However two of the 'key' gatekeepers were perceived as being unlike the other staff for a number of reasons. The most important gatekeeper worked as a chaplain which involves building relationships with prisoners and providing support during times of personal trauma (Prison Chaplain's Annual Report 2004). Therefore, although employees of the Irish Prison Service, chaplains are seen as occupying a 'neutral space' between staff and prisoner, and tend to be perceived in a more positive light by prisoners. Another important gatekeeper worked as a guard within the prison but was perceived to be unlike the other guards as he seemed to genuinely care for the wellbeing of the prisoners. This perception of neutrality or difference was an important element of Dencombe's (2004) *currency* between gatekeeper and participant within the recruitment process. These gatekeepers secured the highest number of participants for the study compared to earlier gatekeepers with a more 'official' role. Although gatekeepers were essential to secure participants, their role in the study also raises some important practical and ethical questions.

### **Steps to uphold the rights of research participants**

The first question raised by the use of gatekeepers relates to a potential disadvantage of the relationship currency (Dencombe 2004) between participant and gatekeepers. It is possible that participants may have felt impelled to agree to the interview in an effort to maintain their relationship with the gatekeeper. Indeed this illustrates Robson's (1993) concern that research with vulnerable or 'captive populations' such as prisoners can raise particular ethical issues, as participants may feel powerless to decline to be involved in research. This lack of autonomy could potentially violate one of the key ethical principles within research, that the rights of research participants must be upheld within the research process and that their participation must be entirely voluntary (Dencombe, 2003). In order to address and minimise this risk, at the start of each interview it was emphasised to each interviewee that their participation was voluntary, that they could choose to withdraw at any time from the interview and or choose to decline to provide information on any topic that arose in the interview. Each participant gave their verbal consent and also signed a consent form (see Appendix C). Within some of the longest interviews, as recommended by Lewis (2003), verbal consent was re-confirmed at various later stages in the interview.

### **Bias within the sample**

A further drawback when using gatekeepers in the study was the danger of bias in the sample, as gatekeepers will have exercised significant influence in selecting participants for the study. While this possibility of bias must be acknowledged, this was unavoidable due to the strictly secured and controlled nature of the research site. Day et al (2005) also highlight the lack of alternative to using gatekeepers when conducting prison based research in the UK. For although prisoners may be selected randomly, as for example in Looney's (2001) study, due to the controlled nature of the research site, prisoners must still be approached through gatekeepers. In this study while some individuals secured more participants than others, a total of three gatekeepers' were involved, therefore the sample was not composed purely from the contact of one individual gatekeeper, which could help to reduce gatekeeper bias.

During the course of the study, an incident occurred that illustrated the potential power of prison staff to influence the recruitment process. A prison guard attempted to exclude a participant from the study just before an interview was about to take place. When questioned further, the guard revealed a deep dislike and distrust for the prisoner, and felt

him 'unsuitable' for the study. One of the key gatekeepers within the study was present during this conversation and was able to confirm that the prisoner met all three sampling criteria, and the interview went ahead. This illustrates an 'officials' attempt to use their power to exclude a participant from the study because of their personal opinion, however it also created a useful opportunity to discuss objectivity with the key gatekeeper who showed a clear understanding of this principle.

### **Gatekeepers and a loss of control in the research process**

While the gatekeepers were extremely supportive and cooperative within the research, it was impossible to monitor how the participants were actually recruited. As highlighted above, research by Clarke et al (2005) and Day et al (2005) used contacts within the Prison system to recruit participants, while Looney (2001) used guards to approach randomly sampled prisoners. In all of these studies their inability to monitor what was actually said to the prisoner during the recruitment process was highlighted. All noted that one of the inherent pitfalls of conducting research within a restricted and secured environment like the prison system, entails a loss of control of some of the key processes (Looney, 2001, Clarke et al, 2005, Day et al, 2005.).

### **Gatekeepers and the principle of anonymity**

The anonymity of participants is another key ethical principle which must be upheld within research (Dencombe, 2003). However this principle was limited in this study, both by the use of gatekeepers, and by the fact that each prisoner needed to be escorted to and from the interview by a prison guard (see below). Due to the restricted and controlled nature of the study site, this ethical limitation could not be addressed. However, while both gatekeeper and guards were aware of the identity of the participants, neither was present to hear the actual interview process, therefore the confidentiality in relation to the content of the interview was maintained.

## **Data Collection Methods**

Qualitative research is characterised by the use of data collection methods which are flexible, developmental and allow close contact with research participants (Snape and Spencer, 2003). Both focus groups and interviews meet this criteria as they both offer an opportunity for the views, experiences and perspectives of participants to be explored,



shared and refined within either a one to one or a group setting (Finch and Lewis, 2003) One of the advantages of a focus group is that group interaction allows for greater spontaneity and synergy between members, which can lead to deeper insights than individual interviews allow (Finch and Lewis, 2003). The high levels of interaction between members in focus groups can allow the interviewer to step back into the role of listener and have less influence on the process, in this way focus groups are seen as a more 'naturalised' approach (Finch and Lewis, 2003).

### **The unsuitability of focus groups**

Boswell and Wedge's (2002) study carried out in UK prisons, is the only study to use focus groups with prisoners, in addition to individual interviews. However some topics relating to the individuals characteristics and experiences were omitted from these focus group as they were felt to be too intimate for this setting (Boswell and Wedge, 2003). In previous research with prisoners (see Day et al, 2005, Ardeti et al, 2005, Looney 2001, Boswell and Wedge, 2002) feelings of emotional trauma arising from the separation of imprisonment or family breakdown were frequently discussed, highlighting the potentially emotive and sensitive nature of the topic.

A key ethical principle in research relates to 'avoidance of harm', in terms of physical or psychological harm, or the harm which could arise through disclosure of personal information (Dencombe, 2004). Violence and bullying are a significant part of prison life and Mountjoy prison is no exception (see the Inspector of Prisons Report, 2006). A culture of suspicion can dominate prison relationships and in such a competitive and hostile environment, personal disclosure and intimacy can be restricted (Sabo, Kupers and London, 2001). Given this culture of suspicion within prisons, the sensitive nature of the topic, and the risk of harm that could arise from disclosure in a group setting, it was decided that a focus group would be an inappropriate method of data collection for this study.

The interview on the other hand, is much a more appropriate method for a sensitive topic of this nature, as it offers the opportunity for disclosure on a one to one basis, which poses far less risk to the interviewee than a group situation. A number of studies have used individual interviews in research with prisoners as their main method of data collection, illustrating the suitability of the interview for prison research (Morris, 1967, McDermot

and King, 1992, Shaw, 1992, Looney, 2001, CSER, 2002, Ardetti et al, 2005, Clarke et al 2005, Day et al, 2005).

### **Structured versus unstructured interviews**

Individual interviews can take the form of a structured or unstructured approach. Structured interviews are characterised by the use of a rigid format for the order and wording of interview questions, and it is expected that the interviewer behaves in a rather formal manner. As Sarantakos (2005) describes, the interviewer is expected to

perform almost like a robot', acting in a neutral manner, keeping the same tone of voice across the interviews, offering a consistent impression to the respondents, using the same style appearance prompts and probes (Sarantakos, 2005, p268)

Unstructured interviews in contrast, rely on much greater flexibility and interaction between participant and interviewer than the structured approach (Sarantakos, 2005, Ritchie, 2003). Within an unstructured interview, the format for the wording and order of questions can be flexible. Rather than a list of pre-prepared questions, a topic guide was used to allow questions to be phrased in a manner to suit the individual respondent and the pace of each interview. By using an unstructured and informal approach, the interviewer aims to achieve a much greater level of depth and detail in response. Indeed the flexibility and responsiveness of an unstructured interview approach illustrate the essential elements of qualitative research methods outlined within Snape and Spencer's (2003) list of essential elements

In this way the unstructured interview are highly suited to facilitate the process of gathering the views, perspectives and experiences of research participants (Ritchie, 2003). In their research with prisoners Day et al, (2005) noted how many prisoner's relationships were characterised by complex and ambiguous feelings. Day et al (2005) noted that the unstructured interview approach was particularly useful for capturing and exploring these complexities. Indeed contemporary scholars of fatherhood (Marsiglio et al, 2000 Parke, 2002) have called for the greater use of more in-depth interviews method to further understanding of the experience of fatherhood.

## **The ‘conversational’ interview approach**

The particular unstructured interview approach used in this study was drawn from Rubin and Rubin’s (1995) ‘conversational interview’ style. Rubin and Rubin (1995) argue that an interview style which is as unstructured and as ‘conversation like’ as possible, will seem much more natural for respondents, and elicit far more detail than a more structured approach. All prisoners who participated in this study would have experienced formal interviews as part of the Criminal Justice process and may have negative associations with the interview experience. By using a ‘conversation’ style, the aim was to create as far a distance as possible from any of these previous experiences of interviews. Of course, this particular approach was limited in how ‘natural’ a conversation it could be, as this was far more focused, sought a far greater level of depth and was recorded (Rubin and Rubin, 1995) while ‘normal’ conversations, obviously are not.

## **The introductory phase of the interview**

Although the ‘conversational’ interview approach entails a high level of flexibility, the initial introductory phase of each interview was relatively structured and as a result was largely similar in each interview. At the beginning of each interview, after the initial greeting and introductions, the subject matter of the interview and ethical considerations were addressed. The nature and aim of the study was explained in terms very similar to the attached ‘letter of introduction’ (see Appendix B). Procedures around taping, transcribing of interviews, and the storage of data were clarified, and it was explained that names and other distinct information which could lead to the participants being identified, would be changed. It was also made clear that this study was independent from the prison service and either participation or withdrawal would have no impact on the prisoners’ sentence. The importance of voluntary participation and freedom to withdraw (see above) were stressed at this point.

## **The particular ethical requirements of the Irish Prison Service**

Some limitations to confidentiality were pre-imposed by the Irish Prison service as a condition of access. It was expected that prisoners be informed of these at the beginning of each interview. These limitations to confidentiality referred to a serious risk of harm to the subject such as an intention to commit suicide, a serious risk of harm to others such as allegations of child abuse or neglect, or for example in relation to an intention to commit a

violent crime against another individual. These exceptions to confidentiality were relayed to each participant at the start of the interview. While this may have introduced a more formal tone to the interview, most participants mentioned that they were familiar with this requirement from contact with prison psychology services and seemed to accept this as part of procedure. By providing this information initially, prisoners were able to make an informed decision about their participation, therefore the ethical principle of 'informed consent' (Dencombe, 2003) was upheld in this process.

### **The ethical decision regarding disclosures of illicit drug use**

As will be illustrated in chapter five, some prisoners in this study revealed use of illicit drugs within the interview. While illicit drug use is harmful, it was not referred to specifically within the exceptions to confidentiality set out by the Irish Prison Service discussed above. As was discussed in chapter three, support around this issue in terms of drug treatment is available on a limited basis within Mountjoy. Passing on this information to the prison authorities could very well have resulted in the research participant being punished (Connelly, 2006). As has been highlighted, illicit drug use reflected the drug dominated nature of the research site. Similar to Dillion's (2002) previous study, it was felt that preserving confidentiality in relation to this issue was a necessary ethical decision to protect the privacy of the individual prisoner and the ethical integrity of the study.

### **Beginning the interview**

Consistent with the flexibility and responsiveness of the 'conversational' approach (Rubin and Rubin 1995), each interview began by asking each participant to simply "tell me about yourself". With such a flexible start, each interview was unique from this point onwards, however most participants tended to begin within the area of their own personal or family circumstances. Sometimes participants began their narrative with their sentencing or addiction history, as a reference point as to how they came to be in prison. As Legard et al (2003) point out, interviewees tended to feel more comfortable with this less threatening type of 'factual' information in the early stage of the interview.

### **Table 6 : Interview topic guide**

Prisoners' personal details, children's details, sentencing history, experience of early fatherhood, experience of contact with children, experience of supports for role as father in prison, addiction history and current addiction status, child's awareness of imprisonment, perception of the fathers role, nature of the current relationship with the mother of their children, experience of the relationship with their own father, hopes and plans for the future.

(for greater detail see appendix D)

### **Building a picture and achieving a depth of response**

Depending on the responsiveness of each participant, a range of probes, prompts and follow up questions (Legard et al, 2003) were used to 'map' or form an idea of the particular circumstances of each individual, and to draw out the information on the topic guide (Table 6 above). This type of probing involved the use of more open questions or 'expansion probes' (Rubin and Rubin 1995) aimed at encouraging the respondent to expand further, for example "how was that for you" or "what was that like", "how did that feel". These types of open ended questions were helpful in drawing out the emotional significance or impact of a situation being described.

### **Techniques to encouraging participation**

Throughout all stages of the interview a range of techniques were used to encourage participation. Interest and attentiveness was conveyed by maintaining eye contact. A range of verbal and non-verbal cues or 'continuation' probes (Rubin and Rubin, 1995) were used to convey understanding and encourage depth. These cues included nodding and short verbal utterances such as 'right', 'ok' and 'hmmm'. Legard et al (2003) suggest comments such as 'right' and 'ok' are remarks that should be avoided, as they convey a sense of judgement on the part of the interviewer and cause an interviewee to 'close down' rather than expand. However, this was not the experience in these interviews.

### **Probing ambiguous terms**

At other times the interviewee would use vague or ambiguous terms, and clarification was needed. Sometimes clarification was sought immediately after the interviewees had made the point, or a little while after to avoid interrupting the flow. For example, one prisoner was asked how he felt about his forthcoming release and he provided the following comment “*stop...I got a reality check there last week and it wasn't very nice at all....*”. This was probed by asking ‘*in what way*’, however the proceeding discussion did not fully explain his comment. Clarification was sought by referring back to what he had said and checking if there were further factors involved “*and when you were saying you got a bit of a reality check when you went out, is that what you meant or did you mean something else?*”. He responded at a deeper level by revealing his anxieties about his release in relation to finding work, re-establishing his relationship with his children and staying off drugs. As Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggest, repeating parts of the interviewee’s phrases and checking that their meaning was understood aided clarity and indicated to the interviewee the level of depth being sought.

### **Evidence probes**

Rubin and Rubin, (1995) suggest that ‘evidence probes’ are useful as a way of seeking illustrations or examples of points that participants make. These were used frequently to generate detail, however on some occasions it was found this resulted in the interviewee backtracking. The following example illustrates this occurring in ‘Roberts’ interview when referring to visiting his son during days outside made possible through temporary release (TR).

**Robert;**           “*...but you know if I get the day out I always made sure I go and see him or spend the day with him or so*”.

**Jane;**               “*and what would you do together if you did spend the day together?*”

**Robert;**           “*the last time we went emm well the last time I was with her (his girlfriend) but emm the time before. ..yeah...I got an overnight...it was his emm confirmation*”.

Robert displayed some confusion with his halting reply and revealed that he did not in fact always see his son when released for the day, as claimed, but proceeded to discuss the confirmation day. This particular type of inconsistency was minor, as the respondent may

well have meant he *generally* made an effort to see his son on his release days. Attempts were made to probe inconsistencies which occurred in the interview, however after some probing was made, these were passed without comment. To have probed these in a more confrontational way would have turned the interview into an ‘inquisition’ rather than discussion and could have resulted in interviewees becoming defensive, discouraging their participation.

### **The challenge of flexibility versus control**

One of the challenges in conducting an interview of this nature is achieving a balance between the flexibility of a ‘conversation’ and keeping the focus directly on the topic of the study. At times during interviews, particularly in the earlier stages, participants were allowed some freedom to discuss topics or issues that were of importance to them, but did not seem directly related to their role or relationships as a father. Retaining this flexibility seemed to encourage participants to relax and open up about themselves; however the question of knowing when to pull the participant back to the topic guide required a balanced judgement. Too much flexibility would have resulted in large amounts of unrelated data, or insufficient time for the topics on the guide. On the other hand, too much control as interviewer could stifle participation or given the impression of disinterest. Generally a balance was struck by engaging for a few minutes into these topic areas but, at an appropriate pause, drawing participants back towards the topics on the guide, or by asking a new question.

### **The interactive nature of the ‘conversational approach’**

An important characteristic of the ‘conversational interview’ (Rubin and Rubin 1995) approach, is that it relies on a higher level of interaction between interviewee and interviewer than more structured forms of interview. This technique is based on the notion that research participants, rather than being ‘objects’ of interest, are partners or collaborators in the research process (Legard et al, 2003). Rubin and Rubin (1995) argue that it unreasonable to expect interviewees to reveal themselves when they know nothing of the interviewer, and that it is legitimate for the interviewer to disclose their thoughts and feelings to bring balance to the process (Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

In this study these disclosures were related to the interviewers’ experiences as a parent. When topics of this nature arose in the interviews, the interviewer revealed experiences of

some of the struggles of coping with a small new baby or the demands of parenting a teenager. Legard et al, (2003) highlight how a potential danger of this approach is that the interviewee will alter their perspective of the researcher and inhibit or censor their responses (Legard et al, 2003). However a considerable social distance was already present within the interview relationship (see below) and was from the outset influencing the participant's responses. These types of disclosure were intended to emphasis where the interviewee and interviewer shared experiences, for examples in relation the struggles of being a parent. Also this was intended to legitimate the expression of struggles in the experience of parenting. For as Rubin and Rubin (1995) point out, as a researcher "your ability to recognise, accept and share emotion legitimates its expression in the interview" (Rubin and Rubin, p41, 1995).

### **Researching across Social Chasms**

The question of social distance between the interviewee and interviewer is considered to be crucial, as some researchers argue that there needs to be a substantial level of cultural affinity between parties in order for understanding to be shared (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, Legard et al, 2003). However, Rubin and Rubin, (1995) argue that social boundaries can be crossed when a researcher is prepared to recognise and address cultural barriers. On entering the research site, it was clear there were a range of potential barriers of culture, class and gender within the interview setting. For example, although levels of education were not explored with the group, some participants revealed they had significant literacy difficulties, and must have perceived a (student) 'researcher' from a third level institution as considerably more educated than them. However, in addition to recognising these social boundaries, Rubin and Rubin (1995) argue that by placing the interviewee in the role of 'expert or teacher', cultural boundaries can be overcome.

### **Probing for cultural meaning**

Some interviewee took the role of 'teacher' to explain the process of heroin addiction or when talking about some aspects of prison culture. Prisons are institutions with a distinct culture (Geoffman, 1961, Sabo, Kupers and London, 2001), and a distinct terminology, that may not be widely understood. For example 'stung out' was used to mean becoming heroin dependent and 'phy' referring to methadone maintenance. Other prison terminology included 'the three's' to refer to a specific landing, which was shorthand for a



stage of drug rehabilitation within the Medical Unit. To maintain the flow of conversation, clarification was not always sought. However sometimes this was necessary, and this was sought either by asking what the term meant or by repeating the term and signalling uncertainty with tone of voice. This helped to place the interviewee as 'expert' who had important knowledge to impart, and helped to readdressing the power imbalance inherent in interview situations. This action of viewing and placing the interviewee as expert is also described by Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2002) as a useful approach to use when interviewing men.

