

# Stories of the “good father”: The role of fatherhood among incarcerated men in Mexico

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## Abstract

This study examines the role of fatherhood for incarcerated men in Mexico, based on repeated life-story interviews with twelve men. We distinguish between their descriptions of fatherhood in the past and present and how they imagine the future, and explore how fathers describe their relationship with their children. The incarcerated men idealize the past with their children or tell stories of how they have changed from being “bad” to “good” fathers. They emphasize how they are still able to protect and educate their children from prison, reflecting widespread values of fatherhood. They admit that fathering while incarcerated is difficult and hope that things will be better in the future. In line with previous research on fathers in prison, we argue that storytelling of being “good fathers” is a way of projecting “normalcy”, using one of the few gendered resources available, and is an escape from the harsh realities of prison life. Following insights from narrative criminology and desistance studies, we further argue that their stories of fatherhood can be a resource for reintegration into society.

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Finally, we suggest that inmates' emphasis on involved fatherhood might reflect diffusing narratives, ideals, and norms of parenting.

### **Keywords**

fatherhood, fathering, Latin-America, life-story, narrative, prison

## **Introduction**

Francisco (40) was convicted of murder. He lost custody over his only child and was denied the right to approach or contact him. He remembered the good times he had had with his son before they were separated, and he dreamed of a happy reunion with him at some point in the future. Francisco also wanted to start a family with his new girlfriend. When asked why it was so important to him to be a father, he responded: "I want to form a family, I have a lot of dreams (...) The things I did not have as a child, I want to create it with someone who loves me." Although Francisco had no contact with his son, fatherhood was still very important to him. For the incarcerated Mexican fathers in this study, fatherhood was not related to the everyday practical concerns of parenting, but was nonetheless a prevailing topic in their life-stories. Fatherhood was key to how they remembered their past and to who they wanted to be, and featured heavily in their prospected hopes for the future.

Fatherhood and paternal identities may differ significantly (Collier and Sheldon, 2008; Dermott, 2008), but are of great importance in most societies (LaRossa, 1997). Although second to the role of motherhood and maternal identities (Umamaheswar, 2013), they are decisive to the understanding that many men have of themselves and are crucial to the organization and reproduction of most cultures. Fatherhood is fragmented, situational and in flux, but there are still historical tendencies and dominances. In many Western societies, for example, the good provider has been the ideal of fatherhood, but more recently, this has been challenged by more emotionally involved paternal identities (Lamb, 1987, Pleck, 1987). Fatherhood is closely connected to masculinity, and in hegemonic masculinity, being a good father is a crucial part of being a good man (Connell, 1995). In more marginalized forms of masculinity often associated with incarcerated men, such as protest (Connell, 1995), oppositional (Messerschmidt, 1994) or street (Mullins, 2006) masculinities, fatherhood has usually been ascribed a less central role.

We study how twelve incarcerated Mexican men talk about their children. Distinguishing between their past, present and future as fathers, we explore the role fatherhood plays in their lives and in their life-stories. Our data indicate a certain discrepancy between the two. Most of the incarcerated fathers had little daily contact with their children, both while in prison as well as before incarceration, but they nevertheless spoke of them with great emotional commitment.

Based on insights from narrative criminology (Fleetwood et al., 2019; Presser and Sandberg, 2015), we argue that stories of fatherhood are of great importance even when they do not reflect the lives lived. Stories of fatherhood are a way of “doing normalcy” and offer an opportunity for crafting compelling narratives of change. Similar results have been demonstrated elsewhere (e.g. Cunico et al., 2020; Chui, 2016; Maruna, 2001; Turner, 2017; Walker, 2010). Our study however, explores the life-stories of incarcerated Mexican men, about whom little is known. We also discuss how their stories of fatherhood reflect and relate to new and widespread ideals of involved fatherhood.

### **Involved fatherhood in Mexico**

Studies of fatherhood have often emphasized the difference between paternal norms and ideals in different historical periods or eras. Lamb (1987) for example, distinguishes between different fatherhood paradigms, such as the moral teacher, breadwinner, sex-role model and the nurturing father. Similarly, Pleck (1987) differentiates between the father as distant breadwinner or sex-role model and the involved father. In contemporary fatherhood research, there is often an implicit or explicit assumption of a change from “old” to “new” fathers. The intimate (Dermott, 2008), nurturing (Lamb, 1987) or involved (Pleck, 1987) father is frequently associated with new trends of fatherhood, and these new fatherhood practices and narratives are often associated with middle-class, Western societies. However, describing contemporary fatherhood as dominated by one paradigm “does not accurately capture the complexity of fathering” (Williams, 2008). Collier and Sheldon (2008) have characterized contemporary fatherhood as fragmented, and Dermott (2008) sees it as a “collection of fatherhoods” rather than a hegemony.

