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Family Stories and Correctional Statistics in Context

Eljdupovic, G. & Bromwich, R. J. (Eds.). (2013). *Incarcerated Mothers: Oppression and Resistance*. Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press.

The social scientific academic community remains captivated by incarcerated women and their families. For the past decade, publications tackling these issues proliferate bookshelves and search engines. This is not altogether surprising, given the shocking rise of women entering and exiting correctional institutions across the globe. In the text under consideration, Derkzen and Taylor announce a Correctional Service of Canada statistic that „The number of incarcerated in Canada has increased by 41 percent since 2002–2003” (p. 29). Walsh and Crough also note that „Up to 80 percent of incarcerated women in Canada are mothers” in the same edited volume (p. 160). Alarming statistics like these provide a context for two important and relatively neglected themes developed in Eljdupovic and Bromich’s edited text, *Incarcerated Mothers: Oppression and Resistance*. First, the work provides a contextual and feminist discussion of the meaning of motherhood in conjunction with incarceration. Second, the editors include selections that provide a true comparative analytic element to this analysis. Overall, this text begins a necessary conversation about the nuances of and challenges faced by incarcerated and formally incarcerated mothers.

This collection of essays begins by framing motherhood’s historically problematic definition before delving into the complications of incarcerative motherhood. The editors deftly take up the feminist viewpoint „that mothering is not just a source of oppression and imposed identity, but it is also a political identity...” (p. 5), and organize the selected essays concerning motherhood behind bars according to this assumption. Several of the included essays analyze the intersection of motherhood and incarceration in Canada, an admittedly neglected area of inquiry (p. 10). While this is one of most enduring and unique contributions of this work, it is hardly its sole consideration. Many of the other essays take the reader beyond the

Canadian borders to explore limiting policies and promising programmatic initiatives in global locales such as India, France, Australia, Portugal and the United States. Notable articles include an analysis of the place of motherhood in India and that society's reaction to incarcerated mothers (p. 93) as well as the intricacies of French policy toward mothers residing with their children in correctional institutions (p. 70). Readers will undoubtedly find the variety and scope of comparative elements refreshing and a very helpful addition to existing literature, as did I.

The authors of the essay in this collection are mostly quite effective at integrating elements of intersectionality into their analyses. Feminist and criminological scholars have long understood the importance of the way a person's status and social location contributes to a life's trajectory, but this perspective is not altogether recognized in other social science disciplines. Based on the choice of essays, one of the editors' primary goals of the text is to advance the broad field of „motherhood studies”, which includes elements from psychology and even health sciences, by firmly situating marginalized populations, like Aboriginal Canadians, within the broader context of institutionalized mothers. Motherhood means different things in different contexts and to different people, and the normative expectations of this role do not sometimes match up with the reality of mothering from a place of disadvantage, as Eljdupovic eloquently describes (p. 173). Other selections in the text offer more nuanced, but no less effective, descriptions of marginalized persons and their experiences of incarceration.

The collection is, as befits a work of feminist scholarship, not without an agenda of its own. The contributors to the text clearly support the development and maintenance of more responsive programming for incarcerated mothers. Moreover, the editors hint that Canada is on the cusp of pivotal criminal justice change (p. 20). This provides a counterpoint to a major theme of the majority of the selected essays, the glaring shortcomings in systems of institutional justice around the globe. Overall, the book highlights the disparity between intention and reality, and between past successes, future challenges and present failures, when it comes to incarcerativemothering program design and implementation. A national Canadian report, *Creating Choices: The Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Woman*, factored prominently in several essays as an indicator of good intentions. In spite of the informed recommendations set forth in its pages, beloved Canadian programs for incarcerated women do disappear—sometimes without any warning. Good legislative recommendations exist and could benefit incarcerated mothers if only resources exist to maintain them. Programs that were created and later dissolved by various government oversight agencies, as well as prisoner-led initiatives such as California's Mother's Alliance at Valley State Prison for Women (p. 194) find their way onto the pages of this volume. Notably, the

text sparks the imagination about the possibilities and potential challenges of allowing mothers to maintain custody of their children during their incarceration. A number of the essays consider this controversial aspect from a variety of different lenses, including a global and multicultural perspective. In short, the authors of this text suggest that a more permeable prison experience is possible and essential for maintaining familial relationships.

Contributors to *Incarcerated Mothers* employ an array of data collection methods in their respective projects, namely interviews and secondary data/policy analysis. There are a few primary research studies included, but many of the selections in this text review existing data, taking a fresh look at often troubling statistics and situations, as in the Eljdupovic et al. piece on the historic plight of Aboriginal women in Canadian prisons (p. 43). However, the relatively light inclusion of pure research studies in this text suggests the difficulties for social scientists seeking to conduct research behind prison walls. Specifically, researchers seeking to collect data behind prison walls face sometimes insurmountable challenges and bureaucratic hurdles. For instance, Herzog-Evans punctuates this cautionary tale with her retelling of the difficulties she encountered when embarking on an original research project in a French prison, which she subsequently aborted after being refused access (p. 70). Even when researchers can collect data in correctional institutions, entry is infrequent and often spans years, as in the case of Da Cunha and Granja's fieldwork project with women in Portuguese prisons (p. 106).

The second part of the text focuses on politics and incarceration, mainly through ethnographic first-person accounts, observations, and photographic data. Using women's voices throughout this portion of the text lends a heightened legitimacy, and essentially adds a human face to the stark policy-laden selections in the first part of the text. Lamentations over lost programs for women in prison also gain a sense of urgency when participants can articulate, as Kelly did in Alison's selection, „It was certainly not the cool unit but a place where I could face the emotions tied to my own mothering and move through a process of healing and cleansing...this opportunity to be with the babies peeled a layer of my hardened heart...” (p. 146). Without these narratives, this text would feel emptier and perhaps much colder.

The text concludes with Poe's biographical analysis of Diane Wilson, noted ecological activist, and her global generational body of work. In this essay, the author intended to explore Ms. Wilson's dual identities of mother and activist, ultimately making a case for an updated definition of motherhood, including both of the former. Despite the arresting prose and important biographical information, I am unsure whether the author successfully met her stated goal. To present a truly convincing argument regarding the subject's true feelings on motherhood, the author needed to present more personal first-person data, possibly interview data.

As an American reader, this book introduced me to the eye-opening treatment, sentencing disparities, and unique prison experiences of Canadian Aboriginal women. Eljdupovic et al. effectively conveyed the seriousness of the situation in their synopsis of Section 718.2(e) of the *Criminal Code of Canada* which requires judges to consider the circumstances and Aboriginal heritage of these defendants who appear before them in court (p. 48). Upon reflection, international readers encountering this situation for the first time might benefit from a brief, but comprehensive, historical/socio-political overview. However, background information of this sort is likely beyond the scope of the present work.

Also, the text's singular focus on the unequivocally straight and female motherhood experience leaves the reader wondering about the alternative conceptions and expressions of motherhood behind prison walls. Acknowledgement or coverage of the GLBT parenting experience is another sorely neglected topic in correctional institutions and its intersection with „motherhood” and parenting. Considering the mothering identity of these groups is necessary and a truly neglected issue here and elsewhere in the literature.

This book is clearly written with a Canadian public policy bent, but it is relevant for a range of international scholars, including criminal justice, psychology, and women's and gender studies. It provides context and a comparative element in which to focus future inquiry. Overall, Incarcerated Mothers is an excellent companion piece to the larger and emerging body of work on family relations, particularly motherhood, and incarcerated populations.