### **Interviewing across the gender divide**

Any interview situation, no matter how informal, entails some loss of control on the part of the interviewee. According to Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2002), men who construct their identity around 'hegemonic masculinity' will find the interview particularly threatening. Hegemonic masculinity is the performance and interpretation of a particular set of characteristics which allow placement in the social order. Therefore western men must signify:

...greater desires and capacities for control of people and the world, autonomous thought and action, rational thought and action, risk and excitement and (heterosexual) sexual pleasure and prowess (Connell, 1995, in Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2002)

Physical and emotional strength are particularly important aspects of masculinity within prison culture (Sabo, Kupers and London, 2001). One of the threats of an interview is the risk of exposure, in that interviewees may feel their 'masculine selves' will be exposed as not in fact living up to the hegemonic ideal (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2002). Non-disclosure of emotion can be problematic in some interviews with men, for this is an admission of vulnerability, which also conflicts with the 'masculine ideal' (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2003).

Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2003) suggest that it may be less threatening for men to ask about 'thoughts' rather than 'feelings' within an interview. This approach was adopted by framing questions such as 'how did you find that' or 'what were your thoughts at that time'. However, it was found that participants did respond openly when questions were framed around 'feelings' as well as 'thoughts'. Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2003) suggest that evoking other men's experiences and asking 'what was your experience of this' is also a

less threatening approach, as it sends the signal that others have talked about this issue. While it could be argued that there was a danger of interviewees distorting their responses to match or contradict what others have said, in practice a variety of responses were generated by this type of questioning.

This relative openness on the part of the research participants could be explained by a number of factors. For example, it may have been related to the gender of the researcher. For while some argue that gender differences can become a barrier in research, a number of women have successfully conducted research with prisoners in relation fatherhood (Looney, 2002, Nurse 2001, Morris 1967, Johnston 1991, Hariston, 1995, Gable and Johnston 1995, McDermot and King 1992). It is possible also that an admission of vulnerability is less threatening for men when being interviewed by women. Also, the flexible and interactive interview approach may have supported this process, for a more formal and structured interview style must entail a greater loss of control for the interviewee than the more informal approach adopted. Given the violence, suspicion and intimidation often associated with prison life (Sabo, Kupers and London, 2001), it is possible that participants enjoyed being the focus of attention, particularly with an individual independent of the prison system.

### **Ending the interviews**

Both Legard et al (2003) and Rubin and Rubin (1995) highlight the importance of the ending phase of an interview. This helps to move participants from the deeper and highly reflective phase of the interview and return to the “level of everyday social interaction” (Legard et al, 2003). Towards the end of the interview, in an effort to shift the focus towards the outside world, if plans for the future had not already emerged in the interview, participants were asked about these, in relation to their role as a father and in a more general sense. Participants were also asked about their experience of the interview process. Therefore, most interviews that ended naturally were very similar at this stage. Interviews held in a less restricted environment would normally have an ‘after the interview phase’ where more everyday interaction would resume (Legard et al, 2003). However all participants were immediately escorted back to their cells, which gave a rather abrupt ending to the interview. It was found that offering sincere thanks, and best wishes, prior to the prisoner’s departure seemed an appropriate finish.

## **The challenges of the interview environment**

This following section will describe the interview environment and steps taken to conduct the interview. Due to the reflective nature of this discussion, the first person will be used occasionally (Silverman, 2005). A total of ten interviews were carried out over a five week period between November and December 2005, with an average of two conducted each day. One interview was restricted to twenty minutes however the remainder of the interviews were between one and a half, and two hours in length. During each visit to the prison I was escorted from the main gate to the interview location by a prison officer who had been assigned as my escort for the day. This prison officer's role also entailed locating the prisoner and escorting them to and from the interview location and 'observing' the interview process from outside the room.

All interviews with Prisoners were carried out in the Medical centre within Mountjoy prison. All apart from one were conducted in what is known as the 'welfare room'. This is a small room with two chairs at either side of a desk with a small, 'secure' window and was the most private and comfortable venue to conduct the interviews. The door had a very small glass observation window through which the guard could 'observe' but not hear the interview. This relative comfort and privacy during the interview was particularly important to uphold the principle of confidentiality in relation to the interview content and may have helped to encourage richness and detail (Legard et al, 2003). As Day et al (2005) found in their prison research that when a guard was present during the interview the responses from prisoners were more stilted.

## **The impact of a poor interview environment**

The importance of the relative comfort and privacy afforded by the 'welfare room' became clear when due to a lack of space, an interview was held in an 'interview box'. Interview 'boxes' are very small rooms used for monitored public visits. The only twenty minute interview in the study was conducted in this facility. These boxes have narrow benches on either side of a narrow table, immediately next to a large glass observation window. A combination of these cramped conditions, the lack of privacy, and the behaviour of the guard made the experience of this particular interview quite stressful, and impacted on my performance as interviewer.

Due to an accumulation of delays, this interview was restricted to twenty minutes to fit in with cell lock-up times. I was informed of this after waiting for at least an hour for the prisoner to arrive. As the interview schedule had not been designed for such a short timeframe, I felt unprepared beginning the interview. Also, the guard who had been assigned to escort me and the prisoners that morning had, due to an administrative mix up, been taken off another duty and assigned to me unexpectedly. He was obviously unhappy at this new duty and made this clear through his facial expression, body language and extremely gruff manner. This particular guard sat and stared in throughout the interview in what I felt to be a particularly malevolent manner. Day et al (2005) note that although prison staff can be asked to co-operate in the research “how they co-operate and facilitate one’s research agenda can be another matter” (Day et al, p191, 2005). This factor, coupled with the unexpected short time frame and cramped conditions, affected my performance as interviewer. I was tense and stressed, found it difficult to formulate questions and couldn’t remember the details the interviewee gave, which made the interviewee frustrated. Only as the interview neared completion did I become more relaxed in my role and the interview flow more smoothly. This experience illustrates how a stressful and uncomfortable environment can have a negative effect on the interviewers’ ability to perform. It must be pointed out however, that the vast majority of staff were highly co-operative and helpful throughout the research process and this was an isolated experience.

### **Recording of Interviews and transcription of Interviews**

Each interview with a prisoner was recorded (with permission of the interviewee) using either a tape or digital recorder. The use of recording equipment was generally beneficial for as Rubin and Rubin (1995) point out, it enabled me to concentrate on what was being said, and to plan follow up questions without interrupting the flow to record notes (Rubin and Rubin, p126, 1995). In order to maintain as accurate and fresh a record as possible, each recording was transcribed in full by the researcher over the days following the interview. In keeping with the ethical principle to uphold the privacy and confidentiality of participants (Dencombe,2003), transcriptions were retained in a secure location.

## The process of analysis

Validity and reliability are two concepts that originate from quantitative research and have been adapted within qualitative research to encompass concerns about the quality, replicability and ‘truth’ of research (Silverman, 2005, Lewis and Ritchie, 2003). It seems generally agreed that these concepts can be supported by a clear explanation of all procedures used to carry out the analytic processes which were undertaken to carry out the study (Silverman, 2005, Lewis and Ritchie, 2003). For this reason the following section will describe in detail the steps taken to analyse the data for this study.

Miles and Huberman (1994) have identified the core common features of qualitative data analysis that summarise the steps taken in this study (see Table 7 below).

**Table 7 : Miles and Huberman’s core features of qualitative data analysis**

- Affixing codes to a set of field notes drawn from observation or interviews.
- Noting reflections or other remarks in the margins.
- Sorting and sifting through these materials to identify similar phrases, relationships between variables, patterns, themes, distinct differences between sub-groups and common sequences.
- Isolating these patterns and processes, commonalities and differences and taking them out to the field in the next wave of data collection.
- Gradually elaborating a small set of generalisations that cover the consistencies discerned in the database.
- Confronting those generalisations with a formalised body of knowledge in the form of constructs or theories. (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p 9)

## The early stages of analysis

Consistent with Miles and Huberman’s (1994) approach, analysis began by studying the transcriptions, highlighting segments of text and noting when striking themes and patterns emerged. The initial stages of this analysis process were hampered by the sheer volume of data. This data amounted to several hundred pages of transcribed type and was found as Ritchie et al (2003) describe, to be “voluminous, messy” and “unwieldy” (Ritchie et al, 2003, p202). In order to overcome this issue of data management a series of data matrices

were constructed to allow comparison between the differences and similarities in themes that arose between the study participants (see Table 8).

### **Summarising the data**

To compile the data for this thematic framework, each piece of data was combed through and summarised to capture the main point that was being made. The following extract from Larry's interviews illustrates this process; in this extract Larry was describing how his heroin addiction influenced his behaviour as a father. In particular this piece of data refers to him taking drugs in the presence of his son and the conversation between them.

*...just say Jimmy was in the flat and trying to get in the door [I'd be ] saying, "will you wait there Jimmy , I'm just doing something" and he'd be saying "what are you doing daddy, let me in". He couldn't understand why I wouldn't let him in, it was horrible it was, and me ma would be saying "what are you fucking doing in there", me ma was crying or snapping "don't be doing anything in front of that child . (Larry)<sup>6</sup>*

This piece was summarised as **taking drugs in presence of son (p19)** and was placed, along with the page reference, in two locations within the thematic framework. Larry was describing the impact of his drug addiction on his behaviour as a father and so for this reason it was placed in the 'addiction' thematic category. In this passage he was also expressing feelings of guilt about this behaviour in the presence of his son and so this reference was also placed in the 'failure to enact fatherhood' thematic category. This extract illustrates how multiple themes may emerge when the data became complex or emotional (Ritchie et al, 2003). Also, by recognising and assigning multiple locations, the complexity of the data was not compromised by this reduction and categorisation process.

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<sup>6</sup> The last section of this extract includes the intervention of Larry's mother, however my interest here is in the nature of Larry's behaviour during this recollection (taking drugs) and to the expressed emotional reaction (feeling guilty) from this memory.

**Table 8 : Development of data matrix themes**

<b>Categories within the ‘thematic framework’</b>
Location in prison complex, personal, child details and criminal history,
Feelings about self
Relationship with own father
Enacting fatherhood
Wished enactment of fatherhood
Failure to enact fatherhood
Relationship with partners
Experience of supports
Visits
Drug addiction

### **Retaining the original words and phrases within the data matrix**

One of the dangers of summarising data is that the phrases used by the participants are replaced by the interviewer’s words, and the essence of their original meaning can be lost (Ritchie et al, 2003). Ritchie et al (2003) argue that a balance must be struck between preserving the original phrases and summarising the content for easy management. Particular words or phrases that were used frequently were retained within the thematic framework. ‘Daniel’ for example, frequently used the term ‘it doesn’t seem right’ in relation to a general feeling of discomfort experienced through a variety of interactions with his children in prison. This phrase was retained intact within the thematic framework with a summarised description of the specific interaction he was referring to.

### **Developing sub-themes in the thematic framework**

One of the most significant advantages of this thematic framework was the way in which the data display assisted in tracing the process of analysis. This thematic framework used three separate columns. The summarised text is placed in the first thematic column and a description of this data is placed in the second column. The third column is used for assignment of sub-themes or categories for this description<sup>7</sup>. For example in Table 9 below, Daniel’s references to feeling close to his son because they had lived together were recorded in a summary form in the first column, assigned the description ‘relationship with son developed outside’ in the second column, and categorised as ‘factor supporting relationship with son’ in the last column. In this way, the thematic framework was found to

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<sup>7</sup> An extract from the thematic summary has been included as appendix E.

be useful for retaining the links between the summarised text, description and more ‘abstract’ sub-themes that were developed.

**Table 9 : Extract from thematic framework**

<b>Summarised text</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Sub-theme</b>
knows son cos of time outside together at home	relationship with son developed outside	factor supporting relationship with son

NB: Extracted from Daniel’s interview and the ‘enacting fatherhood’ theme

### **Gathering ‘descriptive accounts’**

Once this part of the analysis was completed, the entire range of descriptions and sub-themes were examined for similarities and differences. This entailed initially highlighting and then gathering closely related elements from the description column and comparing them across the entire sample in a table. For example, one of the first groups of descriptions to be compiled for each individual interview and compared across the sample related to negative comments about current and previous partners. This process revealed that ‘negative comments towards partners’ included a wide range of elements, for example ‘partners role in addiction’, ‘partner role in relapse’, ‘visits as exposure to partners control’, ‘lack of trust for partner’, ‘partners poor mothering’, ‘partner disloyalty.’ As well as describing the range of elements that constituted negative comments towards partners, this illustrated the linkages between ‘negativity towards partners’ and other themes for example, ‘partners and addiction’ and ‘partners and visits’ and fragility in family life. Through this and the processes described above the trends, patterns and themes were illustrated within the data gathered.

### **Conclusion**

Detailed discussions of the methodological theories and procedures which underpin this study have been presented in this chapter. This research aimed to explore the factors which constrain and enable the involvement of prisoners as fathers, through gathering and analysing the experiences and perspectives of a group of prisoner fathers within Mountjoy prison. Consistent with this aim, this discussion has demonstrated that an Interpretive research perspective and a qualitative approach were appropriate methodological choices.



Due to limitations of access and time, Mountjoy prison was chosen as the study site, and both the atypical, and typical features of this prison were illustrated in comparison to the range of prison within the State.

Consistent with the qualitative approach, a small sample of ten participants, who were found to generally reflect the range of characteristics typical among Irish prisoner were selected. Gatekeepers within the prison played a key role in recruitment and selection of participants, and a range of practical and ethical issues which arose from the gatekeepers' involvement were explored. While other Irish studies (CSER, 2002, Looney 2001) have utilised a more structured interview approach, in this study the individual in-depth, unstructured 'conversational' interview was chosen as the most suitable method, to capture the depth and detail required. As was explored, one of the key features of this interview approach is the range of techniques available to encourage participation and overcome social divisions. However this technique presented some challenges in terms of balancing flexibility and researcher participation. To uphold transparency, the interview location and procedures were presented in detail, while some of the more challenging experiences of conducting research in a prison were explored. Finally the procedures used to manage, reduce and analyse the data are described to provide a clear account of the process that lead to the development of the themes that emerged from this study.

## **Chapter 5 : Research findings : the experiences and perceptions of prisoners as fathers**

This chapter will present and analyse the data generated from this study. All names used in this chapter are false, and some details regarding their family circumstances are presented in a general way to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the research participants. Prisoner's experiences and perceptions of fatherhood will be presented and discussed using extracts of raw data from the interviews. In addition, tables of summarised data, drawn from the thematic framework used in data analysis, will be also included to illustrate parallels and diversity within the data in relation to particular issues.

The first section of this chapter will illustrate the sentencing, addiction and family profiles of the prisoners in the study, as a context to their experiences and perceptions as fathers. Stability within family life was a relatively rare theme in the lives of the men in this study, yet co-partners hold a key role in facilitating prisoner's involvement as fathers. The interaction between the prisoner's co-partner relationship, addiction status and involvement as fathers will be explored in more detail. While all men's narratives have been included in the analysis of the general themes in this chapter, the experiences of three men will be explored to illustrate the contrasting responses to addiction and 'neglectful' behaviour as fathers. Exploration of prison visits will highlight the influence of location within the prison complex and the quality of the co-partner relationship. This section will also discuss the reasons prison visits were discouraged. Furthermore, discussion of prisoner's perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of fatherhood will demonstrate the power of the nurturing father role as a cultural reference for fatherhood.

### **The age and sentencing profile of participants**

The age and sentencing profile of the prisoners gives an indication of the amount of time spent in prison throughout their lives (see Table 10 below). Most prisoners spoke about their sentences in terms of the length of sentence awarded by the courts, however due to the practice of awarding remand, prisoners may not have spent the entire period of the sentence in prison.

Prisoners ranged in age from twenty four years to thirty three years, reflecting the most common age category found among Irish prisoners, of between twenty one and forty years of age (IPS, 2005). Current sentences being served ranged from one year as the shortest, to ten years as the longest, however it was most common among the sample to be serving a current sentence of less than four years in length. A significant number of prisoners in the sample were multiple offenders who had spent a large portion of their lives in prison, some receiving several sentences totalling between fifteen and twenty years.

A smaller proportion of the sample were serving first sentences; however some of this small 'sub-group' were also expecting additional sentences. These additional sentences were important because they indicated the length of additional time likely to be spent in prison. For example, one father, Ritchie, was serving the lowest current sentence of one year but revealed he was awaiting sentencing for 13 serious offences. Additional sentences were found to impact on access to drug treatment supports and caused significant levels of anxiety for prisoners both as individuals and as fathers. During his interview Ritchie was considerably anxious about the length of this sentence, his future and his relationship with his son. Dan on the other hand was anticipating a 'light' additional sentence for a more minor offence and was mildly anxious about this, but did find that it impeded his access to further drug treatment.

The participants of this study generally mirror the profile of prisoners found within Irish prisons, in terms of sentence length and the frequency of multiple sentences. Although a large proportion of Irish prisoners serve short term sentences of six months or under, a significant number of prisoners accumulate within the system serving longer term sentences which range from one to ten years in length (IPS, 2005). The high occurrence of multiple sentences among the sample also reflects the recidivist tendencies of Irish prisoners highlighted by Irish research (O'Mahony, 1997, O'Donnell, 2006)

**Table 10 : Age and sentencing history of the study sample**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Length of current sentence</b>	<b>Number of previous sentences</b>	<b>Total sentences in years</b>	<b>Out-standing charges</b>
<b>Gary</b>	31	9 years	3	16 years	0
<b>John</b>	27	2.5 years	1	5 years	0
<b>Stephen</b>	29	8.5 years	0	8.5 years	0
<b>Jerry</b>	33	2 years	4	18 years	0
<b>Ritchie</b>	26	4 years	0	4 years	0
<b>Ken</b>	25	5 years	5	not known	0
<b>Robert</b>	38	4 years	2	9.5 years	0
<b>Dan</b>	28	3 years	0	3 years	1
<b>Larry</b>	24	1 year	0	1 year	13 serious offences
<b>Daniel</b>	29	10 years	4	19.5 years	none

### **The Extent of Drug Addiction among the Sample**

The experience of early, long term heroin addiction was a dominant feature among the sample (see Table 11). Only one prisoner within the sample of ten had no history of drug addiction. This reflects the prevalence of heroin addiction found among Irish prisoners by a range of studies (Dillion 2001, O'Mahony, 1997, Long et al 200, Allwright et al 1999, Hannon et al, 2000), and concurs with the high level of methadone maintenance provided particularly to prisoners held in Mountjoy by the Irish Prison Service (IPS, 2005). It was common for prisoners to describe or define themselves as 'a heroin addict' and state the number of years of their addiction. While heroin addiction was the most common drug used, some prisoners did discuss previous use of a range of drugs including cocaine, ecstasy, amphetamines, marijuana and solvents. The prisoner's age at first drug use ranged from fourteen to twenty-four, however it was most common for heroin addiction to have begun before the age of twenty.