In Latin America, traditionally associated with macho identities (Ingoldsby, 1991), ideals of involved fatherhood have had some influence. Schmuckler (1996) has described the “crisis” of the model patriarchal family in Latin America as the democratization of family relations. Since the 1980s, men in Latin America have increasingly participated more in the raising of children (Fuller, 2000). As women achieve higher levels of education and participation in the labor market, there has been a transformation in the family model. This is associated with a change from the model of “families with a man as provider” to that of “double-income families” (Arriagada, 2007). Even though female participation in paid labor is on the rise, domestic and household responsibilities remain predominantly in the hands of women. Despite increasing pressure on men to participate in housework, changes are slow (Jelin, 1998, 2005).

With regard to Mexico, the demographic, economic, and socio-cultural transformations of the last three decades have contributed to important family transitions, that is, to changes in family dynamics (Ariza and Oliveira, 2001). Changes in family relationships can, for example, be seen in difference between generations. In a study of men from the lower classes in Mexico City, Gutmann (2002) points

out that older men insisted that they needed to maintain a distance from their wives and children in order to maintain authority over them. This was not the case for younger men. He also noted that for older men and women, the term “macho” carried the positive connotation of a man who supported his family financially, while for younger men the word was an insult. Being a father, however, still seems to imply complying with the obligation to support the family and, therefore, work time is prioritized over family life (Rojas, 2008: 208). In fact, the role of provider continues to be a stable element in Mexican conceptions of masculinity (García and Oliviera, 1994). Being a provider has an important symbolic meaning for men related to masculine power, the notion of protection, responsibility, and sense of honour (García and Oliviera, 2006).

Various studies confirm transformations in the role of fathers in Mexico, most importantly their greater emotional involvement with their children (e.g. de Keijzer, 2000; Rojas, 2008). Fatherhood also seems to be crucial for their masculinity. Being a reliable and committed father was as important to being a man as most other components of masculinity, including sexual potency (Gutmann, 1998). This coincides with studies of middle-class men in Mexico carried out by Vivas (1993, 1996) in which men mainly described paternity in terms of assuming the role of trainer or guide, and less so as the classical authority. Indeed, most defined their masculinity in terms of their active role as parents, which included attention and care, support for schoolwork and participation in play and games (Rojas, 2008). In sum, while practices and narratives of involved fatherhood are less prevalent in Mexico and Latin American than in the US and Europe, they seem to have had some impact. Until now, however, there has been little available information on how this is reflected in the Latin American or Mexican prison population.

## **The Mexican prison context**

The crime rate in Mexico increased from 30,535 cases per 100,000 inhabitants in 2010 to 37,807 in 2018.<sup>1</sup> Theft on the street experienced the greatest increase from a rate of 7,413 in 2010 to 10,775 in 2018 (Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública (ENVIPE), 2019). There is a total of 188,262 prisoners housed in 267 state penitentiaries (with capacity for 170,772): 92 for men, 17 for women, 157 mixed, and a high-security center for high-impact crimes (Censo Nacional de Gobierno, Seguridad Pública y Sistema Penitenciario Estatales (CNGSPSPE), 2017). Of the total prison population, 95% are men and 5% are women; 111,214 (59%) have some occupational activity; 71,779 (38%) study or train and 16,073 (9%) carry out another type of activity while imprisoned (CNGSPSPE, 2017: 16). Mexico has an incarceration rate of 173 per 100,000 inhabitants, which in North America, is closer to Canada (114) than to the US (693). In Latin America, Mexico also has a moderate incarceration rate, compared, for example, to El Salvador (590), Brazil (357) or Uruguay (337).<sup>2</sup>

This study was conducted in a medium-security prison in Mexico City for those convicted of common (non-federal) crimes. The city's prison system has 13

penitentiary centers: 11 medium-security, 1 high-security module, 1 psychiatric center, and an open low-security institution (“Halfway House”). The total prison population is 26,128 and the installed capacity is 27,549.<sup>3</sup> 70.4% of prisoners had financial dependents at the time of arrest and 64.1% had children who were minors (Encuesta Nacional de Población Privada de la Libertad (ENPOL), 2016). The Mexico City prison population shares many characteristics with prison populations elsewhere (relatively young, low education levels, marginalized backgrounds, etc.), but stands out in terms of crimes committed. Many were arrested for crimes committed on the street (e.g. 41% for robbery, 7% for drug dealing CNGSPSPE, 2017: 17), and were mostly arrested for a crime involving less than 100 dollars. Crimes of poverty (e.g. minor robberies) tend to get relatively long sentences in Mexico (Bergman et al., 2014).

Fathers do not have the right to live with their young children, as opposed to mothers who can live with children until they are 3 years old (art. 36 - LNEP, 2016). In 2016, there were 618 minors living with their mothers in state prisons (41% were under the age of one). Only 19 of the 174 female and mixed state prison establishments reported having nurseries and only 11% of prison institutions have spaces suitable for minors (CNGSPSPE, 2017: 34). Intra-prison visits with minors are not available for fathers whose partners and young children are also in prison, and it is rare to find minors visiting parents in prison, especially fathers. Fathers are not particularly well regarded or expected to exercise their fatherhood in prison. They usually depend on their families to fulfil this role.

## **Narrative criminology and fatherhood in prison**

A study of men in the UK concludes that “the nature of their role as fathers was not a matter of choice – that is, to be a ‘breadwinner’ or an ‘involved’ father – but was, instead, broadly shaped by circumstances which they saw as beyond their control” (Williams, 2008: 490). This observation is even more applicable to marginalized and lower-class men in Mexico – and especially to men in prison. The lack of fathering experience and the structural limitations due to incarceration, might lead some to dismiss narratives of involved fatherhood as “mere talk”, especially coming from individuals often viewed with great skepticism.

Narrative criminology challenges such simplistic dismissals of stories (Fleetwood et al., 2019; Presser and Sandberg, 2015). As storytellers in general (Frank, 2010; Polletta, 2006), incarcerated individuals have a broad repertoire of stories that play out differently, depending on storytelling contexts (Brookman, 2015; Sandberg et al., 2015; see also Barrera, 2019). This might invite criticism of inmates “just trying to get their sentence reduced” or “appearing as nice people in the interview”. All stories however, even contradictory ones or flat out lies, can reveal important features of individuals, social contexts, and cultures (Sandberg, 2010). Similarly, prison studies show that stories of fatherhood, may be helpful generative pursuits for desistance from crime (Maruna, 2001) that can function as fulfilment, restitution, legitimacy, and therapy for incarcerated fathers (Walker,

2010). Turner (2017: 45) for example argues that fatherhood for incarcerated men is a “catalyst for carefully thinking about the future”, and “creating a motivation for desistance”.

The literature on fatherhood in prison in the US and Europe is extensive and a full review is beyond the scope of this paper (see e.g. Arditti, 2012: Chapter 4, Turner, 2017). Fatherhood is frequently seen within the context of prison masculinities (Maycock and Hunt, 2018), often with an emphasis on how the practical limitations to exercising fatherhood influence the construction of identity while incarcerated (see Bartlett and Eriksson, 2019; Tasca et al., 2016), on how contact between children and imprisoned fathers impacts their relationship following release (Lansky et al., 2016) or on the role of fatherhood parenting programs (Buston, 2018; Curtis, 2018). There has also been a broad emphasis on the exercise of fatherhood identities in prison. Meek (2011) found that fatherhood was an important identity for incarcerated men and argued that fatherhood could compensate the loss of masculine identity following incarceration. Similarly, Ugelvik (2014) found that imprisonment inspired “narrative problem-solving strategies”, where incarcerated men repositioned themselves as real men and good fathers. Drawing upon insights from the latter two studies, Chui (2016: 75) argues that there “may be elements in prison conducive to the restoration of fatherhood identity afterwards”.

Easterling et al. (2019: 535) call for more research into incarcerated fathers’ “ambiguous loss”, especially the contours and possibility of an “identity threat concerning fatherhood on account of their incarceration”. To date, motherhood has received far more attention than fatherhood in prison studies, and there are few studies on the role of fatherhood among incarcerated men in Latin America (see Cúnico et al., 2018, 2020; Miranda and Granato, 2016; Techera et al., 2012). Furthermore, none of these are from Mexico, nor do they have an explicit or theoretical emphasis on the role of narratives. Although based on a small sample, this study can contribute to filling this research gap. Most importantly however, we hope to expand upon Arditti’s (2012: 80–81) finding that “central to incarcerated fatherhood are men’s expectations and images of reunification with their children upon their release” and link this to a discussion of new and possibly diffusing norms, ideals and especially *stories* of involved fatherhood globally.

## Method

Data in this study are from life-story interviews with incarcerated fathers in Mexican prisons. These interviews were part of a research project with the overall goal of investigating conditions of imprisonment and life-stories of Mexican inmates. Twelve participants were fathers and this study focusses on them. They were interviewed in a Mexico City prison between January and July of 2019. All are Mexican nationals in the 18–50 age range, and had been in prison for at least one year. The interviewed fathers were sentenced for a variety of crimes including: theft, armed robbery, homicide, manslaughter, violence, sexual crimes and

kidnappings. Interviews were audio recorded (with participants' permission) and transcribed. We refer to participants by pseudonyms, and have removed or slightly changed information such as the particularities of the crimes they committed, details of their children and other identifying information.