The current addiction status among the sample was relatively mixed and generally reflected the range of drug treatments currently used within the prison (IPS, 2005, Dillion 2001). Some prisoners in the sample were currently stable on methadone maintenance, while one prisoner had recently completed one of the drug treatment courses within the medical unit and was drug free. Others openly discussed current illicit heroin use and some were open about previous drug usage but made no references to current drug use. The location of the prisoner within the prison complex seemed linked to their current addiction status. Prisoners located in the medical unit were monitored for drug use through urine testing, whereas those who were open about their current illicit heroin use were held in the main prison, where urine testing was not in force at the time of the study, reflecting the availability of illicit heroin within the prison that has been highlighted by previous studies (O'Mahony, 2002, Dillion, 2001)

**Table 11 : History and current status of drug use**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Current drug status</b>	<b>Location in prison complex</b>	<b>Type of drug used in past</b>	<b>Age of first drug use disclosed</b>	<b>Approximate length of usage</b>
<b>Gary</b>	unclear	medical unit	cocaine and range of drugs	19	12 years
<b>John</b>	methadone stable	medical unit	heroin	heroin addict since 14	13 years
<b>Stephen</b>	unclear	main prison	ecstasy and range of drugs	18	11 years
<b>Jerry</b>	methadone stable	medical unit	heroin	heroin addict since 14	19 years
<b>Ritchie</b>	none	medical unit	none	none	none
<b>Ken</b>	methadone stable	medical unit	heroin	heroin since 19	6 years
<b>Robert</b>	methadone stable	medical unit	heroin	24	14 years
<b>Dan</b>	drug free post treatment	medical unit	heroin and range of drugs	sporadic heroin use since 15	14 years
<b>Larry</b>	using illicit heroin	main prison	heroin	since youth	unspecified
<b>Daniel</b>	using illicit heroin	main prison	heroin and range of drugs	heroin addict since 15	13 years

## Prisoners, fatherhood and family life

All prisoners in the sample were biological fathers apart from one who defined himself as a step father to his partner's son, and another who had biological children but also referred to contact with his partner's child. The numbers of children fathered by these prisoners ranged from four children at the highest to one child as the lowest. Children ranged in age from 8 months old as the youngest, to 13 years as the oldest at the time of the interviews. In terms of gender, out of a total of 21 children referred to during the interview, the number of male children roughly even with eleven boys and ten girls.

**Table 12 : Nature of family relations**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Number of partner relationships involving children</b>	<b>Lived with partner and child prior to imprisonment</b>	<b>Relationship status with current partner</b>
<b>Gary</b>	two	no	uncertain
<b>John</b>	one	yes	uncertain
<b>Stephen</b>	three	yes	married – plans to reside with partner post release
<b>Jerry</b>	two	yes	plans to reside with partner post release
<b>Ritchie</b>	one	yes	plans to reside with partner post release
<b>Ken</b>	two	unclear	unclear
<b>Dan</b>	one	yes	engaged - plans to reside with partner post release
<b>Robert</b>	two	no	uncertain
<b>Larry</b>	one	no	uncertain / strained
<b>Daniel</b>	one	yes	officially intact but uncertain

### **Fragile family ties**

In terms of family ties and stability in relationships, the most dominant experiences among the group were of fragility in relationships with co-partners, and as a result disrupted contact with, or estrangement from their children. Children within multiple relationships were common and formal commitments such as marriage or engagement were relative rare (see Table 12 below). Most had cohabitated at some point in their relationships with co-partners and child, although for some this was for very limited periods of time, due to relationship breakdown or imprisonment. Only one prisoner had never lived with his co-parent and child. Few of those prisoners who had lived with their current partner and children prior to their prison sentence, still planned to reside with their family post release. As can be seen, uncertainty about the status of current relationships was widespread.

These experiences reflect the trend towards greater family instability found within Irish society in terms of greater levels of separation, divorce (CSO, 2007) and non-residential fatherhood (McKeown et al, 1998, Corcoran, 2005). Although these trends are increasing in Irish society, as was shown in the literature, they still remain the minority of family experiences, as over 70% of all families in Ireland are comprised of married couples (CSO, 2007). Among prisoners' families however, these levels of instability appear to be dominant, with previous studies of Irish prisoners highlighting high occurrences of children within multiple relationships, extremely low levels of marriage or other formal commitments, and large proportions of prisoners who no longer expected to live with their partners post release due to relationship breakdown (O'Mahony, 1997, Looney, 2001).

### **Contact with children**

For the majority of men in this group, previous experiences of disrupted contact or estrangement from their children were widespread. However most prisoners had re-established some form of contact with their children, even if this was on an infrequent basis. As can be seen from Table 13 below, most prisoners maintained contact through visits or by telephone, although some men who were not visited used 'temporary release' to visit their children. Another maintained contact through sending gifts and cards with the support of a paternal grandmother. These were all discussed as important methods or gestures that enabled prisoners who did not have regular contact, to maintain some form of relationship as a father.

**Table 13 : Nature of contact with children**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Experience of disruption or estrangement in relationship with child in the past</b>	<b>Visits with child</b>	<b>Other forms of contact</b>
<b>Gary</b>	estrangement – contact re-established	no visits from biological children. Regular visits with girlfriend and her daughter	presents
<b>John</b>	disrupted contact	no visits	temporary release
<b>Stephen</b>	continued estrangement from son	regular visits from partner and some children	telephone contact
<b>Jerry</b>	estrangement – contact re-established	regular visits from partner and some children	telephone contact
<b>Ritchie</b>	no disruption	regular visits from partner and child	telephone contact
<b>Ken</b>	disrupted contact	regular visits from some children	presents
<b>Dan</b>	no disruption	regular visits from partner and child	telephone contact
<b>Robert</b>	disrupted contact with all	no visits	temporary release
<b>Larry</b>	disrupted contact	no visits	telephone contact
<b>Daniel</b>	disrupted contact with one child	regular visits from partner and one child	no known

### **The importance of partners in facilitating contact**

Children who visited regularly tended to be younger (for example under ten) and were brought to the prison by the prisoner’s partner. If children visited the prison infrequently, this was usually linked to the visits being discouraged by the prisoner or to an issue involving a prisoner’s partner. These issues included their partner’s sickness preventing visits, their children being in the care of a relative other than their partner, or contact with their children being lost through estrangement and conflict with the child’s mother. One exception to this was when an older child visited infrequently due to discomfort with the prison environment. In relation to regular contact with younger children, partners clearly play an essential role in this study. This concurs with the key role of partners found in research with prisoners from a number of jurisdictions (Looney, 2001, Clarke et al, 2005, Ardetti et al, 2005, Boswell and Wedge, 2002, Nurse 2001).



Clark et al's (2005) research with prisoners in the UK identified the quality of the co-partner relationship as a crucial factor in a prisoners contact with his children. Clarke found that prisoner's who had a positive perception of their co-partner relationship saw their children more frequently, while those who felt negative about the relationship saw their children less frequently. In this study, some prisoners discussed feeling uncertain and ambiguous about their partner relationship, yet still relied on their partner for facilitating contact. For example Daniel depended on his partner for regular contact with his son but expressed the following view:

*Well its sort of fizzling, like she hasn't been faithful, she's been with a good few fellas, and I don't think the same trust is there, and I don't think the same love is there, but I will always love her, she's bringing up me kids and I'll always respect her, and I'll always look after her, but whether there's a relationship there when I get out, I don't know.*

Daniel discussed how he was unwilling to reveal his feelings to his partner as this would mean no contact with them during his imprisonment. Therefore, it was found that men in relationships which were officially intact did discuss regular contact with their children, although they may not necessarily have felt positive about this relationship.

### **The emergence of a 'secure' minority**

Although many prisoners' relationships were characterised by disruption and relationship break-up, a minority of prisoners did show elements of greater security in their relationships as partners and fathers. These rare experiences of intact relationships reflect the findings from both Irish studies (O'Mahony, 1997, Looney, 2001) where a minority of prisoners' relationships were intact and were maintained during their sentence.

Out of the sample of ten, four men all lived with their partners and children prior to their sentence, and expected to resume family life after release. All apart from one of this sub-group were serving shorter sentences among the sample and had either no addiction history, were drug stable through methadone maintenance or drug free post rehabilitation. Stephen described his co-partner relationship as intact and expected to resume family life on release. However Stephen's interview was the shortest among the sample and was the one which had taken place in the most difficult and stressful circumstances (as described in detail within the previous chapter). In comparison to the men in secure and intact relationships,

Stephen was serving a long term sentence of 8.5 years and made no references to current drug use, while he did refer to previous drug use.

In contrast to the prisoners who were very unsure about their partner relationships and their extent of involvement as fathers post release, most of these men discussed contentment in their relationships with partners. Most, apart from Stephen, stood out in the positive ways they referred to their partners and their perception of the relationship between them. Dan, for example was explicit in his respect for his partner, and seemed proud of her qualities

*she deserves an awful lot more, especially (girlfriends name) she's got a good head on her shoulders, she works twenty four seven, plenty of morals, very old fashioned you know, like you can trust her, she'd stand by you, you know.*

Ritchie also seemed proud of his partner being “a hard worker” and of their close relationship. He discussed how he knew his partner was pregnant when they met and they had decided to “make a go of it anyway”. Jerry described how differently he felt with this current relationship compared to his previous relationship. He was explicit about his love for his partner and said “it felt like a proper relationship”. Jerry’s partner was the only parent to use drugs within this group of fathers, and he referred several times to concerns about his partner’s ability to cope with their children in his absence. The prevalence of positive comments about their partners among this group of three men, together with frequent references to commitment, trust and concern, illustrate the greater level of contentment in these prisoners relationships with their partners. These men seem confident of their involvement as fathers post release, and discussed family life as a source of support during their sentence.

### **Family life as a source of support**

Similar to other studies of prisoners (Clarke et al, 2005, Looney, 2001, Dillion, 2001), most of these men who referred to stability and contentment within their co-partner relationships, articulated how family life was a source of support in prison. For instance Jerry referred several times to “ordinary family life” outside of prison as a source of focus, referring frequently to looking forward to “being a normal father, living in my own house and doing ordinary things with the family, going on holiday together, that kind of thing”. Ritchie, discussed with enthusiasm, plans for his partner and child to relocate together after his sentence. Dan described how his partner and child were in need of new housing and linked

this several times to maintaining his own rehabilitation “*she wants her own house, yeah, well I have a good few things in place now, I’m clean over a year*”. These references to family life as a source of focus and support for some prisoners mirrors the observation made by McDermot and King’s (1992) research which found for some prisoners, family life provided a sense of history and focus for the future.

## **Co-parent relationships and involvement**

It was rare for prisoners to discuss how the experiences of becoming a father led to a change in their perceptions or values, however two prisoners who were both drug stable did raise this point. However the differences in how they referred to their co-parent relationship, and their level of certainty regarding their involvement post release were stark.

### **Addiction, relationship security and confidence of involvement**

Jerry was explicit how his second experience of fatherhood had saved his life and changed profoundly what he valued. Jerry, who was aged 33, had a criminal history of multiple sentences, receiving total sentences of almost eighteen years in prison. Jerry also described himself as a “*heroin addict since 14*”. With his first experience of becoming a father, Jerry described how, although he was “*pleased*” when his child was born, because of the strength of his addiction at the time “*my brain was not able to focus on anything else, being a father didn’t really register*”. He described the relationship with the mother of his first child as being a casual sexual relationship, and in contrast how, his second experience of fatherhood occurred within what he perceived was a loving relationship. This second experience of fatherhood was described several times as a life changing experience

*I just think, I’d say now if I hadn’t got kid, the two boys and that, I’d say there’s a 99% chance that I’d be dead, shot dead or dead from drugs, and that’s a fact, ‘cos I wouldn’t have given a fuck about what I was doing.*

Jerry related a number of experiences where he compared his life as a criminal with that of a non-offending father to emphasise his change in perceptions. He emphasised how his current sentence was for a crime committed some years ago, and that the Judge had suspended six years of his sentence in recognition of his current stability.

Jerry was overall very positive about his future, his role as a father and the relationship with his partner, which he described as close and committed. He seemed proud of the fact that he was successfully maintaining methadone stability and he described how fatherhood within a secure relationship helped to motivate Jerry to seek methadone stability. It seems as though his commitment to his role as a father, his positive attitude towards methadone stability and contentment in his relationship with his partner, all combined to strengthen his continued involvement as a father. Although it is not possible to know if his commitment to fatherhood and methadone stability helped to strengthen his relationship with his partner, or if his relationship with his partner in fact helped to strengthen his commitment to fatherhood. Jerry's experience highlights that these factors are linked, but the causal relationship remains unclear.

### **Addiction, relationship conflict and uncertainty regarding involvement**

John was the only other prisoner to explicitly discuss changes in thinking since becoming a father. John was aged 27 and was serving his second sentence of two and a half years. He described himself as "*a heroin addict for 13 years*" but was currently methadone stable. Maintaining drug stability seemed very important to him

*I'm stabilised now you know, I have goals, I know the mistakes I made the last time, I'm taking heroin 13 years, I know what I have to do to stay clean.*

John made a number of references to how becoming a father changed his thinking, in terms of beginning to understand his own parents more

*It's not until you have your own children you realise why they worry, that comes automatically when you have a child.*

He also referred to a sense of responsibility "*I'm responsible for a life, I want the best, I don't want my son growing up the way I grew up*". He referred several times to his identity as an addict and prisoner and his desire for his son to perceive him differently

*I want him to know who his father is, you know, I don't want him to know that his fathers in prison and his father was a drug addict.*

Paradoxically, although John articulated a change in perception and a wish to be 'responsible', he also perceived significant barriers in maintaining his relationship with his son.

John clearly perceived his relationship with his partner as a negative influence in his previous relapse towards drug use

*When I got clean, 'em I actually thought that I'd never go back on drugs, but it turned out that my partner went back on drugs before I did, and I stayed in the relationship, which I shouldn't have, I should have just broke free at that time, you know, and I ended up relapsing then.*

John was also sure that his partner continued to use drugs “*I don't believe she's 100% clean, I believe she dabbles*”, and because of his need to remain methadone stable, was unsure of the future of their relationship. “*I'm not too sure at the moment, I'd need my partner to be as dedicated to staying as clean as I am, you know*”. Also, because of his partner's previous attempts to block access to his son during periods of conflict, John discouraged his son's visits as a result of anticipating disruption to his relationship

*To be honest I try and block out my son as much as possible, you know, I'd rather not see him at all because, seeing him and then seeing them go, it hurts, you know so, what I don't have I don't miss.*

Although John minimised contact with his son to protect himself, he seemed conflicted about the future of his involvement in his son's life. When referring to his own father, John repeated several times and in different ways, his hopes for a close relationship with his son “*I'm going to be a lot more involved...I'm not just going to be a provider*”. These contradictory statements illustrate John's conflicted feelings about fatherhood and rehabilitation. In order to realise his hopes to lose his identity as an addict and remain out of prison, John anticipated a loss of the relationship with his son, however he also expressed the desire to be more involved.

### **The impact of addiction and diverging goals within co-partner relationships**

Both fathers discuss a change in perceptions since fatherhood, and both, at times articulate a commitment for involvement with their children, although John's desire for involvement is contradicted by his statement about needing to distance himself from the relationship for self-protection. The differences in how these men refer to their relationships with their partners are wide. Jerry seems confident of combining fatherhood and rehabilitation due to an impression of greater co-operation and shared goals within his co-partner relationship. In contrast, John's co-parent relationship is discussed in terms of suspicion, conflict and diverging goals in relation to drug treatment. Similar to other studies of prisoners as fathers

(Nurse, 2001, Boswell and Wedge 2002, Ardetti et al, 2005), John cites maternal gate-keeping as a barrier to his future involvement as a father, as he perceives that future access to his son will depend on him remaining within the co-parent relationship. For some prisoners with addiction issues, their confidence regarding their involvement as a father seems dependent on co-operation with the co-partner relationship and converging goals in relation to rehabilitation. This also illustrates how, when some prisoners are more uncertain about their future involvement as fathers, they may minimise contact to isolate themselves from the impact of the loss of the relationship.

### **The impact of addiction on behaviour or involvement as a father**

Drug addiction was widely acknowledged to have been a dominant factor in relationship breakdown, which frequently contributed to loss of contact with children or sporadic involvement as fathers (see Table 14). Gary for example described how drug use was one of the factors that led to conflict with his co-partner and parents, to the breakdown in the relationship with his partner and their child being placed in the care of his parents.

*I just started going out raving, and then the mother started coming out raving, coming in bollixed tired, and the baby starts crying and you know, all you want to do is sleep, so they go an awful lot of concern around that child, but it wasn't ill treated or nothing, you know*

Others who remained in regular contact with their children, discussed previous neglect through prioritising their addiction over the needs of their children.

*When I was out for the nine months I was on heroin, yeah, I was there for em', he never went without anything...there was always stuff in the press but your still neglecting them... because you put your heroin before your kids. (Daniel).*

In the extract above, both Daniel and Gary above, provided assurances that their children were not neglected in the physical sense. Indeed this was a reoccurring theme which seemed to be used to minimise the impact of their statement describing a potentially neglectful situation.

### **Drug stable prisoners and the impact of addiction on thinking and behaviour**

Prisoners who were currently stable on methadone or were drug free were more explicit about the psychological and behavioural impact of drug use, illustrating some evidence of reflection on this process. These more 'reflective' comments included how drug use led to

a ‘selfish’ attitude, feelings of detachment from reality, or emotional turmoil. For example, Dan who was drug free described how drug users become selfish

*Everything else is second best to your drugs, you’re very mean, very self centred like, cos once you have your drugs you don’t care about anything else*

As highlighted in the previous section, Jerry described a sense of ‘detachment’ from drug use “*my brain was not able to focus on anything else, being a father didn’t really register*”. In the following extract, Dan described the experience of drug detoxification, illustrating how addiction inhibited feelings and emotions

*Its like em, when your on drugs you don’t deal with emotions or feelings and when your off them, you get a big flood of these feelings or emotions, plus its, you feel clean, you feel healthy again.*

It was widely perceived that drug use lead to a lack of control in behaviour. A number of prisoners discussed how “*their sicknesses*” dictated how they behaved during times of severe addiction. Indeed many prisoners who were currently drug stable discussed how drug treatment or methadone replacement therapy was the most important support as fathers they could access while in prison, as it was seen to enable prisoners to regain a sense of self control, and removed the need to seek and consume heroin. Robert’s point reflected the general view

*The methadone programme is keeping me away from drugs and I’m able to have a relationship with me kids. I don’t have to be running off looking for me next fix, it won’t be me sickness telling me what to do it’ll be me-self.*

**Table 14 : Impact of addiction on involvement as a father**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Drugs ‘disrupt thinking’ in early fatherhood (Jerry, Dan, John)</li><li>• Lost contact in past because of drug use (Jerry)</li><li>• Drugs make you selfish and self centred and prevent feelings (Dan)</li><li>• Lost first relationship and access to children through drugs (Gary)</li><li>• Lost first relationship through drugs, and sporadic involvement as father (Robert)</li><li>• Previous neglect of son through addiction (Daniel)</li><li>• Importance of rehab to support him as father (Ken, Robert, Larry, Dan)</li><li>• Lack of self control in addiction (Daniel, Robert, Ken)</li><li>• Became unreliable as father, used drug use in presence (Larry).</li></ul>
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## **Difficulties with drug treatment and rehabilitation**

Although many of these men were conscious of the damage their addiction had inflicted on their relationships, a pessimistic attitude regarding their ability to achieve or maintain drug stability was widespread among fathers who were struggling in their co-partner relationships (see Table 15). For instance a number of prisoners had experienced previous relapse and cited this as a reason for fearing relapse in the future. Concerns were also widespread about the prevalence of drugs in the main prison being an overwhelming temptation to a struggling addict, especially among prisoners with long term sentences left to serve

*I says you put an alcoholic in a pub, sitting in that pub for twent- four-seven, then eventually he's going to have a sup of fucking gargle, put a heroin addict in Mountjoy... (Daniel).*

While methadone was very important for some prisoners, both Larry and Daniel, who were using illicit heroin, discussed similar fears of the harmful consequences of methadone maintenance

*It goes into the marrow of your bones, there's a worse sickness off it, you're on fucking methadone for the rest of your life, the sickness off heroin isn't as bad as the sickness off methadone (Daniel)*

A number of prisoners also cited the temptations presented by friends who were connected to the “*drugs lifestyle*”, and the difficulties of avoiding these friendships. Robert was currently methadone stable, but perceived a number of personal barriers to maintaining drug stability on release. He referred several time to the temptation of “*easy money*” to be made though drug distribution, his lack of previous employment experience and his inability to read, as barriers to personal change and future employment (see Table 15).

Despite expressing general feelings of regret about the extent of ‘neglectful’ behaviour in their role as fathers, and the general consensus that drug stability supported their relationships with their children, paradoxically expressions of powerlessness and helplessness were also common in relation to achieving and maintaining drug treatment. This sense of helplessness was reflected in their perception of the loss of control in behaviour highlighted above, and in the insurmountable person barriers to achieving drug stability both inside and outside of prison.



**Table 15 : Difficulties with rehabilitation**

- Fear of future relapse due to previous episodes of relapse (Gary, Robert, Larry, Daniel, Dan)
- Exposure to drug lifestyle through friends / contacts (Robert, Dan, Larry)
- Lack of alternative means of financial support (Robert)
- Difficult changing thinking and behaviour (Robert)
- Fears of methadone (Larry, Daniel)
- Prevalence of drugs in prison (Daniel, Larry)
- Outstanding charge and lack of supports at current stage (Dan)
- Outstanding charges as barrier / remaining sentence length as barrier to drug treatment (Larry, Gary)
- Lack of treatment places (Larry)

### **Policy related barriers to drug rehabilitation**

Other barriers to rehabilitation experienced by some of the men related to access to drug treatment within Mountjoy prison (see table 15 above). Larry mentioned several times his efforts to access treatment from within prison referring to a range of obstacles. These included the lack of available places within drug treatment, and the fact that he was awaiting sentencing for several additional charges which restricted access to treatment within the prison. Due to an outstanding sentence, Dan was unable to progress to the Training Unit and access the additional addiction supports (such as Narcotics Anonymous) provided there

*At the time I was watching everyone else move from me own group like going over to the training unit and I was a bit gutted about that. There's no support now where I am, there's no NA and there's 3 meetings a week over at the training unit.*

Gary described how for long term prisoners, this difficulty accessing treatment can increase resentment and negativity among prisoners

*Just say your doing a 9 year sentence, 9 years and something clicks and you say enough is enough, I want treatment, they will not give you the treatment if you have 3 years left, 4 years left, they'll tell you to wait until you have 16 months or 12 months left. Now if an addict is waiting that long they'll get the attitude well fuck youse! I asked you for help and you threw me back into the rubbish, you know what I'm saying?*

The experiences of these prisoners illustrate the restrictions found within prison based drug treatment programmes discussed in the literature. As Dillion (2001) has highlighted, only

prisoners with less than 26 months left to serve on their sentence, or a circuit court review date less than 26 months away, can apply for either of the two treatment programmes offered within the medical unit of Mountjoy prison (Dillion, 2001). In addition if a prisoner is not enrolled in a methadone maintenance programme prior to entry to prison, they will be unable to receive this on entry (Dillion, 2001). Indeed, the Irish Prison service (IPS, 2005) has noted how budgetary constraints have resulted in restrictions to the provision of drug treatment in Mountjoy.

### **Secure relationships and focus on rehabilitation**

Not all prisoners who were methadone stable were so negative about sustaining this stability. As discussed above, prisoners who appeared more content in their relationships and who were more certain of family life outside of prison seemed more positive and focused on drug stability. For example Dan also expressed a general fear of relapse and was experiencing some difficulties in accessing further treatment supports (see above). However he also discussed how a previous contact would provide employment, and had secured a place in a residential drug treatment after release. Dan's partner relationship was strong and he seemed mentioned several times being committed to "*getting clean*" for his family

*Well em, being in here (the medical unit), doing the things I'm doing, I think I'm doing pretty much ok, like you know, I'm trying to get me act together.*

Dan's more positive attitude seemed to be bolstered by the additional supports of employment and access to residential drug treatment. For Dan, family life also provided the support and motivation to maintain drug stability, and his success in rehabilitation seemed to make family life all the more attainable. This illustrates how greater stability in relationships and thoughts of family life, seem to provide an element of support to some prisoners.

### **Addiction and feelings about 'neglectful' behaviour as a father**

While all prisoners in the sample made some references to what they felt were previous "neglectful" behaviour as fathers, a range of complex emotional responses to this were apparent. Some interviews were dominated by overtly emotional or guilty references about their intermittent involvement as fathers, whereas others, with similar levels of intermittent involvement, seemed relatively unaffected by guilt or emotion. Three interviews will be

discussed in detail as they illustrate the most extreme examples within the range of responses to “neglectful” behaviour as a father. Larry’s interview illustrates a very emotional response to his previous neglect and suggests that fatherhood has become closely linked with his sense of ‘worth’ as a person. Daniel’s interview illustrates how feelings of guilt, blame and failure are intertwined with his experience of fatherhood. Robert’s interview illustrates a more unemotional and withdrawn response to intermittent fatherhood.

### **Larry’s account**

Larry was aged twenty four, and while serving the shortest sentence among the sample, he was considerably anxious about a forthcoming trial for thirteen serious offences. Although Larry had never lived in the same residence as his son, he described high levels of regular involvement with his son prior to the full blown development of his addiction and subsequent imprisonment. Similar to the prisoners with more secure experiences of family life (see below), he made frequent references to feelings of pride in relation to the endearing behaviour of his son and the quality of their relationship. He was the most explicit about feelings of love for his son. He described how his inability to cope with the loss of his partner and son lead to addiction problems

*It just wasn’t the same, ‘cos when she was gone it wasn’t the same and I wasn’t seeing ‘jimmy’ much and that was killing me. So I just ended up taking the gear and I blocked everything out.*

Larry continuously contrasted his positive behaviour as a father before and his neglectful behaviour during his addiction, describing incidents when he took drugs in the presence of his son, or stopped buying ‘treats’ and was generally unreliable:

*In fairness there’s times like, and I do feel bad about it, there’s times when Janet would ring up and says ‘are you going to get Jimmy’ and I’d say ‘yeah’, but I’d come up 5 hours later, like basically I’d put me gear (heroin) before Jimmy’*

He seemed very uncomfortable at these recollections, describing them as “horrible” and was particularly emotional at this point in the interview.

As well as the reoccurrences of fatherly pride and love for his son, Larry also stood out in the level of intense admiration he had for his partner, who was admired for being a good mother, hard working, non-drug using, non smoking, psychologically strong with exemplary levels of cleanliness as a mother. The relationship with his ex-partner seemed of

central importance to him. His need to prove that he had changed and was capable of achieving and maintaining drug stability seemed crucial to the future of his family relationship. He discussed prison as an opportunity to focus on overcoming his addiction and rebuilding his relationship as a father and partner:

*I'm glad I'm in here now, do you know what I mean, focus on things, go back to training, give up smoking, give up the gear, just concentrate on being a father to Jimmy and being a decent boyfriend to Janet, you know what I mean. Cos I'd love to marry Janet, she's the only girl I've really loved.*

Paradoxically as was explored in the previous chapter, Larry also discouraged visits from his son, choosing to keep in contact by phone instead. Larry made numerous links between his role as a father and his feelings of self worth, although in the following quote, this was also linked with his anxiety about his forthcoming trial:

*I'm hoping the judge will see that it wasn't really me, you know what I mean, it was the strung out person doing that, and that I am a decent father to me son. Which I am, anyone in my family will tell you that, how good I am to me son. I'm always with me son, I love him.*

This suggests that Larry's relationship with his son was perceived as the most positive aspect of his life, and was being held as 'evidence' of his value as an individual both for himself and others.

### **Daniel's account**

Daniel was aged twenty nine and was the father of two children. He described how his "addiction" both to crime and drugs developed at a very early age and defined himself as "a heroin addict since the age of 15". As a result of his addictions, Daniel had spent the vast majority of his adult life in prison. He was serving a ten year sentence which was the longest among the sample. His partner and son visited regularly and he felt his son knew and loved him even though they had limited time together in the family home during his son's early childhood. Daniel's relationship with his daughter was more strained, he felt that she didn't know him and he saw her infrequently due to being in the care of another relative:

*Me daughter still wont come in and jump into me arms, me young fella does, she still frets a bit. She doesn't know me, my son does know me 'cos I had nine months out there.*

Daniel's interview was dominated by frequent references to strong feelings of guilt and anger about his relationship with his children, long term imprisonment and general self-

hatred for his addiction. *“I look back on it now and think, I look at meself now and think you’re a fucking prick for going back on it”*. Daniel discussed fatherhood in terms of his absence from his children’s lives - throughout both pregnancies, his children’s christenings and communions, early childhood and from family photos. His actions as a father were continuously discussed in the negative, for example *“I’ve not been there”* or *“I know its bad like, this is the only place they know me really is across the counter”*, or *“It’s not right, it just doesn’t feel right”*. Numerous references were made to his own responsibility for this situation *“I’ve only got me-self to blame, I made all them choices”*, but was also angry towards others including the prison authorities for refusing temporary release for his son’s communion, his partner for her addiction which influenced his relapse, and his parents for their use of violent discipline towards him as a child.

In contrast to the prisoners with more secure partner relationships, when referring to his son’s love, this seemed to cause Daniel further guilt and confusion rather than strengthening their relationship

*It wrecks me head thinking how has he so much love for me, how has that child so much love for me, I’ve spent nothing, I’ve been locked up all his life.*

Daniel’s discomfort with the physical conditions and emotional intensity of visits have been described above, however in addition, visits were linked to his failings as a father and were perceived as a source of pressure. Despite these discomforts Daniel seemed determined to continue visits in order to maintain the relationship with his children. Despite the difficulties in his co-partner relationship, similar to the fathers with more secure family relationships, his role as a father seemed to provide him with a sense of purpose for the future:

*The way I look at it now, my kids are my life, the way I look at it, anything I get is my kids, when I get out I want to build a proper home for them and when I go I want to be able to leave something here, I want to leave something for me kids.*

### **Robert’s account**

In direct contrast to the emotional reactions exhibited by Larry and Daniel, it was found that some prisoners in the sample seemed relatively untroubled or distant while reflecting on similarly intermittent involvement as fathers. Robert was the oldest prisoner in the sample at thirty eight and was serving a current sentence of four years. Robert’s relationship with his first partner broke down through his addiction

*...there came a stage when she knew then, then she was 'look I don't want that life for Jason', but it didn't really affect her until I started getting really bad on the drugs, I didn't start getting, not aggressive, I wouldn't hit her or anything like that but I didn't have time for her, you know, wouldn't have time for the family, more caught up in me-self and getting the money for drugs.*

He reflected that his relationship with his thirteen year old son had been dominated by drug use, imprisonment and intermittent contact early on. *"I wouldn't say I've been a proper father, a decent father like, jumping in and out of his life"*. Despite their sporadic contact, Robert felt he had a positive relationship with his son and he discussed his efforts to remain in touch and provide guidance through the early teenage years.

Robert reflected that he had been heavily addicted throughout the period of his second relationship and the main focus of his second partner's visits was the supply of drugs:

*Drugs, that was always on the visit, .that's always what I looked forward for, that the only thing, don't get me wrong, I did look forward to seeing Rani and that but the biggest thing in me head was drugs. I had a problem in there.*

Although Robert's second partner and daughter had visited regularly for nearly three years, Robert felt he had not developed a relationship with his daughter. This was attributed to being imprisoned throughout all of his daughter's life, whereas he had spent time in the home with his son as a child. Robert did not seem to perceive any link between the seriousness of his addiction with his lack of relationship with his daughter.

As his second partner was currently methadone stable, the future of their relationship hinged on him maintaining methadone stability on release from prison. However, Robert perceived a wide range of environmental, economic and personal barriers to maintaining methadone stability. He was initially open about the possibility of withdrawing as a father, explaining that his daughter deserved more than the *"drugs lifestyle"* and for him to be *"jumping in and out"* of her life, and that he did not want to *"drag her down"*. Robert then pulled back from this, explaining that nothing had been decided yet regarding his involvement in her future. Despite not living with his son from an early age he had still managed to maintain an intermittent relationship with him but did not seem to see the same possibilities for his daughter.

### **Intermittent fatherhood and the range of emotional responses**

Hogan and Higgin's (2000) Irish study had suggested that drug using parents frequently expressed high levels of anxiety and guilt about the impact of their drug use on their family. This study has identified a broader and more complex range of responses to intermittent and neglectful fatherhood. The first two responses illustrate high levels of emotional intensity about their failings as fathers. Although expressed in varying ways, these seem to reflect the guilt and anxiety identified by Hogan and Higgin's (2000) study. Robert's interview stands in stark contrast to the emotional responses in Larry's and Daniel's interviews. Robert's interview was bereft of any expression of strong feelings of guilt or anxiety about previous intermittent involvement with his son, and the likelihood of withdrawing from his daughter. Similar to the prisoners in Ardeti et al's (2005) study who described themselves as a negative influence on their child's life and discussed their withdrawal as evidence of care for their children, Robert discussed his withdrawal almost as a responsible act to protect his daughter from his negative influence as a father.

### **Conflict and ambivalence in relation to fatherhood**

Both accounts by Larry and Daniel illustrate high levels of ambivalence in relation to their role as a father. For Larry, his role as a father is discussed in terms of simultaneous pleasure and anxiety. While fatherhood is presented as the most positive aspect of Larry's life, he minimises contact with his son. For Daniel, although his relationship with his children provided a sense of focus for the future, this also served as a reminder of what he perceived as his failings in life. Paradoxically, while Larry discouraged visits, Daniel continued them despite the discomfort experienced. Ambivalence in relation to the father's role also featured in Johns interview, where he expressed desire for greater levels of involvement at the same time as uncertainty regarding his involvement as a father in the future (see page 91)

### **Cohabitation and involvement**

Corcoran's (2005) research with Irish non-resident fathers highlighted how fathers who had co-habitated, or had been married to the mothers of their children, were more likely to remain involved in a regular and continuous relationship with their children post separation. Both Robert and Daniel had short term experiences of living with their sons and not their daughters, and both indicated a sense of closeness to their sons, that was absent from the relationship with their daughters. This may appear to support Corcoran's (2005) finding,

however for both men there were additional barriers within the relationship with their daughters. For instance neither Robert nor Daniel discussed any conditions of access in the relationship with their sons, yet there were certain obstacles in the relationship with both their daughters. Robert's relationship with his daughter was dependent on him undergoing some personal change which he felt he could not sustain, while Daniel discussed how due to being in the care of another relative, he was unable to gain regular access to build a relationship with her. While other prisoners who had lived with their partners and children prior to this sentence did express feelings of closeness in their relationship with their children, for many of the men in this study, the complexity of their interpersonal relationships made their relationships as fathers more difficult to sustain.

### **The diverging experience of visits**

As was found in Looney's (2001) study, when visits occurred between prisoners their partners and children, they were found to be important in helping to maintain relationships throughout the period of imprisonment. However the experiences and perceptions of the men in this study were diverse in relation to family visits. Again, the minority of prisoners who appeared more secure in their family relationships generally had more positive experiences of visits. As shall be explored below, those who were struggling to maintain their co-partner relationships had more mixed and generally negative experiences of family visits.

### **Positive experiences of family visits**

A minority of prisoners who were housed in the medical unit generally had more positive experiences of family visits (see Table 16 below). These prisoners who appeared more content in their co-partner relationships and were visited regularly by their partners and children. These positive experiences of family visits were partly related to the cleaner and more private facilities within the medical unit and the tendency to be allowed physical contact during visits. "*They're grand over here cos you can touch your child and hold you child*" (Dan). Ritchie, Dan and Jerry all discussed being given extra time for their family visits by prison officers and also occasionally received treats from the staff to give to their children such as footballs and chocolates.



All were aware that these gifts and extra time were additional visiting privileges. Indeed some of these men felt that the benefits to their family visits were awarded because they either developed relationships with staff or conformed openly to the ‘rules’. For example ‘Ritchie’ described working in one particular area which allowed him to talk on a daily basis with the guards. He explained that got an extra 15 minutes on his visits because he “*kept on their good side*”. Jerry explained that he was given extra time “*because they knew me and they knew I didn’t cause any trouble*”. Others who were held in the medical unit who received visits pointed to the fact that physical contact was allowed but did not mention extra time or gifts.