The interviews were semi-structured and organized as life-story interviews (Atkinson, 1998), covering participants' lives from childhood to the present. Tagg (1985: 163) summarizes the advantages of life-story interviews as getting access to "personal conceptions of the past and all its stages", and "the readily interpretable nature of the open interview product". The main problem he identifies is that participants' memories cannot be trusted. In line with narrative criminology (Fleetwood et al., 2019; Presser and Sandberg, 2015), our emphasis is on *stories* of fatherhood, and not on actual fathering practices, so reliability is less of a problem than it would be in other research traditions. The open-ended life-story approach to interviews is mainly used for what Kohli (1981) describes as the referential function of life stories, or the description of events in temporal order. The interviewee will typically expect some kind of organization to a conversation and the life-story interview provides one such structure. It is thus a pragmatic approach, but also one that allows for an analysis of differences between forms of speaking about the past, the present, and the future.

Interviews were conducted in visiting rooms or in prisoners' cells. Prison officers were not present and prisoners were not surveilled in any way by criminal justice authorities. On average, each inmate was interviewed three times over a two-week period, with each session lasting approximately two hours (with an average of six hours in total). The repeated interviews, combined with a flexible research design, allowed participants the freedom to emphasize the topics that were important to them. Family relations was one such topic, particularly their relationships with their own children. The interviewed fathers were eager to discuss this and we were thus able to obtain extensive data on both their relationships as well as their more general ideas of fatherhood. We believe that the frequent references to children in the interviews reflect how important fatherhood was for the incarcerated fathers, although it might also have been strengthened by gender and age dynamics in the interviews. A 48-year old female interviewer conducted the interviews, and it is possible that she reminded them of a maternal figure and thus their relationship to children might have been a "natural" focal point in these conversations. We will briefly return to this issue in the discussion section.

All interviews were conducted in Spanish and tape-recorded for transcription. All tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analyzed in their original version; all identifying personal data were deleted. Only the quotes used in this paper were translated into English. Data were analyzed by an interdisciplinary group of researchers: a sociologist, a psychologist, and a criminologist. The first group of emergent themes was produced in two iterative data coding and analytical processes, and includes codes such as "prison conditions", "family", "work outside prison", and importantly for this paper "relationship to children". After empirically grounded categories and their inclusion were agreed upon by consensus, testimonies were entered into ATLAS.ti to facilitate data management. Themes

were first inductively drawn from the data and then refined through peer discussions of the key themes and concepts identified in the research literature on fatherhood in prison; thus, themes were both data-driven and theoretically informed. The selection of testimonies and the final content was established through this iterative process of moving between the data-driven themes and theory-driven research concerns. The three parts below (fathering in the past, present and future) are the temporal axes within which we organized the findings. The life story method allows us to organize the analysis under these headings. The coding procedure itself comes from comparing incidents linked to stories about parenthood. Generally, we follow the grounded theory procedure of generating empirically based categories, according to Strauss and Corbin (1990) and combine this with what Brown and Sime (1981) describe as theoretically oriented content analysis of life-story interviews.

Ethical approval was provided by the local Ethics Committee of the Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE) and all the procedures performed formed part of routine care. The limitations of a study with twelve participants are obvious. We cannot claim representativeness, and selection bias as well as the risk of random results are problematic. At the same time, the strength of our data should be acknowledged. Repeated life-story interviews provide time for participants to reflect on their life between interviews, for the interviewer to prepare follow-up questions, and for both to get to know each other better than in one-time interviews. This is especially important when themes include highly sensitive topics, such as fatherhood, for men who have had little or no contact with their children. Even though results are explorative, they nevertheless reveal interesting information regarding the role played by fatherhood for many men in prison.

### **Narrating fatherhood in prison – Past, presence and future**

Fatherhood was important for the incarcerated men in this study. They spoke extensively about their children, and their tone of voice and body language reflected an emotional engagement when speaking. The interviewer commented on this in her interview with Luis (31):

Interviewer: The only time I have seen your face change is when you mention your children.

Luis: I'm glad, my kids, my family, are my life. I notice that when they come to visit me, I am laughing. (...)

Interviewer: Even when you speak of your girlfriend, you keep this little [cynical] expression, the only time you lose it, is with your children.

Luis: They are my children!



Below, we distinguish between how the incarcerated fathers described their early years of fatherhood, their experience once incarcerated, and how they imagined fatherhood in the future. We interpret these stories in light of their current incarceration and explore the role of stories of fatherhood for incarcerated and marginalized men.

### *Recollecting fatherhood before prison*

For most of the men interviewed, paternity was not planned and occurred when they were in their late teens. The surprise of the unplanned pregnancy was followed by a period during which parents often helped with housing and financial support. It was usually described as a difficult time, often involving conflict with the mother of the child, with a scarcity of material resources. For about half the men, it was nevertheless a time that they associated with the strong emotional bond between themselves and their children. The rest of the men told stories of how they had gone from “bad” to “good” fathers. Either way, the coda (Labov, 1972) or conclusion of both narratives of fatherhood before prison were phrased in terms and ideals of involved fatherhood.

Alejandro (49) spoke about when his only daughter was born: “I saw her sleeping and began to feel that my decisions were not so light, that I had to think them through better, because an error of mine was going to affect her.” He described himself as a loving and caring father who wanted to spend time with his daughter. As time passed, however, he lost contact with her, which made him sad: “I always had my mom and dad, well maybe that part of me had to do the same and yes that part of me hurt my daughter, she doesn’t have her dad and mom together”. He still took pride in having provided for her, having brought her clothes and food, and having taken up the traditional male provider role (Marks and Palkovitz, 2004). Alejandro claimed that he had had a strong and good relationship with his daughter before she was taken away from him by a cruel and selfish mother. This is likely a somewhat selective and idealized version of his early years with his daughter, but it reflects the importance for inmate fathers on having (or wanting) an emotional attachment to their children.

The incarcerated men’s emotional commitment to their children was sometimes expressed through descriptions of how they used to play. Ignacio (36) remembered the time when he played with his son as a child:

My relationship with him has always been excellent. When he was a child, I sat on the ground with my son playing with carts. When he was little, we also played football in the street. About a year before I came here, he was 13 years old. I played on a team and he said, “Hey dad, I want to play with you on the team you are in” I said “okay, let’s play”. And we played together on that team.

Expressing emotional commitment through play and seeing this as an important part of the father-child relationship, resonates with Rojas (2008) study of

middle-class Mexican men, and with widespread ideals of involved fatherhood (e.g. Dermott, 2008). Such fatherhood norms were also reflected in the way inmates spoke about how they had raised and corrected their children. Benito (29) emphasized that: “I never hit them, I always talked to them and I always gave them time. Always talking, “come, let’s go to the park” and so on. They were distracted”. Describing himself as quite the opposite of the mother, who relied on fear, scoldings and beatings, he emphasized the importance of dialogue and patience when raising a child (see Rojas, 2008).

The continuous father-child relationship that these men describe was typical for about half of the men interviewed. The other half told more complicated stories which sometimes started with less support from family. Juan (34) spoke about how his father had been very reluctant to help out during the first months of his child’s life:

The day that the child was born, I told my dad, “I will have a son”. He said “What the hell? Don’t be stupid. If you don’t have a formal girlfriend”. I returned to see her almost every day for the next two months and provided diapers, with the help of my dad. I asked him to come with me, but he replied, “No *güey* (man), you go alone, did I tell you to make a child? That is not my responsibility, you fix your problem as you can, do not bring anyone to live here, it’s my house, you get a house, a job, be someone in life, I will not give you my things”.

Juan had two more children with different partners. In all three cases, he did not take responsibility for them. Speaking about his second child, he recognized his lack of interest, stating that: “it was part of my madness, my rebellion, my inexperience (. . .) I said no, no, how am I going to get married, have a child, a family, no, no, no, I have to meet more women, travel, experience things”.

Similarly, Mario (27) described how he had neglected his first daughter because he had “started with alcohol, with women”. He only gave his daughter what her mother asked for and did not care much about her upbringing. Instead he increasingly started to party more and had a series of relationships with other women. In such stories, the men described themselves as “deadbeats” (Marks and Palkovitz, 2004) or “absent fathers” (de Keijzer, 1998; Grundetjern et al., 2019). Importantly, in all cases (but one), these stories were told in a self-critical fashion. They had come to realize, often in prison, that this way of parenting was wrong. Mario for example, now wanted to spend more time with his children and “see them play and be happy”. Their stories of initial neglect must therefore be seen in light of their current incarceration and proclaimed change.

In fact, the story of the men being “poor” fathers was so tightly connected to how they had changed, that the conclusion or point of these stories was similar to those who claimed to have been “good fathers” from the start. Both shared ideals of involved, intimate and nurturing fatherhood also seen among other Mexican men (Gutmann, 1998; Rojas, 2008). These memories of fatherhood from before prison, and claims of change, may easily be viewed with skepticism. The stories

sometimes reflected a wish to get revenge on wives or girlfriends who had left them, blamed the mothers for their lack of contact with their children (see also Cúnico et al., 2020), or seemed to be crafted to create a convincing story of change. As imprisoned men in a relatively macho society, involved fatherhood was only one of many ways of narrating fatherhood. Nevertheless, following the emphasis on *all* stories in narrative criminology (Sandberg, 2010) and the potential of generative pursuits in prison studies (Maruna, 2001), it is still interesting that intimate, nurturing or involved images of fathering played such an important role in their ideals and stories of fatherhood.