**Table 16 : Positive experiences of family visits**

- |  |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fathers with greater stability in family life reported positive experiences of visits (Jerry, Dan, Ritchie)</li> <li>• All allowed extra time and physical contact in the Medical unit</li> <li>• All given gifts from staff for children on visits</li> <li>• All perceived they were given treats by staff because they conformed, or did not cause trouble (Jerry, Dan).</li> <li>• Built relationship with guards to gain benefits from visits (Ritchie)</li> </ul> |
|--|

**Inconsistencies in visiting policies**

While the lack of restriction on physical contact was seen as a positive element to visits in the medical unit, there seemed to be a perception that the rule regarding physical contact was enforced inconsistently within the prison. Some prisoners perceived that positive relationships with guards tended to lead to more flexibility in how the policy regarding physical contact was enforced on visits. Robert had spent over ten years in prison and described how a good relationship with the staff led to greater flexibility in this rule:

*If that officer sees you on the visit that work with you, he’d be all right with ya, and the baby comes over, I’ve never had any problems with an officer coming saying ‘here you take the baby down’, you know what I mean*

Others perceived that the enforcement of rules would depend on the attitude or personality of the particular guard, “*that depends on the prisoner officer that’s there, if there’s an alright prisoner officer there he’d let you have the child*” (Gary). Enforcement of the physical contact rule was also seen as a form of punishment dealt out by guards. Robert described how a guard preventing physical contact during a visit may be doing so to “*pay*

*the prisoner back*” for previously insulting them in front of other prisoners. However other prisoners described how they ignored this rule. For example Stephen stated “*they’re over the other side, and there’s no physical contact, only I do ‘cos I want to hug me kids anyway, I don’t care what they say*”. Although Looney’s (2001) study had described the lack of physical contact as one significant difficulty with visits, in this study the restrictions on physical contact appear much more inconsistent. Experience of the visits varied according to the prisoner’s location in the prison complex, their relationship with the guards, the attitude of the guard and the prisoners’ willingness to disregard the rules.

### **Difficulties with visits**

For men held in the main prison, the experience of visits was predominately negative and stressful (see Table 17). Stephen and Daniel were both held in the main prison at the time of the interviews and both were visited regularly by their partners and some of their children. They both became angry and stressed when discussing the topic of visiting conditions. Their concerns related mainly to the poor facilities in the visiting area due to the noise levels, crowds and poor hygiene. Both found that having to sit so close to other people undermined any sense of privacy in the conversation with their partners. Coupled with the shortness of time and lack of play facilities for children, they both felt these conditions made it very difficult to interact properly with either partner or child

*The kids get distracted by other things, do you know, there’s nothing to do for them really to do on the visits. Its not comfortable either, your shouting, your beside other people.* (Stephen)

*What’s good about them here, the visits are filthy, you can’t hear cos you have people here, people there, there’s kids all over the place, screaming and running around, the visits are crap. I’d rather go without visits, but just to see my kids.* (Daniel)

Both Stephen and Daniel were serving a long term sentences of eight and half years and ten years respectively. Both felt visits were the only way to maintain a relationship with their children “*I don’t like them having anything to do with prison but it’s the only way I get to see them*” (Stephen). Daniel referred to the importance of the visit in helping to maintain or build a relationship with his children through comments made about his daughter who was in the care of another relative and did not visit regularly. “*I’d like to see her one or twice a week so I can get that bond with her but that’s not happening*”. Both of these prisoners, who were serving long term sentences continued visits in order to maintain a

relationship with their children, despite the discomfort experienced. These difficulties with the poor quality of the visiting conditions within the main prison of Mountjoy prison mirror the findings from Looney's (2001) study. Looney (2001) concluded that these conditions produced an 'artificial' environment which undermined family interaction. In this study, it is clear that these conditions were perceived to be an uncomfortable but important form of contact for some prisoners. For prisoners who were serving long term sentences and who wished to maintain a relationship with their children, they were felt to be the only available option.

**Table 17 : Negative experiences of visits**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visiting area dirty (Daniel)</li> <li>• Prison environment frightening and harmful for children (Larry, Stephen, John)</li> <li>• Time of visit too short (Stephen, Gary)</li> <li>• No privacy for conversation (Daniel, Stephen)</li> <li>• Children noisy and out of control (Daniel)</li> <li>• Visits important for maintaining contact (Daniel, Stephen)</li> </ul>
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### **Discouraging visits**

Some prisoners who were no longer in an intact relationship with their co-partner discouraged their children from visiting. The reasons provided for this were varied, but tended to broadly relate to concerns about the impact of the negative prison environment (see Table 18). For example Robert expressed concern that his teenage son would become too familiar and accepting of the idea of prison

*I don't ask for him to come up, don't like him, I don't want him to get into this atmosphere this, I don't want that catching on to him, I don't want him thinking its all right to come up here.*

Others explained that their children were fearful of the intimidating atmosphere of the prison, were scared of the prison guards or the prison structure itself. For instance Larry explained how his son was scared of visiting

*Actually the last time he came up here he said to me on the phone 'daddy I don't want to go up there cos I'm afraid'. He gets scared of the walls, know what I mean.*

These reasons for discouraging visits are mirror those expressed by the prisoners in a range of other studies (Boswell and Wedge 2002, Looney 2001, Clarke et al, 2005, Ardetti et al,

2005). It seems that, similar to the prisoners in these studies, these men were discouraging visits as ‘evidence of their care’ for their children.

Sometimes, however, the reasons for discouraging visits were more complex. For instance although Larry had referred to his son’s fear of the prison environment as a reason for discouraging visits, later in the interview Larry said he discouraged visits due to his own inability to deal with his son’s disappointment

*So he looked up to me...and says ‘when are you coming home’, you know like that, ”are you coming out with us now?’ And he was grabbing me hand and I says ‘no’ and he says ‘aww’ looked at me up like that, you know with a big sad face, and I’m not looking at that again I says, you know so I talk to him on the phone all the time.*

Larry justified this decision by viewing the visit as being ultimately disappointing and more harmful for his son, “*He’s only being happy to get sad, he’s getting happy to see me and when he has to go he gets sad*”. By perceiving visits in this way, Larry seems be able to justify protecting both himself and his son from the emotional stress caused by the visit.

**Table 18 : Reasons for discouraging visits**

- Opportunity of exposure of prisoner status (Daniel, John, Larry)
- Discouragement to preserve image (Gary)
- Emotion of parting (Larry, John)
- Discouragement to avoid emotional upheaval (Larry)
- Exposure to drug use (Gary)
- Prison environment negative influence on children (Robert, Stephen)

Sometimes the poor environment within the visiting area exacerbated a prisoner’s discomfort with the stigma of imprisonment, and in combination lead to the decision to discourage visits. Gary initially described how the prevalence of drugs was part of the reason for discouraging his daughters from visiting

*You can see an awful lot of things in that waiting room that you (the interviewer) wouldn’t see, if you wait long enough in that waiting room you can see people dealing drugs*

However Gary’s relationship with his children was newly re-established after several years of estrangement and he was seemed anxious about creating a positive image with them. He

explained how the reason for discouraging their visits was linked with his children's perception of him within an environment of this nature:

*It'd be part of meself in that as well, some people would think me selfish and that but, I just want to take it slowly, get them used to me, you know, I don't want to see me kids leaning over a counter*

Previous studies (Ardevi et al, 2005, Clarke et al, 2005, Boswell and Wedge 2002, Looney 2001) have highlighted how prisoner's concerns to protect their children from the harmful prison environment, or their inability to deal with the emotions of visits were discussed in relation to discouraging visits. In this study, it seemed that concerns about the stigma of prisoner status, reinforced by the poor prison environment, were also cited. It appears a combination of factors informed this decision, illustrating the complex nature of feelings around fatherhood for prisoners. Although the reasons for discouraging visits were often complex, this study shows that prisoners cited reasons which indicated 'evidence of their care' for their child much more readily than reasons which indicated their own emotional inability or discomfort with the stigma of imprisonment.

### **The emotional intensity of visits reinforcing intimacy**

The emotional intensity of visits was a widely shared difficulty which emerged across the sample. Many prisoners described how their mainly young children refused to leave at the end of visiting time, or showed intense disappointment when their fathers would not return home with them. The prisoners who enjoyed the benefits of more flexible visits discussed the emotions of parting as *the* most difficult aspect of visits. For example Dan described consciously having to deal with this at the end of visits

*The hard part would be when the child is leaving you know, clinging onto me, stuff like that, I just have to switch meself off and hand her back to her ma like you know. It's very hard.*

For prisoners who were very positive about their families, these experiences were discussed in a way which suggested that this emotional intensity reinforced the intimacy of their relationship with their families. For example Jerry related with amusement and pride the story of his son "*refusing to budge from the chair*" during one of his last visits and how and his partner "*eventually got him to agree to go home and he called out 'I love you daddy' as he left*". For the fathers who were more confident of family life outside of prison, although they found separating at the end of visits painful, the emotion of visits seemed to

reinforce the links with their families. Of course, as described above, for these prisoners, visits took place in the less stressful visiting environment of the Medical unit, which may have helped this experience to be perceived more positively.

### **Strained relationships and the emotional intensity of visits**

In this research it was found that prisoners who struggled in the relationships with their partners did tend to be visited less frequently by their children and seemed more likely to perceive the visit as a negative experience.

Daniel was unusual in comparison to the other fathers in strained or uncertain co-partner relationships as he was visited regularly by his partner and son, yet was struggling with his own uncertainty about their future together post release. Daniel referred to visits as the only source of “*pressure*” in his life and seemed to find the emotional intensity difficult. For example Daniel reacted with worry when his son refused to leave, and found it difficult dealing with what he felt was a constant stream of questions from his son about when he was coming home

*All he ever says to me is ‘daddy when are you coming home’, ‘I don’t know son’, ‘will you be home for Christmas?’, ‘I don’t know son, its not down to me, its down to these, I’d love to come home with you but I can’t’.*

Daniel had spent the longest period of time in prison across the sample. Apart from nine months spent in the family home prior to this current sentence, the majority of his experience as a father was within the context of a prison. Rather than give his son a concrete response, he avoided answering the question, illustrating his inability to deal with his son’s questions. For Daniel, the visit seemed to compound his feeling of failure as a father

*It’s just, it’s not right, .it just doesn’t feel right, you know what I mean, it’s the only life I know with me kids from across the counter*

As has been explored above, Robert and John were in strained relationships and both also discouraged visits from their children. As discussed above, Larry discouraged his son’s visits when he could no longer cope with his son’s disappointment. At the same time his relationship with his partner was strained and uncertain, and he was anxious about the

possibility of further long term imprisonment, illustrating a number of simultaneous pressures.

Previous studies have highlighted how prisoners have cited their inability to cope with the emotional upheaval of visits as a reason for withdrawing from contact (Boswell and Wedge, Clarke et al, 2005). In this study it has been found that prisoner's who are struggling with greater levels of uncertainty within their relationships, or a number of simultaneous stresses, appear more likely to perceive the emotional intensity of visits as a source of pressure, rather than a source of support.

### **Visits and 'exposure' of deception**

As was the case in Looney's (2001) study, many younger children in this study were deceived about their father's status as a prisoner, and were told their father was in work, or less commonly and in the case of a father with HIV, described as being in hospital. Visits were seen as a crucial point where this deception could be 'exposed'. Two prisoners related with a mixture of discomfort and amusement at their child's curiosity about the unusual 'overnight' and 'long term' nature of their work, or to their questions about the presence of uniformed officers. For example Larry described how his son's questions were difficult for him to answer, "*I didn't know what to say, he put me on the spot you know, I said 'this work isn't like other daddies work'*". Daniel pointed to the presence of uniforms and the use of handcuffs to explain that exposure was inevitable during visits.

Screened visits, with a glass partition between the prisoner and visitor prevented all physical contact, posed a particular problem for the continuation of this deception. Larry explained that his son was never brought to visit him in another prison which used screened visits only, as this would have required a difficult explanation "*what's he meant to do, what's he meant to think, that's why he was never brought up there'*". When young children are deceived about their father's imprisonment, visits seemed to present a further source of discomfort for prisoners, as a potential point of exposure. Particular types of visits, such as those with screens, make this exposure more likely and appeared linked to discouragement of visits.

Morris (1967) had argued that prisoners deceived their children to preserve a positive image and because prisoners feared rejection by their child. In this study a range of explanations were provided for the deceit of their children. Daniel implied that being aware of their fathers' status as a prisoner was harmful for the child, which suggests that withholding this information is seen as a form of protection "*like I know its affecting my son, its not affecting me daughter cos she doesn't know what it is, this is all my son knows*". Jerry's older daughter had found out about his imprisonment accidentally while estranged from him. He said it felt "*horrible*" when he knew his daughter had found out, and "*I'm sure she wasn't pleased*". Similar to Nurses' (2001) observation of prisoners with older children, it seems that prisoners in this study experienced discomfort and embarrassment when their older children discovered their prisoner status. From the range of motivations which emerged, it seems that prisoners deceive their children both to protect them from distress or discomfort, to preserve a positive image in their child's eyes, and to avoid difficult explanations.

The explanation that proceeded from an older child awareness of their fathers' prisoner status raised some tensions for prisoners. Daniel and Gary discussed how, due to the inevitability of 'discovery' of their prisoner status, they felt it would be *more* damaging to the relationship with their children for them to be exposed as 'liars', so they wanted their children to be told the truth. Neither had told their children themselves but relied on a paternal grandmother or partner to impart this information.

Also, it was also highlighted how a prisoner telling the truth may also have to discuss with their child the reason for their imprisonment, as illustrated in Gary's extract

*I was very determined to tell them, look the reason I'm in here is because I done something wrong and I'm being punished for it, they were going to be told at some stage, so I'd rather the relationship would start on the truth rather than start on a lie, you know?*

Furthermore, some prisoners recognised that by admitting that they had done wrong, they were compromising their authority as a father. In the following extract, Robert acknowledged this tension when discussing how while providing advice, he also had to admit his own mistakes:

*You know I try and steer him on the right path, I even talk to him about this place, and I'm in here cos I was bold, I shouldn't have done things that I done, I try and tell him right from wrong.*



It seems that for prisoners with an older child, tension and discomfort may arise from the need to reveal their prisoner status and to explain the reason for imprisonment. There is a potential for further tension in the compromise of their authority as a father.

### **Defining / describing the ‘ideal’ father’s role**

In most interviews, prisoners either were asked to describe, or introduced independently, the most important aspects of a father’s role. A range of perceptions and behaviours emerged from this discussion. Some dimensions of a more traditional role for fathers did emerge. The most widely cited traditional role was to provide moral guidance, and less popularly provide discipline and provide financial support. Most responses broadly reflected the image of the ‘involved’ father, the most recent model of ‘ideal’ fatherhood to gain popularity in recent decades (Pleck, 1987, McKeown, 1998, Marsiglio, 1995).

This model depicts the ideal father as affectionate, loving and playful, who provides guidance and support rather than physical punishment and who takes a far greater share of involvement in domestic tasks than more traditional fathers. In keeping with this model of the ‘involved’ father, all prisoners in this study discussed the importance of open communication, and mutual understanding in the relationship with their children (see Table 19). The importance of providing moral guidance, being “*loving and caring*”, being physically available and encouraging were also common themes. For example the following extract demonstrates how John referred to physical care and moral guidance:

*You’re responsible for a life, you know you’re responsible for somebody that is helpless to help themselves, until they get to their teens. I suppose the most important thing is teaching a child right from wrong, having manners, being there for the child, physically and emotionally, being there in every way.*

**Table 16 : Defining the father's role**

<p><b>The 'nurturing' father role</b></p> <p>Being available (Gary, Robert, Larry)</p> <p>Communication and understanding (Gary, Ken, Robert, Ritchie, Larry, Daniel)</p> <p>Providing encouragement (Gary, Robert, Larry)</p> <p>Being loving and caring (Gary, John, Larry)</p> <p>Importance of play and energy (Jerry)</p> <p>Spending time together (Ritchie)</p> <p>Providing emotional stability (Dan, Larry)</p> <p>Providing physical care (John, Ken)</p> <p>Provides treats (Larry)</p> <p>Providing moral guidance (Gary, Robert, John)</p> <p>Being a role model (Daniel)</p> <p><b>Traditional roles</b></p> <p>Provide financial support (John)</p> <p>Provide discipline (Dan)</p> <p><b>Comparisons</b></p> <p>Be more like his own father (Ken)</p> <p>Defined in relation to being different from own father (Gary, John, Dan, Larry, Daniel)</p>
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**'Ideal' fatherhood as a contrast to personal experience**

It was also very common for fatherhood to be defined in terms of a comparison to prisoners' experience of the relationship with their own father. The 'involved' father model and a rejection in the use of physical punishment were very strong themes in this area of discussion. Commonly, prisoners discussed relationships with their own fathers that were dominated by extreme levels of violent discipline, or in terms of feeling unloved, disappointed or neglected. All prisoners who discussed these experiences referred to them in contrast to how a father should behave. For example, the desire for a high level of communication was typically contrasted with the use physical punishment, violence or fear as a form of control or discipline, as was their own childhood experience:

*I come from a disciplined family, my father yeah, I'm sure he loves his children an all, yeah but he's one of the old school, he used to you done something wrong you got a slap, you done something real wrong you got a hiding, that the way it was bet into me. I'd rather sit down, that's what I see now, parents sitting down and talking to their kids instead of punishing them. (Gary)*

Some discussed their intentions to build their child's confidence, provide discipline and stability in contrast to experiencing instability, a lack of boundaries and having confidence undermined by their own fathers.

*I've never heard me da in his whole life say 'I love you', not once or 'I'm sorry about that', do you know what I mean? Not once. I tell my Jimmy that I love him all the time. Like with me da, there's not a bit of, what's that word? Encouragement, I'd say Jimmy, you could be anything you wanted, you can do anything with your life. (Larry)*

Some prisoners did discuss a positive relationship with their own fathers, however this was uncommon. Both Jerry and Ken discussed relationships which were characterised by more warmth and understanding in the relationship or a more authoritative approach. For example Ken described his father's approach to discipline, "he'd make us do something, say clean the house or take our favourite toy, or he'd ground us, he wouldn't hit us you know". Therefore positive relationships with their own fathers were characterised by memories of greater communication, feelings of being loved and an absence of physical punishment. The predominately negative experiences of relationships with their own fathers were starkly characterised by the use of violence, harsh physical punishment, poor communication and neglect.

### **The importance of the 'nurturing' father model**

It is clear from these discussions of how a father should behave that the 'nurturing' model of fatherhood (Pleck 1987, McKeown et al, 1998, Marsiglio, 1995), which encompasses an authoritative parenting approach (Mosley and Thomson, 1995) was held as the appropriate approach to the fathers role among the prisoners interviewed. As was seen in the literature review, authoritative parenting emphasises a balance between positive and encouraging behaviour, through providing encouragement, warmth and communication, and controlling behaviour, through behavioural boundaries or discipline (Baumrind 1966 cited in Mosley and Thomson, 1995). As a result of the influence of this theory, physical punishment is commonly considered to damage a child's psychological development. Indeed recent legislation in the UK has prohibited the use of physical punishment as form of punishment (Children' Act [2004], ch 31, 58 (1 – 3)). Most of the participants echoed the view that the

use of physical punishment by fathers was unacceptable and damaging to children and efforts to communicate and provide guidance were preferable. However, while this model was clearly held to be the established standard of fatherhood, some exceptions to this were apparent.

### **Play or physical care and definitions of fatherhood**

Although guidance, support and encouragement are important aspects of the ‘nurturant father’ model which has formed part of the ideal of fatherhood, play and most importantly, greater involvement in the provision of care, are other key aspects of this model (Lamb 1987, Pleck 1987, McKeown et al, 1998, Coltrane, 2004). Some men did refer to the importance of play and the provision of physical care as part of the father’s role, however these were very minor themes to emerge (see Table 20). Ironically, in other parts of the interview, it was very common for participants to discuss how much they enjoyed playing with and encouraging their son’s interests in sport.

It seems that while many of these men enjoyed play with their children and some described involvement in domestic tasks in the home, the vast majority did not seem to see these tasks as part of the father’s role. When, as in Jerry’s case, these tasks were discussed as part of their responsibilities in the home, they were still discussed in terms of “*women’s work*” and attracted teasing from wider family members (see below). In addition, the provision of financial support, usually a very strong traditional role for fathers (Lamb, 1987, Gerson, 1997, Coltrane, 2004), emerged as a very minor theme (see Table 20). Other participants only mentioned resources in terms of the provision of ‘treats’ as an important activity for fathers.

### **The importance of support for involvement**

For a range of prisoners, the support of individuals within the prison and external organisations were important in helping them to maintain or rebuild relationships as fathers. For example Gary, who had virtually no relationship with his children for many years, discussed how an outside state agency supported him to re-establish contact with his family. John discussed how an individual officer supported him through a loan, to provide a birthday present for his son. Others who seemed particularly hostile towards authority would only accept support from trusted individuals. For example both Daniel and Stephen were hostile and suspicious towards any involvement of prison authorities in “*their*

*business*". However they both either praised prison chaplains or individual named guards for their genuine concern and personal support:

*You wouldn't talk to a screw in here, they would make fun of what you're saying, they don't give a fuck. They want to see you do your jail as hard as you can, I'm not saying all of them, but most of them, yeah Mr [says name] is different, he has a heart and wants to see you make it (Stephen).*

Some prisoners were able to access support from a range of internal and external sources. For more alienated prisoners however, prison chaplains and named individual guards seemed to fulfil an essential role in providing personal and practical support in relation to family issues.

### **Worrying about their welfare**

In Looney's (2001) Irish study, prisoners described frequent feelings of anxiety about their children, which Looney (2001) suggested resulted from the restrictions in how fathers can enact their role within the prison environment. In this study anxiety about the welfare of their children did arise, but seemed primarily linked to conditions in the family home relating to a drug oriented lifestyle, or as a result of partner conflict. For example one prisoner, whose partner was HIV positive, described overwhelming levels of anxiety about the possibility of his son's HIV status. For this prisoner, his anxiety was exacerbated by his HIV medication. Two prisoners who were in a strained relationship with their co-partners voiced concerns about their partner's drug use and how this impacted on their children. For example Daniel expressed concern about his son's emotional well-being while living with his partner, while John described how his mother monitored his son's welfare on a weekly basis

*I don't believe she is 100% clean, I believe she dabbles, but I know me son is looked after 'cos me mother goes over there and picks him up. She checks the house you know, she's always telling me the fridge is has food, he looks healthy, the house is clean, you know.*

Prisoner's anxieties about their children seemed linked to particular addiction related issues within the home environment, partner conflict and the prisoner's well being.

## **Pride in fatherhood**

Many prisoners described some incidents or experiences of feeling proud of being a father when asked about positive experiences of fatherhood. For some fathers, expressing pride seemed to be an important way of articulating their commitment to their role as a father or emphasising the closeness of their relationship with their children (see Table 20). Prisoners who described feelings of pride more frequently, and had a wider range of sources of pride were typically those with more secure co-partner relationships who received regular visits, reflecting the regular nature of their contact and the greater amount of time they spent living with their children. Larry was one exception, for as described above, Larry stood out in the frequency of references made to fatherly pride and to the closeness of his relationship to his child, despite the uncertainty of his co-partner relationship and the fact that he had never lived with his son. However, Larry was serving his first prison sentence and had regular contact with his son prior to the full blown development of his addiction. Like the other fathers with more secure co-partner relationships, Larry felt he had a close relationship with his son.

**Table 17 : Sources of pride in fatherhood**

- proud of physical beauty (Jerry, Ritchie)
- proud of cleverness and endearing behaviour (Dan, Jerry, Ritchie, Larry)
- pride in daughters achievements (Jerry)
- pride at sons presence as match (Ritchie)
- pride in close relationship (Dan, Ritchie, Jerry)
- memory of pride at christening of daughter (Gary)
- pride at families relationship with daughter (Ken)
- memories of pride at son's confirmation (Robert)
- proud of daughter's recognition of him after period of separation (Robert)
- pride at son watching him play football for his local team (Ritchie).

For some fathers sources of pride related to their children's achievements or qualities, for example their child's intelligence and endearing behaviour. These references were common from fathers of boys between three or four years of age.

This pride was illustrated by relating stories of their child's amusing observations and comments:

*He's a little character, the things he comes out with, she has him great she has, for four years of age, he's very smart, he loves football, he keeps talking about the new x-box 'I want an x-box 350. (Larry)*

For example Jerry had told his son that he was “*building the towers*” as the reason he could not return home. He related with much pride and amusement the story of his son looking out the windows in the visiting room and saying “*daddy, those towers are built now, why aren't you coming home?*”. Ritchie, whose son was also four, was proud of his son's love of football, and referred to feeling proud when his son watched him play football for his local team. Other sources of pride related to the achievements of their older children, their children's physical beauty, or the feelings of attachment they gained from their relationship. Dan for example described how one of the most positive aspects of fatherhood was “*getting the belonging feeling from your child, knowing your belonging to something you know*”. These examples of pride illustrate some of the sources of pleasure that can be derived from the father's role, which seemed linked to moments of positive interaction with their children or from feeling loved and needed by their children.

Even prisoners who had particularly disrupted relationships with their children referred to moments of pride. Gary for example described the following event from nearly twelve years ago as his most positive experience of fatherhood

*The day of the christening, I was so proud as punch. Everyone was going around telling me she was the image of me, she had the slanty little eyes which she did have, an it was a wonderful day, you know. Really, really so proud to be a father, you know, I swore I'd watch out for her from that day on you know.*

His feelings of pride seemed to be reinforced by his daughter's physical resemblance to him being widely acknowledged on the day, confirming his status as father. Robert, who also had a history of disrupted contact with both his children, described an incident where a feeling of pride was linked to him publicly enacting the role of father

*I was actually with him in the chapel last Sunday gone, but he was chuffed you know, he was over the moon that I was with him, his da was with him you know that kind of way, so I know he was proud, cos I was, I was proud for him. Just to be there with him in the church, just to show everyone he had his da with him, so he wont be getting all that pressure 'oh you don't have a da', you know, all that kind of stuff”.*

In the example below, Robert's pride as a father is linked to his daughter recognising him as her father, reflecting the fragility of their relationship

*Last Sunday I was out, it was the first time I'd seen her in 8 months, we went down to the playground and she was running around saying 'daddy' this and 'daddy' that, and I was shocked, I mean she still knows me do you know and I was real proud of myself, it was really lovely, I was even saying to her, jeaysus 8 months, and she still knows me.*

For prisoners with less regular interaction or experience of estrangement in the relationship with their children, pride seemed linked to the social status of their role as a father being enacted or confirmed, which may arise from the greater levels of fragility in their relationships. However, fathers with more secure relationships and more regular contact used different ways of displaying their status as a father.

### **'Displays' of fatherhood to others**

Some prisoners referred to behaviours which seemed to 'display' the importance of their role as a father. They described activities which attracted ridicule and comment from others, but which seemed an important part of their social status as fathers. Ritchie described how he purposefully watched cartoons that he knew his son enjoyed so he could keep up with his son's interests, and how he was ridiculed for this by other prisoners. Jerry also described how he teased by his family for his involvement in domestic tasks

*My family would slag me that I should have been a mammy, cos I'd do everything, getting up early in the morning, I'd make their breakfast, change their nappies, I'd do all the women's work, I used to let (partner) stay in bed in the morning cos she'd be getting up in the night, I used to let her have a lie in, so I used to get stick over that, but they used to be delighted with me.*

Both fathers seemed proud of these public displays and subsequent ridicule and seemed to discuss them as an illustration of their commitment to their role as fathers. The fact that Jerry pointed out how his family were delighted with him, illustrates that their pleasure in him performing this role, while apparently seen as slightly out of step with what a father is typically expected to do, was important to him. This point illustrates Doherty et al's (1996) argument, that the wider family context and their perception of how a fathers role should be enacted, can influence how a father performs his role. While it was impossible to verify any of these displays, they seemed to fit with the many other examples of pride in, and knowledge of their children, referred to by these fathers. Although these displays indicated that the 'involved' father was important image for these fathers. Other prisoners made



similar claims of ‘involved fatherhood’ that were more difficult to accept when considered within the context of their lives as they described them at the time.

### **‘Claiming’ fatherhood**

Two fathers claimed higher levels of involvement with their children than seemed acceptable given their circumstances. This ‘claiming’ behaviour occurred with two fathers who had also described intermittent involvement or estrangement from their children. For example, Gary claimed to change nappies and be involved in feeding during the night for his newly born daughter, but also described concurrent difficulties adjusting to the responsibilities of new fatherhood, an increasingly erratic criminal lifestyle and growing levels of drug use. These factors lead to the increasing involvement and concern of his family and social services, and the eventual loss of custody of his daughter.

Gary repeated this ‘claiming’ at other points of the interview, for example he explained how his girlfriend would often bring her child to see him for visits and how she would leave her daughter during the visits to give them time on their own. However, according to Irish Prison service policy, children must be accompanied by adults during visits. While some inconsistencies in the policy regarding physical contact were highlighted, this seemed an unlikely action for his partner to take given the short period of time available for a visit. Gary also claimed to have taken part in a parenting course in a UK prison while completely estranged from his children and with little prospect of re-establishing the relationship at the time.

Robert also claimed to have the responsibility of caring for his son while his girlfriend worked. He had also discussed how his drug addiction had developed at that time, and when probed about how he combined caring and drug use he avoided answering several times. The following exchange illustrates his avoidance

Interviewer: *“So you actually looked after him when he was little when your girlfriend went out to work, what was that like?”*

Robert : *“Yeah, (clears his throat), it was good yeah, it was good but as I say it was ...”*

Interviewer: *“How did you find the day to day stuff?”*

Robert: *“Well to tell you the truth, I was messing around with the heroin as well, that’s what the day was about, the day used to just fly by”*

Interviewer: *“And how did you manage having to look after him and still be taking your heroin?”*

Robert: *“Well I have six brothers as well, if you imagine that circle, let me see (lists 3 names) .they were all involved in drugs, and I had friends that were involved in drugs, and I was selling a few drugs as well...”*

Eventually, after a number of probes Robert provided the following answer

*I used to like he was only one like when I had him, let me see, and she first went out to work as well when he was 8 / 9 months I’d say, and the road I lived on was a private house and he had little friends I used to look out on the road all the time just to check he was alright.*

Given his son’s age in this explanation, it seems unlikely that he would be continuously left on the road to play with his friends. Robert later minimised these claims of responsibility by suggesting that his partner would very likely dispute them.

Both of these accounts of high involvement during periods of high drug use are in direct contrast to the accounts from other fathers who described the difficulty of combining the responsibilities of fatherhood and drug taking. As has been described above, the dominant view was that drug use impeded their awareness of the responsibilities of fatherhood and lead to unreliable behaviour as fathers. It would seem that Robert and Gary were exaggerating their previous level of involvement as fathers in order to appear as more ‘nurturing’ fathers. This may reflect the dominance of the ‘nurturing’ father image referred to by the entire range of prisoners in their definitions of the father’s role, and in discussions of their experiences with their own fathers. As was found above, other prisoners engaged in similar ‘displays’ of their commitment as fathers, but had more credible examples at their disposal due their more regular and continuous contact with their children.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown that prisoners’ relationships as fathers how the quality of the co-parent relationship and the prisoners current addiction status can exert considerable influence on a prisoner’s relationship as a father. Stability in the co-partner relationship was found to be linked to a perception of family life as a source of support in prison, and greater optimism regarding the ability to maintain a drug free status. Prisoners struggling

in their co-partner relationships, were much more uncertain about their future involvement as fathers and were more pessimistic about relapse.

Despite agreement that addiction undermined a prisoner's ability to be an involved father, there was widespread pessimism that stability in addiction could be achieved or maintained, although some men were more optimistic about maintaining drug stability. Diverse reactions were illustrated to addiction within fatherhood, for while some fathers illustrate guilt and anxiety, others 'seem more distant and untroubled by similar experiences of intermittent fatherhood.

Prisoner's experiences of family visits diverged widely. Some prisoners had overwhelmingly positive experiences of visits, while similar to Looney's (2001) study, visits in the main men's prison were negative and uncomfortable due to a range of reasons. Similar to previous studies of prisoners (Nurse 2001, Looney, 2001, Boswell and Wedge, 2002, Clarke et al, 2005, Ardeti et al, 2005) visits were discouraged for a range of reasons linked with 'protection of the child. Visits were seen as a crucial point of 'exposure' which could lead to visits being discouraged. For prisoners with older children, exposure of their prisoner status was considered inevitable, and was a potential source of discomfort.

Despite the predominately disrupted experiences of involvement among the prisoners interviewed, paradoxically it seems that aspects of the 'nurturing' model of fatherhood, and in particular notions of an authoritative parenting approach, were widely discussed as the most appropriate form of fathering. The men's actual experiences of this type of parenting in the relationship with their own fathers however, were uncommon. This discussion showed how some dimensions of involvement such as play, physical care and providing were deemed less significant. Many men referred to feelings of pride as a father, however diversity was shown in these sources of pride between men with regular and close contact and men with more sporadic involvement as a father. The dominance of the nurturing model of fatherhood was emerged in the way that prisoners 'displayed' or 'claimed' high levels of commitment or involvement as fathers.

## **Chapter 6: Discussion and conclusion chapter**

This chapter will explore the relationship between the findings presented in the previous chapter, the literature examining fatherhood in general, and previous research on prisoners as fathers, to illustrate to what extent the aims of this study have been achieved. This chapter will then provide a conclusion which will re-address the main research question and attempt to summarise and conclude the whole study. The limitations of this study will also be addressed in this section.

### **Irish research on prisoners as fathers**

Looney's (2001) study was the only Irish study to focus exclusively on the experiences of fathers in prison, while some references were made to the CSER (2002) study which combined the experiences of male and female prisoners in relation to parenthood. Looney (2001) established that prisoners were largely inhibited in enacting their roles as fathers by the restrictions of the prison environment. Furthermore, a significant level of diversity was apparent in how men viewed their role as a father in prison. For some men, their role as a father felt unaffected by imprisonment, others found this role so stressful that they withdrew from involvement, while for others, their role as a father had become all the more important while imprisoned (Looney, 2001).

### **The factors that influence a father's involvement**

Exploration of the nature of fatherhood has illustrated the influence of a number of complex, interactive and cumulative factors on a father's involvement. Although Doherty et al's (1996) model proposed a wider range of factors, this review focused on the influence of the father's personal characteristics, the influence of the co-parent relationship, and the wider social and economic environment in which they are located.

In terms of the father's personal characteristics, Doherty et al (1996) had suggested that a father's commitment to his role, his knowledge and skills in parenting and level of motivation for involvement are central. These in turn may be influenced by the father's relationship with his own father, his psychological health, employment and residential status. It was suggested that the extent of mutual commitment, a couple's expectations of

each other, and the extent of co-operation or conflict within the relationship are key factors in relation to the co-parent relationship. Within the wider social and economic environment, factors such as the cultural expectations of the father's role, the expectations of his wider family, and availability of employment opportunities can all interact to either support or undermine both the co-parent relationship and the father's personal characteristics, and ultimately his involvement as a father.

### **The influence of the co-parent relationship**

The extent of co-operation and conflict in the co-partner relationship emerged in the literature as a particular factor which can influence a father's involvement. This factor emerged in research with non-resident fathers (Corcoran, 2005) and in research which involved both co-parents within separated relationships (Lunt, 1987). Indeed, in a range of studies it has been highlighted that prisoners are particularly dependent on their co-partners to facilitate their involvement with young children (Looney, 2001, Clarke et al, 2005). A number of studies with non-resident fathers and prisoners have also highlighted the issue of 'maternal gatekeeping', when mothers are described as have a central role in prohibiting or controlling contact between fathers and their children (Lunt 1987, Nurse, 2001, Boswell and Wedge, 2002, Ardeti et al 2005, Corcoran, 2005).

### **The role of the prisoner's partner in facilitating contact**

In this study, co-partners were seen as a crucial conduit for contact between prisoners and their children. Clarke et al (2005) had argued that prisoners who perceived their co-partner relationship to be positive, saw their children more frequently, while those who had a negative perception of the relationship saw their children less frequently. This study found that men in secure family relationships were visited by their children and partner regularly, however it was also found that a prisoner could feel ambiguous about their co-partner relationship, yet be visited by their children frequently. One prisoner discussed how he would not articulate his feelings about the relationship with his partner, to guarantee continued contact with his children. In this case, a positive perception of the relationship was not necessarily the important factor, nevertheless continued contact with his partner was deemed necessary for continued access to children.

### **The co-partner relationship and confidence regarding involvement**

For many prisoners in this study, the quality of the co-partner relationship appeared to be linked to greater confidence about their involvement as a father post release. Men who were in intact relationships saw their children regularly, while men who became separated from the mother of their children either prior to, or during their imprisonment, experienced periods of estrangement or intermittent contact with their children. Prisoners who were more secure in their co-partner relationships, and who spoke of their commitment to the relationship, appeared much more confident about their involvement as fathers in the future. These men articulated plans for future family life almost as an escape from the drudgery of prison. Among men who were struggling in their co-partner relationships or who were separated from their co-partners, it was much more common to discuss their future as fathers in much more hesitant and uncertain terms.

This is not to suggest that the only barrier to the involvement of these prisoners as fathers was conflict within the co-partner relationship. Indeed subsequent discussion will illustrate a number of other factors such as addiction, emotional well being and ambivalence towards their role as a father as further issues. It is possible that an inability to sustain a co-parent relationship may form part of the blend of personal and interpersonal difficulties experienced by the prisoners in this study. Frequently however, clear differences were found between men who described their relationship with their co-partner as secure and those who did not. The importance of the co-partner relationship has not featured to such a significant degree within previous Irish research with prisoners as fathers, (Looney, 2001) or parents (CSER, 2002).

### **Addiction as a personal factor influencing a prisoners involvement**

A further individual factor which has received surprisingly limited references in Irish (Looney, 2001) and international research on prisoner as fathers (Clarke et al, 2005, Ardeti et al, 2005) was the prisoner's addiction history and current drug status. Previous research by Looney (2001) and Clarke et al (2005) highlighted the issue of addiction, in relation to a desire for a greater level of involvement as a father as a result of respite from drugs or participation in drug rehabilitation programmes. Ardeti et al (2001) also identified how a prisoner's drug addiction was cited as a reason for withdrawal from involvement.