### *Fathering in prison: Educating and protecting*

Being a father in prison is a complicated task. Visits and telephone calls are rare, and the possibilities of fathering are limited. The traditional role of a good father, by providing for children, is difficult – as are the new and more involved ways of fatherhood. In prison, inmates are often only left with their stories of fatherhood as a way of showing themselves and others that they are “good fathers”. While actual fathering practices were scarce, *stories* of fatherhood abounded. For example, incarcerated fathers emphasized how they were able to both protect and educate their children from within prison and talked about these widespread and traditional elements of fatherhood with considerable pride, sometimes mixing narratives of traditional, involved and street fatherhood.

Ernesto (42) stated that he could still raise his children from prison: “when they need something they say ‘Mom, can you tell my dad to give me permission for this’”. He thereby emphasized his continued role as the traditional patriarchal father that continues to be important in Mexico (Rojas, 2008). In accordance with newer ideals of involved fatherhood, many of the other fathers emphasized having important conversations with their children while in prison. Ignacio (36), for example, told of how he had managed to convince his son to continue with his schooling and that he helped his wife to raise the children. He admitted that it was still sometimes difficult to convince them to come and visit and that raising children via phone calls was a challenge. His son had had some problems and stopped coming to visit him in prison, and was not really listening when they spoke on the phone. At some point he visited him in prison again:

I cried when we talked. “Do you want to be like me? Do you want to pass this and this?” “No dad, excuse me. I will not do it again”. I have given examples of people who have really misbehaved and look bad. “Do you want to be like this?” “No dad”. I could see his tears coming. Now, what has helped me a lot is that he says: “Hey dad, I am in therapy”.

This was a common story among the incarcerated fathers. Providing a good example is an important way of helping sons to achieve manhood, and thus the incarcerated fathers need to tweak their stories. By crafting creative narratives, they

were able to turn the most obvious challenge to their fatherhood (being “poor fathers” in prison) into an advantage: their children could learn from them. Their stories thus gave meaning to their misery in prison and provided them with a way of holding on to fatherhood by “educating” their children. In a study of incarcerated mothers, Easterling et al. (2019: 519) similarly emphasize that: “social actors can be creative with self-narrative when they can be creative in few other ways”. Narratives of fatherhood was a space where fatherhood could be maintained despite structural conditions that made fathering difficult.

Protecting your children is a traditional element of fatherhood (e.g. Lamb, 1987). As in the case of educating children, this is difficult to do from prison, but the incarcerated fathers found ways to maintain this fatherhood value too. In some cases, especially when children were young, fathers did not tell their children that they were in prison. This was justified by a need to protect them. The fathers who did not have regular visits from their children also said that it was to protect their children from the prison environment. The emphasis in these stories was always on what was best for children. Hilario (28) said:

If I don't make my daughter come to this place, it's because I don't want to traumatize her. I don't want my daughter to grow up with emotional problems. I want my daughter to be a safe woman, a happy woman.

If the incarcerated fathers could not protect their children from the dangers of the “real world” they could, at least, protect them from the prison environment and from the knowledge that their fathers were in prison (see also Cúnico et al., 2020; Miranda and Granato, 2016). Giving up on getting visits from their children was an important, real, and symbolic sacrifice they were willing to make in order to prove their fatherhood. Crafting creative stories of how they gave up actual fathering to hold on to fatherhood ideals, such as protecting their children, was a way of being “good fathers” in prison. Instead of the traditional distant breadwinner (Pleck, 1987) these were stories of a distant protector.

Hilario narrated a version of fatherhood that was more in line with street masculinities (Mullins, 2006). He had another version of the protection-theme found in many fatherhood stories in this study. He described in great detail how he wanted revenge for his daughter who had been assaulted:

I find it hard to forgive him, I feel that if I don't do anything, I'm not showing my family that I love them (...) Honestly my daughter is everything. If I had to stay in jail for more years in order to fuck that bastard, I would do it and I would not care, she is my daughter. (...) Well, I see it as the way to get even, to defend her, to protect her.

Over the course of three interviews, the interviewer suggested that Hilario not take revenge, but he was unwilling to change. Finally, he concluded: “I know that everything you tell me is correct, because I'm not a fool, but sometimes anger is anger.” Ugelvik (2014) shows how men hold on to their fatherhood identity

through stories of taking violent revenge against the authorities who keep them from their children. Similarly, Hilario did fatherhood (protection) by creating and holding on to a story that he would revenge his daughter's assault. In this way, men are able to combine street masculinities (Mullins, 2006) with norms of fatherhood.

Ugelvik (2014: 164) writes that a "good, ethically conscious 'real man' father is one willing to go through trials and tribulations for his loved ones". Being a good father is sacrificing your own interests, through giving up visits or claiming the right to be with your children – and if necessary, taking violent revenge on those who harm your child. The fathers interviewed wanted to show that they were able to both educate and protect their children from prison, but given their structural position as incarcerated men, they had to narrate creatively to make this convincing. For some, these stories of fatherhood were fragmented (Collier and Sheldon, 2008), taking elements from involved and more traditional versions of fatherhood, and combining these with masculinities more prevalent in the environment and the culture of which they were part. Stories of involved fatherhood were constantly challenged by alternative versions of fatherhood when the men narrated their fathering experience in prison. This might have been because this was current and therefore harder to idealize.

### *Imagining future fatherhood*

With all the difficulties of being "good fathers" in prison, it was sometimes easier for the incarcerated men to talk about how they could fulfil their ideals of being good fathers in the future. Even though some were nervous about meeting up with their children after release, most were confident that they would be able to reconnect and imagined that they would be better fathers in the future. For some, this involved being able to provide for their children and wife, while for others it was important to show that they had changed. These men imagined their future in contrast to their problematic past, which had led them to prison. Daniel (39) described a life of partying where he did not care about his children, but placed this clearly in the past. When he was released from prison, he wanted to show his children and his family that he had changed and that he was no longer the man he used to be: "I don't only say it, I will prove it" he said with great certainty.

Alejandro (49) was more nervous but hoped for a happy reunion with his now twenty-three- year old daughter. He told a long story to make the point that reconciliation could happen, even when children have become adults. Alejandro stated hopefully that "the same thing can happen to my daughter, maybe I can cure that part". He had been separated from his daughter when she was three. When talking about the moment when he realized that he would not see his daughter again, he combined stories of the past and the future:

When she was very young, I had her in my arms, she was sleeping. I said, "do you know who I am?" I told her "I am your dad, I love you very much and I will always

love you, I want you to listen to my voice because one day maybe I will not be near you. Record my voice in your head, you listen to me, ok?" She nodded: "I will never do something to hurt you, I want you to know" then she nodded again and I said "you're never going to hear this voice again, when I count to three you will never hear my voice again, but you will remember in your heart what I told you".

Alejandro hoped that she still remembered. He had been out of his daughter's life for twenty years, but still idealized the past and hoped for a happy future with her. Such stories show the importance of fatherhood for many incarcerated fathers, even those with little or no contact with their children. It was sometimes necessary to hold on to fatherhood and be able to imagine happy outcomes and "magical solutions" to their often difficult relationship to their children. Others stated that they would need professional help. Carlos (37) had been in prison for ten years without seeing his children, but intended on contacting them when he got out. He did not have any real plans but said that "I feel that with psychological help, they could guide me too". This is another indication of the modern fatherhood ideals that came to the fore in these interviews.

When the incarcerated fathers imagined fatherhood in the future it was with some concern, but also with great hope and certainty that it would be possible to change the relationship with their children. Their plans for reconciliation were sometimes overly optimistic, but reflected how important fatherhood was for them. While stories of the present had to take account of their current difficulties and situation, stories of what the future could hold had few such limitations. Fatherhood, and stories of fatherhood, were crucial for their imagined future, and their projected hopes for the time after imprisonment. They can thus be seen as generative pursuits (Maruna, 2001), and potential resources for reintegration into society.

## **Discussion**

The fatherhood of the incarcerated Mexican men in this study can be seen as fragmented (Collier and Sheldon, 2008) or even as a "collection of fatherhoods" (Dermott, 2008) more than as a uniform paradigm. They drew upon traditional forms of fatherhood, often reflecting the Mexican context (Rojas, 2008), as well as on street masculinities (Mullins, 2006), reflecting their prison environment and criminal or street culture lifestyles prior to imprisonment. The nature of the ideal fatherhood they described however, was closely connected to new narratives of involved fatherhood. Arguably, the kind of fatherhood the incarcerated Mexican men in this study wanted, hoped for and imagined in the future reflects intimate (Dermott, 2008), nurturing (Lamb, 1987) or involved (Pleck, 1987) fatherhood ideals, at least in part.

The fatherhood stories told by these incarcerated Mexican men frequently expressed ideals of emotionally committed fathers often associated with new fatherhood "metanarratives" (Eerola and Huttunen, 2011) or new narratives of

involved fatherhood (Farstad and Stefansen, 2015). These ideals of fatherhood are usually associated with developments in the US and Europe but have become increasingly important in Mexico as well (Gutmann, 1998; Rojas, 2008; Vivas, 1996). The incarcerated fathers' images of a "good father" for example, was one who was responsible not only as a provider, but also shared child care responsibilities and was emotionally involved with his children. As fathering in prison was complicated however, the men usually clung to such forms of fatherhood through creative narratives (Easterling et al., 2019) and projected the realization of their ambitions of being "good fathers" onto a time after their release. In the words of Arditti (2012: 80–81), they held a "futuristic orientation about fathering", which is well known from prison studies literature.