In this study it was found that issues relating to drug addiction dominated the discussion of prisoner's relationships as co-parents and fathers. These experiences reflect the high levels of addiction found among the Irish prisoner population (O'Mahony 1997 and 2002, Allwright et al, 1999, Dillion, 2001) and the drug saturated environment of Mountjoy Prison (Dillion 2001, Burke, 2006). The vast majority of men in this sample were long term drug addicts, with heroin use being predominant. Drug addiction was widely acknowledged to have been a dominant factor which contributed towards relationships breakdown, and towards estrangement or sporadic involvement as a father. Men who remained in contact with their children also referred to their drug use as a form of "neglectful behaviour" as a father. These behaviours included prioritising their addiction over the needs of their children, becoming unreliable, diverting their resources towards the consumption of drugs and taking drugs in the presence of their children.

Much of this behaviour concurs with Falkowski's (2000) description of the psychological and behavioural changes that occur with 'dysfunctional' drug use, when chronic physical dependence and regular acquisition and consumption of the drug become priority. Hogan and Higgins' (2000) research on Irish parents as drug users had also described higher levels of instability in family life than with non-drug using parents. In Hogan and Higgins' (2000) study, this instability was caused by a combination of financial insecurity, episodes of emotional and physical distance brought about by the pursuit and consumption of drugs, and increased irritability towards their children.

### **Addicts as 'absent fathers'**

In this study, none of these fathers referred to financial instability or increased irritability with their children, indeed most were keen to point out that their neglectful behaviour was of a passive nature, through absence, unreliability or through not fulfilling their usual role, rather than resulting in physical or emotional abuse. These aspects of their experience as a drug using parent may have been minimised within the interview to avoid creating a more negative image (Miles and Huberman, 1994). However, Hogan and Higgins' (2000) Irish study, highlighted that drug using fathers were frequently absent from their children's lives through imprisonment, hospitalisation or residential drug treatment. Even when mothers used drugs in addition to the father, they retained most of the responsibility of care (Hogan and Higgins, 2000).

### **Addiction and the co-partner relationship**

The current addiction status of some prisoners appeared to interact with the quality of the co-parent relationship in a number of ways to influence their level of confidence regarding future involvement. For some fathers, their ability to achieve a drug free status was discussed as crucial to the future of their relationship with their partner, which would in turn influence their level of future involvement as a father. Others, who wished to maintain methadone stability, attributed their partner's ongoing drug use as a reason for maintaining their distance as a father. Another prisoner's future relationship with his co-partner hinged on him maintaining methadone stability in line with his partner. This prisoner was doubtful about his ability to remain drug free, and was considering withdrawing from the child in this relationship. These types of scenarios were all associated with strained or uncertain co-partner relationships, illustrating how addiction was seen as a key influencing factor in some co-partner and fathering relationships.

### **Prisoners, separated fathers and emotional intensity of visits**

As we have seen, Doherty et al (1996) included a father's emotional well being as one of the personal factors which can influence his involvement. A number of studies have highlighted how an inability to deal with the emotions of visits was cited as a reason for prisoners minimising contact with their children (Boswell and Wedge, Clarke et al, 2005, Nurse 2001). This was also found to be the case for separated men in Lunt's (1987) study of divorced couples. Lunt (1987) had observed that while most separated families did find initial visits upsetting, most eventually adjusted to this new routine. The minority of men in Lunt's (1987) study who lost contact with their children were unable to cope with the complex mix of "grief, guilt or resentment" (Lunt, 1987, p216) that can arise as a result of the separation and subsequent visitation process.

### **Co-partner relationships and the emotional intensity of visits**

In this study it was found that the emotional intensity of prison visits was a widespread theme. For some prisoners in intact co-partner relationships, although the emotions of visits were stressful, they were described in ways which suggested that these emotional moments reinforced the bonds of their relationship with their families. Other prisoners in more strained and uncertain relationships referred to the emotional intensity of visits as a negative and stressful experience. However, prisoner's reactions to the emotional



intensity of visits were diverse. While some prisoners who seemed to find these emotional moments particularly stressful discouraged visits, others who made similar references to visits as a source of stress and pressure, continued them despite these difficulties.

Often, the reasons for discouraging visits were complex. As was found with other studies of prisoners (Ardiett et al, 2005, Clarke et al, 2005, Boswell and Wedge, 2002), in addition to the emotional trauma of visits, many prisoners cited concerns about the negative impact of the prison environment on their child, or discomfort with the negative stigma of imprisonment, as reasons for discouraging visits. When discussing the reasons for discouraging their children's visits, it was clear that reasons which indicated a concern to protect their children, were cited much more readily than the prisoners' own discomfort. A father who cites protection of the child rather than his own discomfort is more likely to be judged as conforming to the expectations of contemporary fatherhood, which suggests that some prisoners sought to be considered in those terms.

### **The costs and benefits of the father's role**

Through Becker's (1960) definition of commitment, the idea was raised that a father's commitment to his role can be influenced by the costs and rewards derived from his involvement. It was further suggested that the pleasure, satisfaction, emotional support and social recognition were the possible rewards of the father's role. Both rewards and costs may vary according to the expectations within the co-parent relationship and wider family unit, however the costs associated with the father's role could include loyalty to the partner relationship, economic provision, emotional support, positive interaction with children and practical nurturing tasks.

### **Fatherhood as a source of pleasure and focus**

In this study a number of references were made to the father's role as a source of pride or pleasure, illustrating the potential rewards of fatherhood. Prisoners who appeared more secure in their co-partner relationships, and were in contact with their children frequently, made more repeated references to feelings of pride as a father. These men also had a wider range of sources of pride such as their children's attributes, achievements or endearing behaviour, or from feeling loved by their children. As has been highlighted above, men who felt secure in their co-partner relationships also made frequent references to family life

as a source of focus, particularly when currently stable on methadone maintenance or drug free. Indeed these rewards may be linked to the observation by McDermot and King (1992) that for some prisoners, their role as a father provided a sense of place and focus towards the future.

### **Diversity, ambivalence and contradiction in relation to fatherhood**

Prisoners with a history of sporadic involvement or estrangement as fathers, also referred to feelings of pride, however these more commonly stemmed from having their role or status as a father publicly acknowledged, or from by being acknowledged or remembered by their child. This illustrates the tentative nature of their involvement as fathers and a certain ambivalence towards their role. Indeed among prisoners who were in strained co-partner relationships, and more uncertain about their level of involvement as a father in the future, it was generally found that the range of feelings expressed in relation to fatherhood were diverse, complex and contradictory.

For example the experiences of three men in relation to intermittent and ‘neglectful’ fatherhood illustrate the diversity of responses. Similar to the findings from Hogan and Higgin’s (2000) Irish study, for some men, their role as a father was linked with high levels of emotional intensity and guilt. However, others with similar experiences of intermittent involvement displayed a more withdrawn and unemotional response. In the case of these three men, their interviews also illustrate conflict and ambivalence in relation to the father’s role.

For some prisoners, their role as a father was referred to as a simultaneous source of pleasure and anxiety, particularly within the context of ongoing addiction and long term imprisonment. One father in particular stood out among the sample in terms of the frequency of references to pride at the closeness of his relationship with his son, but simultaneous guilt and anxiety at his ‘neglectful’ behaviour as father. For this father, his relationship with his son was discussed in terms of being the one positive aspect of his life, as evidence as his worth as an individual, yet at the same time he minimised contact with his son. For another, his role provided a sense of focus towards the future, yet also stood as a reminder as what he perceived as his failings in life.

Further ambivalence among men in unstable relationships was expressed in relation to the impact of drug addiction on their relationships and rehabilitation. It was widely agreed that addiction had undermined their co-partner and family relationships, and frequently led to neglectful or sporadic involvement as a father. Yet at the same time expressions of powerlessness and resignation towards continued drug use were very common, although for some men, difficulties in accessing support for their addictions, a lack of faith in methadone treatment, and previous experience of relapse were significant issues which fed their attitude of resignation.

### **Restrictions on the father's role**

It has been shown that the father's role encompasses behavioural, social and psychological elements, which are enacted through involvement and influenced by his commitment to the relationship. Furthermore, 'involvement' was defined as a set of behaviours which indicate a father's commitment to his child such as face to face contact, physical caretaking and financial support (Ihinger-Tallman et al, 1995). As with Looney's (2001) Irish research, the prisoners in this study were highly restricted in how they could enact their role as a father within the confines of the prison environment, although a range of behaviours were discussed as a means of maintaining the relationship. These included maintaining contact through visits, Temporary Release, phone calls and sending gifts. While Looney (2001) identified that cognitive activities such as worrying about their children's welfare were also seen as important activities in relation to the father's role, in this study it was found that those who referred to worrying about their children discussed this in relation to particular drug or conflict related issues within the home environment.

### **The importance of the visiting environment**

A strong theme in previous Irish research has been the predominately restrictive, uncomfortable and artificial environment of prison visits (Looney, 2001, CSER, 2002). This theme has been echoed in relation to a more restrictive visiting environment in studies from the UK (Clarke et al, Boswell and Wedge, 2002). In this study, prisoners' experience of visits seemed to depend in part on their location within the prison. Prisoners who were drug stable or drug free were held in the medical unit, and all reported a positive experience of visits due to the more flexible policies regarding physical contact. In contrast, prisoners who were held in the main men's prison described negative experiences of visits, due to a

lack of privacy, cramped seating arrangements and a generally poor visiting environment similar to those reported in previous Irish studies (Looney 2001, CSER 2002). Although the visiting environment contributed to a negative perception of the visiting experience, men who continued visits were long term prisoners who pointed to these visits as their only means of maintaining their relationship with their children.

Some prisoners in the medical unit were also provided with additional privileges such as extra time and small gifts for their children, and the award of these privileges was usually discussed in relation to the compliance of the prisoner or his relationships with the guards. Indeed, it was highlighted by a range of prisoners that visiting policies were enforced in an inconsistent way throughout many areas of the prison. While Looney (2001) had identified the lack of physical contact as a significant difficulty, in this study a range of factors such as the prisoners' willingness to disregard the rules, and their relationship with the guards could impact on the visiting experience.

### **Deception of children**

Efforts to deceive young children about their father's prisoner status were common in this study. This practice reflects the findings from previous Irish studies which found that the deception of prisoner's children was widespread (Looney, 2001, CSER, 2002). Visits were seen as a crucial point of exposure of this deception and in particular screened visits, which made exposure more likely, created additional difficulties for prisoners and added to the likelihood of visits being discouraged. Morris (1967) highlighted how prisoners deceived their children primarily out of a fear of rejection and to preserve a positive image with their child. It appears a similar mixture of reasons emerged in this study. These included concerns to protect their child from distress, to preserve a positive image within the relationship with their child, and to avoid the discomfort associated with explaining their imprisonment.

### **Management of prisoner status.**

The CSER (2002) study had pointed to a loss of parental authority in the relationship with children as one outcome of imprisonment. In this study, the efforts to manage their children's awareness of their prisoner status illustrated some of the tensions inherent in a prisoner's role as a father. Some prisoner discussed how with older children, discovery of

the nature of their prisoner status was inevitable, and being truthful about their imprisonment was presented as the least damaging action. This illustrates how prisoners with older children must weigh up the risks of deception against the risks of admission.

Enacting some dimensions of the father's role also raised tensions. Providing moral guidance was one of the most widely cited behaviours associated with the traditional view of the father's role. A tension was acknowledged between providing moral guidance as a father, while holding the 'immoral' status of prisoner. For example it was discussed how in order to provide advice or guidance to their children, past wrongs must be acknowledged and discussed by prisoners. Admission of previous immoral behaviour presents an opportunity for the father's status to be further compromised. These examples highlight how a prisoner's role as a father exposes him to the risk of rejection by his children and to a potential loss of status within the relationship.

### **The importance of support for fathers**

The ability to manage these moments of interaction may also depend on the support of the co-parent or others within the wider family. The prisoners who referred to these tensions had sometimes relied on the support of others to mediate this process. Explaining the circumstances of a father's prisoner status will also present an opportunity for a co-partner, or other members of the wider family, to influence the child's perception of their father. This point illustrates Doherty et al's (1996) argument regarding the extent of support within the wider environment as an influencing factor in a father's involvement. The importance of practical and emotional support from individuals and agencies within the prison, also emerged in relation to building and maintaining their relationships with children. While some prisoners were willing to accept support from a wide range of sources within the prison, others were more hostile towards authority and would only accept support from a few trusted individuals.

### **The power of the nurturing father image**

Exploration of the changing roles and responsibilities of fathers has demonstrated contradictions in the cultural ideal of fatherhood. The contemporary 'ideal' of fatherhood depicts a highly involved nurturer, who practices an 'authorative' (Baumrind 1966 cited in Mosley and Thomson, 1995) parenting approach, and is highly involved in play and

physical care with his children. However Irish research (Nugent 1987, Kiely, 1996) suggests this ideal has been slow to translate into practice. The majority of women carry the main bulk of responsibility for childcare and domestic tasks, and for many fathers, the provider role remains as a powerful measure of ideal fatherhood.

In this study, some references were made to a traditional approach to the father's role. However, the nurturing father image, and in particular the supportive and communicative dimension of the 'authoritative' parenting approach (Baumrind 1966 cited in Mosley and Thomson, 1995), were the most widely evoked as appropriate behaviour for a father. This image was referred to in terms of how a father should behave, and also in terms of a comparison to the relationship with their own father. Ironically, this approach was also evoked by men who had little actual experience of being a parent through estrangement, or when their involvement with their children was highly sporadic. These widespread references to this model of fatherhood illustrate the strength of this image as the cultural ideal of contemporary fatherhood. However, the nurturing father ideal combines a number of elements and some of these elements were minimised. Other dimensions of this role such as play and the provision of physical care were omitted in discussions of the father's role, or referred to as 'women's work'. For the vast majority of fathers in this study, these tasks did not seem to form part of their conception of the father's role and responsibilities. It has been established that many of these men have had very disrupted relationships as fathers and the omission of these roles may reflect their general absence from their children's lives.

### **The subjective nature of fatherhood**

Furstenberg (1995) suggested that mothers tended to emphasise the importance of nurturing over providing when inner-city working class fathers struggled to provide. It is possible that the fathers in this study also define fathering in terms of a role that they can enact and minimise the aspects of the role that cannot be fulfilled. Both play and physical care are dependent on the father being physically present and having physical contact with their child, both of which are restricted by virtue of their imprisonment. In this study, the strong emphasis placed on communication, encouragement and guidance may therefore reflect the reliance on verbal forms of communication highlighted by Looney's (2001) research.

While providing has long been a traditional role for fathers, few references were made to a providing role within this study. This may be an outcome of long term addiction, imprisonment or relationship breakdown, when their families have found other means of financial support, or prisoners may no longer see themselves as being needed for this role. This may even reflect the level of economic support provided to lone parents highlighted in chapter two, as only one member of the sample was married. However, given that these prisoners currently had no means to provide for their families, a nurturing approach could be seen as a more achievable dimension of the father's role, illustrating how definitions of the father's role are highly subjective and fluid in nature.

### **Gaining social approval from the nurturing father image**

Miles and Huberman (1994) highlight that one of the drawbacks of interviews is that participants can "craft their responses to be amenable to the researcher and to protect their self interests" (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p265). As was explored in the previous chapter, some father claimed high levels of involvement in physical care of their children during times of severe addiction. These claims were in direct contrast to the dominant experience of most prisoners who described how their drug use impeded their involvement as fathers. Other actions that were claimed stood in contrast to prison policy, or appeared to conflict with their circumstances as they described them at the time. Other fathers, who were more secure about their current family relationships, illustrated how their behaviours as involved fathers were so important to them that they attracted teasing from family members or from other prisoners. It was impossible to verify any of these accounts, although some accounts seemed more plausible than others, given their circumstance as they described them.

All of these behaviours were associated with the image of the nurturing father's role. Indeed Doherty et al (1996) suggest that the cultural expectations of how a father enacts his role, will influence the expectations placed on fathers by themselves, and others. It is possible that for some of these fathers, the nurturing father image was evoked as a means of expressing their commitment to their role as a father. For others who provided contradictory accounts, it seems to be evoked as a means of gaining social approval within the interview situation or perhaps as a means of counteracting the stigma of imprisonment. This behaviour reinforces the power of this image is as a cultural reference for contemporary fatherhood.

## **Conclusion**

This study set out to explore the perceptions of a sample of male prisoners who are fathers, in relation to the roles and responsibilities of fatherhood, and to investigate the factors that constrain or enable their involvement as fathers.

In order to achieve the study aims, a range of literature was explored which illustrated the context of contemporary fatherhood in Irish society, the nature of a father's role and responsibilities, and the personal, interpersonal and contextual factors which can influence a father's involvement with his children. Both Irish (O'Mahony, 1997, Looney, 2001) and international literature (Clarke et al, 2005, Ardetti et al, 2005, Nurse 2001, Boswell and Wedge, 2002) on prisoners as fathers was examined, to illustrate the fragile nature of prisoner's relationships as fathers, and to highlight the range of personal and interpersonal factors which can influence a prisoners involvement. Using a qualitative research design, the experiences and perspectives of a ten male prisoners who are fathers held in Mountjoy prison, were gathered using an in-depth, unstructured 'conversational interview approach' (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). These interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analysed using Ritchie et al's (2003) 'thematic framework'. This chapter has explored the relationship between the literature and the findings generated by this study, in order to show how the aims of this study were achieved.

### **The main findings from this study**

Similar to previous Irish studies, (O'Mahony, 1997, Looney, 2001), this study has found that prisoner's relationships as fathers were predominately fragile, with instability in co-partner relationships, and disrupted involvement as a father, commonplace. Unlike previous Irish studies however, this study found that addiction issues dominated most prisoner's experiences of fathering and frequently led to sporadic involvement as a father. Addiction issues were also found to further complicate prisoners co-partnering relationships, and influenced their plans for future involvement as fathers.

### **The importance of the co-parent relationship**

As has been highlighted in studies examining other non-resident and separated fathers (Lunt, 1987, Corcoran, 2005), the extent of conflict or commitment within the co-parent



relationship was an important factor which was found to influence the involvement of the prisoners in this study. This study found that men who felt secure in their co-partner relationship were confident regarding their involvement, whereas men in strained relationships discussed fatherhood in much more uncertain and tentative terms. Similar to previous research (Looney, 2001, Clarke et al, 2005), due to the restrictions of the prison environment, the prisoners in this study were particularly dependent on partners and co-parents to facilitate their involvement with their children, and therefore were highly vulnerable to loss of contact in the event of conflict within the co-partner relationship. .