A study with twelve participants can only be explorative when it comes to questions regarding the diffusion of different forms of masculinity and fatherhood. Our findings are from one prison in Mexico City and cannot be generalized to this prison, nor to Mexican prisons in general. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, our study does not have baseline data, meaning we lack data on what "old" narratives might have looked like. That means that our suggestion that there has been a change in fatherhood ideals and norms among incarcerated Mexican can easily be questioned. Nevertheless, we believe that these themes deserve further exploration. While our study cannot provide any definitive answers, we suggest a few possible interpretations as to why fatherhood is important, and why an involved form of fatherhood seems to be the most important. These insights might extend beyond the Mexican case we have studied.

Arguably, the incarcerated men interviewed in this study may have talked about fatherhood in this way because it has become the new dominant form of fatherhood, reaching far beyond the Western middle-class basis it once had. Thus, it was the main language through which to express their experiences and expectations of fatherhood. This way of doing or talking about fatherhood could also be part of a "normalcy project" (Frederick, 2017), where fatherhood offered them a sense of dignity. These interpretations are interconnected. If the "involved" norms reflect new and increasingly influential narratives of fatherhood, they are prominent resources for projecting "normalcy" and may be a last stand against the loss of dignity following marginalization and incarceration (Meek, 2011; see also Chui, 2016; Ugelvik, 2014). Involved fatherhood thus connects these men to mainstream society and is a resource when they want to feel and be seen by others as "normal" men. This explains why fatherhood in general, and involved ideals of fatherhood in particular, a small part of their everyday life, was still an important part of their life-story. Stories of involved fatherhood became a resource (perhaps the only one) when incarcerated Mexican men tried to find mainstream dignity in highly marginalized conditions. In this way, the stories provide a welcome escape from the harsh reality of their lives.

Indeed, there are also other possible explanations for the prevalence of stories of involved fatherhood in these interviews. A methodological explanation could be found in the interview constellation. A 48-year-old women will arguably trigger

such stories in a way that a younger male researcher may not. Ugelvik (2014), for example, found stories of “violent revenge” and strong (paternalistic) versions of the *pater familias* that may be easier to tell in a male-to-male context. Although interviewers’ positionality will influence data, most interviewees still have a rather limited narrative repertoire (Sandberg, 2010) and interviews will tend to reflect some general themes (Damsa and Ugelvik, 2017). Another explanation for the pervasiveness of involved fatherhood stories in these interviews may be that since crime is so widespread in Mexico (see e.g. Widner et al., 2011), the prison population consists of a population that is different to other countries. While there might be some truth to this explanation, the fathers in this study were convicted of murder, armed robberies, kidnappings, rape, and serious violence, and may thus be considered as anything but “normal” fathers. It is more likely that previous research assumed a link between men that offend and street (Mullins, 2006), protest (Connell, 1995) and oppositional (Messerschmidt, 1994) masculinities, or at least traditional forms of masculinity and fatherhood, and thereby missed how they might manifest their masculinity and fatherhood in more diverse and “modern” ways.


## Conclusion


Previous studies have shown how different forms of fatherhood can be a much-wanted source of dignity for incarcerated men (Chui, 2016; Meek, 2011; Ugelvik, 2014). Drawing upon this literature, we show how incarcerated Mexican fathers use stories associated with new forms of involved fatherhood to gain respectability and provide meaning to their lives. Using gender in general, and fatherhood in particular, the incarcerated Mexican men in this study found ways to connect to hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) and mainstream life. Such findings challenge overly clear-cut distinctions between different forms of masculinity and between marginalized populations and others.

The fact that fatherhood prevailed mainly in stories, and not in fathering practices, for these incarcerated men could be seen as an argument that this role is not important to them – nor to researchers who seek to understand them. However, in line with narrative criminology (Fleetwood et al., 2019; Sandberg, 2010), we believe that the sometimes romanticized stories of involved fatherhood are of great importance. The fatherhood stories in this study do not show that the men cared for their children before going to prison, nor that they actually educated and protected their children while incarcerated. They also do not carry any promise for the future. Instead, they reveal incarcerated men’s prospected hopes for fatherhood in the future and their many concerns and struggles around wanting to be “good fathers”. Fatherhood can be a motivation for change for incarcerated fathers (Arditti, 2012; Meek, 2011; Turner, 2017; Walker, 2010). Stories of fatherhood indicate what is important for fathers in prison, who they want to be and the dreams they have for the future. True or not, what better place to start a process of change.



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## Notes

1. <https://www.inegi.org.mx/temas/incidencia/>
2. World Prison Brief (2016) <https://www.prisonstudies.org/>
3. <https://penitenciario.cdmx.gob.mx/poblacion-penitenciaria>

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