### **Certainty versus ambivalence about fatherhood**

Discussion of the nature of commitment in Chapter 2, illustrated the costs and benefits associated with involvement as a father. In this study it was found that prisoners who were more secure about their future involvement as fathers, seemed to perceive family life as a source of support in prison, and as a source of focus towards drug rehabilitation. These men also made more frequent references of pride as a father, and placed more emphasis on the benefits of their role as a father.

Other men, who felt less certain of their involvement as fathers, illustrated more diverse, complex and ambivalent views in relation to their role as a father. Diversity was apparent in the range of emotional reactions to addiction and ‘neglectful’ fatherhood, with some men highly distressed about the impact of their addiction and imprisonment on their children, while others were more withdrawn and unemotional. Diversity was also seen in the way that some men discouraged contact with their children, while others endured stressful prison visits to maintain contact. Ambivalence emerged in the way that some prisoners referred to their role as a source of simultaneous pleasure and distress, and in relation to dual feelings of anxiety and complacency regarding addiction and fathering. Ambivalence was also seen when prisoners in strained relationships discouraged visits to protect both themselves, and their children from distress. This diversity and ambivalence, highlights some of the demands that can be associated with the fathers role. Furthermore this illustrates the complex range of feelings associated with fatherhood within strained relationships, which were further complicated by uncertainty about involvement, and the restrictions of imprisonment.

### **Tensions in the father's role for prisoners**

The CSER (2002) study highlighted how a loss of parental authority in the relationships with their children was reported by imprisoned parents. In this study, although some men discussed their role as a father in very positive terms, across the range of prisoners it seemed that the stigma of imprisonment may be difficult to reconcile with the traditional authority and status associated with the role of father. This may explain why the deception of young children regarding their father's imprisonment was so common in this and previous Irish studies (Looney, 2001, CSER, 2002). Similar to the discomfort and shame experienced by prisoners in Nurse's (2001) study, visits raised the risk of 'exposure' of prisoner status. This study found that continuing the relationship with an older child required careful management to avoid rejection and a loss of status once aware of their fathers prisoner status. These tensions illustrate some of the additional costs of commitment for prisoners who have older children or who are serving long term sentences.

### **The dominance of the 'nurturing' father model**

One of the preoccupations in the fatherhood literature has been the emergence of the nurturing father model in response to changing social and economic conditions in Western society (Pleck, 1987, McKeown, 1998, Marsiglio, 1995). It has been suggested that, as the social expectations for fathers increase, those men who fail to meet these expectations may experience increased feelings of failure, guilt and shame, which can exacerbate psychological distress and lead to increased drug use (McMahon and Rounsaville, (2002). This concern regarding psychological distress could be easily applied to drug using and non-drug using prisoners, as all are limited in how they can enact their role as fathers.

In this study it was clear that the 'nurturing' father's role was widely perceived as a cultural ideal for fatherhood, in references to how a father should behave, in terms of negative relationships with their own fathers, and in the way this role was used to attain status within the interview. Paradoxically, these prisoners also referred to periods of sporadic involvement and previous absence through addiction. However, it was also found that generally prisoners emphasised the dimensions of the role they could fulfil, and minimised the dimensions of the role that could not be enacted from the confines of imprisonment. This suggests that the various dimensions that constitute the 'roles and responsibilities of fatherhood', are of a highly subjective and fluid nature. While the changing expectations of fathers, may not in themselves provide an additional source of distress, it seems from the

ambivalence expressed by many prisoners in the study, that the difficulties they experienced in maintaining their relationships as fathers were distressing.

It seems clear that for some men, their role as a father was a potential source of support during imprisonment, while for others, it was a source of co-existing negative and positive emotions, which could be exacerbated by the stress of poor visiting conditions. Many of the prisoners in this study experienced a range of issues which had the potential to undermine their involvement as fathers, in terms of co-parent conflict, long term addiction, and multiple periods of imprisonment. Given the low levels of marriage found among this sample, and the fragile position of unmarried fathers in relation to their parental rights explored in chapter two, it appears that many of the prisoners interviewed could be considered highly vulnerable in relation to their position as fathers. While McKeown (2000) has suggested that unmarried non-resident fathers are one of the most vulnerable groups of fathers in Irish society, it seems from this study that unmarried, prisoner fathers are more vulnerable still.

### **The limitations of this study**

One of the main limitations of this study was the difficulty in securing the participation of prisoners who were non-drug users. The low representation of non-drug users in the sample however, reflects the particular characteristics of the research site. As was highlighted in Chapter four, Mounjoy prison holds the highest number of methadone receiving prisoners within the Irish Prison service (IPS, 2005), and has attracted considerable controversy for the level of illicit drug use (Brady, 2007, Mountjoy Visiting Committee Annual Report, 2007). Indeed, it is possible if this study had been carried out in a different prison, that addiction may not have emerged to such a significant degree. However, this study is still valid when considered that it reflects some of the experiences of a sample of men held in Mountjoy prison, the majority of which were drug users.

It was originally envisaged that the partners of prisoners be included in this study to provide a multi-dimensional view of the prisoners experiences as a father. Efforts to secure the participation of partners of prisoners in either intact or separated relationships proved fruitless. While contact details for two partners within intact relationships were secured, these failed to lead to interviews. The difficulties of securing the participation of partners

has been noted in other studies (Day et al, 2005). The main recruitment method in Boswell and Wedge's (2002) study involved approaching partners who visited the prison, which led to contact with the prisoner. However this method raised additional difficulties by introducing a bias in the sample towards prisoners who were within intact relationships (Boswell and Wedge, 2002). The exclusion of partners from this study reflects the more common experience of separation and relationship breakdown found among the study sample.

While the 'conversational partnership approach' was useful for encouraging the depth and detail required from participants, the relatively unique structure of each interview created difficulties in the analysis process. Were a more structured approach used, the data produced would have been more easily compared against other interviews. As was described in chapter four, the analysis process was lengthy and laborious as a result of the highly unstructured nature of the interview approach, and due to the extent of information generated. However these difficulties were overcome by the imposition of themes in order to compile Ritchie et al's (2003) 'thematic framework'.

## Appendix A: Profile, status and significant features of Irish prisons

	<b>Status of Prison. Age and Gender and category of prisoners held.</b>	<b>In-Cell Sanitation</b>	<b>Total receiving Methadone in 2005<sup>8</sup></b>	<b>Stated measures to address legal and illegal drug use.</b>	<b>Supports and special features<sup>9</sup></b>
<b>Mountjoy prison Male</b>	<p>Closed, medium security prison</p> <p>Main committal prison for State for males aged 18+ serving sentences up to life</p> <p><b>Capacity:- 480</b></p> <p><b>Average daily population in 2005:- 488</b></p>	<p>Not in main prison building.</p> <p>Available in medical unit.</p>	<p>590 (includes medical unit)</p> <p>210 average daily</p>	<p>Medical Unit drug free with urine testing.</p> <p>Drug detox and Addiction support services.</p> <p>CCTV, nominated visitor arrangement, perimeter security</p>	<p>Visitors Centre with play facilities information and refreshments.</p> <p>30% of population participated in education. Rehabilitation programmes and vocational training available.</p> <p>Homelessness prevention support services.</p>
<b>Dochas</b>	<p>Closed, medium security prison</p> <p>Main female committal prison in state for females holding remand (pre-trial), sentenced and immigration prisoners</p> <p><b>Capacity:- 85</b></p> <p><b>Average daily population in 2005:- 87</b></p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>228</p>	<p>Drug free areas.</p> <p>Range of addiction support services</p>	<p>Visitors centre with play area.</p> <p>52% of population participated in education.</p>

<sup>8 8</sup> All figures for prisoners receiving methadone maintenance are taken from the Central Treatment Statistics on p 28 of the 2005 Irish Prison Service Annual Report apart from figures for Limerick and St Patricks which have been taken from the individual profile of the prisons. These latter figures differ significantly from the Central Treatment Statistics provided in the 2004 and 2005 IPS Annual reports

<sup>9</sup> Educational figures provided refer to the number of prisoners who participate for 10 hours or more in educational activities during 2005.

<b>St Patrick's Institution</b>	<p>Closed, medium security 'place of detention'.</p> <p>Committal institution for male juveniles aged Between 16 – 21 years.</p> <p><b>Capacity:- 217</b></p> <p><b>Average daily population in 2005:- 187</b></p>		3	<p>Screened visits,. No physical contact on visits, random searches.</p> <p>Detox and limited Addiction support</p>	<p>25% of population participated in education.</p> <p>Rehabilitation and vocational training available.</p>
<b>Training Unit</b>	<p>Semi-open, low security prison for males aged 18+ serving sentences up to life.</p> <p>Transfer only. Pre-release for long term sentences</p> <p><b>Capacity:- 96</b></p> <p><b>Average daily population in 2005:- 93</b></p>	Yes	Info not available	<p>Totally drug free</p> <p>Random Urine-testing</p>	<p>21% of population participation in education.</p> <p>Rehabilitation and vocational training available.</p>
<b>Limerick</b>	<p>Closed, medium security committal prison for males and females from age 17 + serving sentences up to life.</p> <p>Males prisoners committed from Limerick, Tipperary and Clare. Females prisoners committed from Munster area.</p> <p><b>Capacity:- 92 male, 20 female</b></p> <p><b>Average daily population in 2005:- 253 male, 15 female</b></p>	<p>In some areas, new block with in-cell sanitation for 100 prisoners completed in 2004.</p>	105	<p>Random searches, screened visits, random urine testing, monitored phone calls.</p>	<p>New visitors waiting area.</p> <p>35% of population participated in education.</p>

<b>Cloverhill</b>	<p>Medium security prison for remand (re-trial) males age 18+</p> <p>Also hold prisoners detained for ‘immigration’ purposes.</p> <p><b>Capacity:-</b> 433</p> <p><b>Average daily population in 2005:-</b> 391</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>571</p> <p>80 average daily</p>	<p>Screened visits. X-ray machine. Random searches.</p>	<p>No educational / rehabilitation programmes offered</p>
<b>Cork</b>	<p>Closed, medium security committal prison for Males aged 17+ from Cork, Kerry and Waterford. Serving sentences up to life sentences.</p> <p><b>Capacity:-</b></p> <p><b>Average daily population in 2005:-</b></p>	<p>None in A, B and C Divisions (2004)</p>	<p>Not available</p>	<p>No physical contact on visits.</p> <p>Addiction counselling</p>	<p>31% of population participated in education. Vocational training available.</p>
<b>Arbour Hill</b>	<p>Closed medium security males aged 18+ serving sentences of 2 years and over. Transfer only Holds ‘sex-offender’ prisoners.</p> <p><b>Capacity:-</b> 140</p> <p><b>Average daily population in 2005:-</b> 138</p>	<p>Yes – all cells</p>	<p>0</p>	<p>Random urine testing</p>	<p>47% of population participation in Education.</p> <p>Rehabilitation programmes and Vocational training available.</p>

<b>Wheatfield Midlands</b>	Closed medium security prison for Males aged 18+.  <b>Capacity:- 373</b>  <b>Average daily population in 2005:- 360</b>	Yes	162		42% of population participated in education. Rehabilitation programmes and vocational training available.
<b>Portlaoise</b>	High security, closed prison for males aged 18+. Committals of 'Subversive prisoners' and transfers from other prisons.  <b>Capacity:- 188</b>  <b>Average daily population in 2005:- 121</b>	No	2		New visitor 'waiting and search' area.  17% of population participated in education. Rehabilitation programmes and vocational training available.
<b>Castlereagh</b>	Committal prison for male aged 17+ from Connacht, Longford, Cavan, Donegal. Mixed medium and low security accommodation.  <b>Capacity:- 206</b>  <b>Average daily population in 2005:- 210</b>	Yes	Info not available	Urine sampling Detox prog	29% of population participated in Education. Rehabilitation programmes and vocational training available
<b>Loughlan House</b>	Open centre for males age 18+ Transfer only.  <b>Capacity:- 97</b>  <b>Average daily population in 2005:- 74</b>	Yes	Info not available.	'Aspires to drug free status'. Random urine testing. Addiction counselling	50% of population participated in education. Rehabilitation programmes and vocational training available.



<b>Sheldon Abbey</b>	Open centre for Males aged 19+. Transfer only Pre-release for long-term prisoners.  <b>Capacity:- 56</b>  <b>Average daily population in 2005:- 51</b>	Yes	Info not available.	Random urine testing. Random searches	55% of population participated in education. Rehabilitation programmes and vocational training available.
<b>Midlands</b>	Closed, medium security prison for males aged 18+ Serving up to life sentences.  <b>Capacity:- 449</b>  <b>Average daily population in 2005:- 426</b>	Yes	6	Voluntary urine sampling, screened visits. Post-visit searches. Drug carrying visitors barred	14% of population participated in education.  Rehabilitation programmes and vocational training.

## Appendix B : Letter of Introduction to Prisoners

Date

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Jane McGrath. I am a research student with the Waterford Institute of Technology and I am researching 'Fathering from Prison'. I am interested in talking to male Prisoners about their attitudes, experiences and feelings about being fathers while being in Prison. This is to gain a better understanding of the Prison experience of men as fathers.

At this stage I am looking for volunteers to take part in these interviews. I will need to interview each Prisoner only once. This research is independent of the Prison Service and if you take part your sentence will NOT be affected in any way. Even if you agree to take part in the research, you are free to withdraw at any time.

Personal information and experiences told to me in the research process will be treated as confidential. Any names used in the end report will be false and you will not be identified in any way. Only I as researcher will have access to the research material.

Your support for this research project would be greatly appreciated. The interview time will be set up to suit you (within the limitations of the Prison timetable). If you are interested in taking part but need further information then please contact.....

Yours sincerely

Jane McGrath

## Appendix C : Interviewee consent form

I.....agree to take part in the research project 'Fathering from Prison'. I understand what the research is about and what the information will be used for. Jane McGrath has fully explained to me the aims and purpose of the research.

I consent to taking part in a research interview and for this interview to be taped. It has been explained to me the reasons for taping the interview and that these tapes will be destroyed upon completion of the research. It has also been clearly explained to me that my name will never appear as having taken part in this research.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time and that participation is entirely voluntary.

Participant\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix D : Interview Topic guide**

**Personal details** – age, area of origin, work experience.

### **Family Details**

Ages / Gender of children

Main carer now

Experience of living as a family prior to sentence

### **Sentencing history**

Age when you first went to prison

Current sentence length and period spent in prison

Length and number of previous sentences.

### **Experience of early fatherhood**

Age at first becoming a father

How they felt at the thought of becoming a father

Experience of birth

Experience of early fatherhood (what was it like having the baby)

### **Experience of contact with children**

Do they keep in contact with child

Form and frequency of contact with children

How often and in what form (ie letter, visits / temporary release)

Experience of contact / visiting experience – what's positive / difficult about contact.

### **Experience of supports as father in prison**

Extent / nature of discussion of family issues with prison staff ie psychologist, prison officers, others.

Supports received from prison staff regarding family issues.

Extent / nature of discussion of family issues with other prisoners

### **Addiction history / status**

Current use of drugs

Nature of drug use (type of drugs used)

Length of addiction

Experience of addiction support in prison

Impact of addiction on relationship with child / partner

### **Childs awareness of their imprisonment**

How were they informed

Childs reaction to this

Their feelings / thoughts about child's awareness

How their imprisonment has affected the relationship with their child

### **Perceptions of the fathers role and responsibilities**

What is the most important part of being a father?

Positive experiences of being a father - what was positive about it.

Negative experiences of being a father -what was difficult about it.

What you could do better as a father / What would support you to be a better father?

**Perception of their relationship with their own father**

The nature of their relationship as a child / currently .

What did he do for a living

Did he ever spend time in prison? – when / their awareness at the time.

What they would do differently from him in being a father themselves

What they would do the same as him in being a father

**Perception of the relationship with the mother of their children**

How they met

How they would describe their relationship now

Extent / nature of contact at present

If separated what lead to separation

How their relationship impacts on his relationship with the children

**Future**

Hopes for the future generally and as a father

**Reflection on the interview process**

What was it like talking about being a father and particularly with a woman

## Appendix E : Extract from ‘thematic framework’

### Impact of addiction on father 1

Interview 10	Elemnts / diensions		Elemnts / dimnsions		Elets / dimensions
<p><b>10 Location, Personal details &amp; criminal history</b></p> <p><b>29</b> boy age 8 girl age 4 Main Prison</p> <p>too wild since childhood age 6/7. Sought out prison – St Pats since 15.. ‘lifer’ (main prison – more time in than out). Never worked As source of pride while young (worst joyrider, thought this is it) Serving 10 yr sentence</p>	<p><b>29</b> boy age 8 girl age 4 Main Prison</p> <p><i>Problematic behave in childhood</i> <i>Wanted &amp; expected to go to prison</i> <i>Early imprisonment</i> <i>Multiple sentences</i></p> <p><i>No work exp</i> <i>Crime as source of self esteem / ambition</i> <i>Long term sentence</i></p>	<p>Age Gender &amp; ages of children Efforts to Rehab / location</p> <p>Routes into crime / self image</p> <p>Routes into crime / self image Frequency of sentences Factors against rehab Criminal history</p> <p>Routes into crime</p> <p>Self image</p> <p>Criminal history</p>	<p><b>10 Rel with ptr:-</b>, Pregnant with 1<sup>st</sup> child ‘few months’ into rel. H addict also p2. stood by him after 3yr sentence (son 2.1/2) Together long term (11 years). Lived together in-between sentences. ‘officially’ together but ambiguous – she’s been unfaithful p17, he stays for kids &amp; wont discuss future p17Visits regular with son. Ptr controls visits p18 &amp; access to daughter (another carer) p17 , lost dtr thro addiction p17. ptrs failures as mother p17 (son not happy with her p18). deception re addiction p23 infl on his relapse. Mix feengs for ptr love,respectp17</p>	<p><i>Early preg in rel</i> <i>Parter addict history</i> <i>Early loyalty</i></p> <p><i>Stayed together long term</i> <i>Lived as family</i></p> <p><i>Ambiguous future</i></p> <p><i>Disloyal</i> <i>Staying 4 kids</i> <i>Not communicating re future</i></p> <p><i>Regular visits</i> <i>Partner controls visits</i> <i>Partner control affects rel with daughter</i> <i>Partner lost dter thro addiction</i> <i>No respect as mother</i> <i>Lies re addiction</i> <i>Blamed for relapse</i> <i>Love / hatred</i></p>	<p><b>10 Rel with ptr:-</b>, Development of rel</p> <p>Role in addiction Feelings towards partner</p> <p>Relationship stability Relationship stability / commitment to rel / Relationship stability</p> <p>Feelings towards partner Sacrifices as father Indicators of stability</p> <p>Nature of contact Feelings towards partner / control of access to child Feelings toward ptr Feelings toward ptr Feelings toward ptr Role in addiction / feelings toward ptr</p> <p>Feelings toward ptr</p>

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