

# CASE NOTES: A PERSONAL VIEW

## THE EFFECT OF THE NEWS OF MOTHERS IMPRISONMENT ON THE CHILD: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR TREATMENT OF BOTH

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### INTRODUCTION

A review article on prisoner mothers by Dennis Challinger (1982) questioned what policies there should be for mothers in prison having their children with them. The present article is a personal view by a patient written at her request by a therapist. It deals with the impact of the knowledge that her mother had been in gaol for a year when she was four years of age and some thoughts about the efficacy of being with her and the help they both might have received if facilities had been available.

### BACKGROUND

The mother and daughter had a previously poor relationship because of disruptions by many moves, multiple caretakers between short periods with mother and a number of nursery schools even when the child lived at home. At the time of the mother's arrest, the relationship was probably at its most positive, possible because of the mitigating effects of grandma's presence and care while mother worked.

Sally (pseudonym) still has no memory of the actual arrest or reunion with mother but certainly has a memory of the anger of many members of the family, and anger directed to her which she could not understand. She grew up thinking there was some terrible mystery or some terrible thing about herself.

It was not until she was 32 or 33 years of age that she was told by a relative of her mother's imprisonment. Worse still, the relative was a child of her father's first family whom she had not met since she was one year of age.

### IMPACT ON HER SELF CONCEPT

The feelings attendant on such news was in the form of a personal disaster (Raphael, October, 1980) so that the various stages associated with disaster and crisis can be discerned. However, what is striking in this history, is the personal meaning of the news (Raphael,

1980) and as well the family meaning. More hidden is the social meaning since this was not public news, but the taboos concerning criminality were exceedingly powerful.

Thus the initial impact was one of shock. "I was stunned. I couldn't move. I sat on the lounge unable to speak. There was absolutely nothing to say". Her half-sister must have realised the shock since she tried to comfort Sally with the words that everyone did things during the war but some people got caught. As Sally said this did not mean a thing since the ramifications went deeper than a mere matter of right and wrong or being caught or not.

There followed a long period of searching for confirmation from closer relatives and authorities, including the public library for newspaper reports and court reports. At the same time much cognitive re-structuring went on in the sense that the news made some sense of the haphazard life style Sally had been subjected to, to the secrecy and scapegoating from which there had previously been no basis. This cognitive processing took a long time however. In essence, it meant for Sally, a complete change in the whole basis of her own and her family's existence. The search for

additional information was an attempt to make sense of her world or previous existence. As the police department declined to comment and as her uncle told her very little, while everyone else acted in ignorance, her cognitive capabilities did not fully sustain her. She was able to obtain some comfort from her uncle's information, that he had visited her mother in gaol, but she could not remember whether he told her the cells were bare sandstone or whether she just filled in the gaps from local knowledge, films and books.

When she asked her mother about it the reply was, "How could you do this to me." There was no further opening to explore the mother's impressions, the real facts or the imagined ones of both. There was an historical gap and an accompanying emotional gap and a cognitive one.

The effect of her knowledge within the family at rare gatherings such as funerals, appeared to extend the scapegoating from her mother to herself and hurtful remarks were made or more clearly noticed than when Sally was little and appeared accepted by her family, (though exploration beyond this paper would suggest that Sally had never been accepted but being developmentally unable to cope with the sub-



tleties of mixed messages, idealised the family). The hate and antagonism was out in the open but still indirect. Individually family members listed her mother's misdeeds as fitting a life-long pattern from childhood to the present. Her imprisonment had not exonerated her. She was still a black sheep. A complete family myth became apparent and quotes from the Bible, such as "Beware of the afflicted" were bandied about. (The mother had had a serious illness which the family saw as an affliction she deserved).

Interpersonal effects were also evident. About her peers she said, "I was afraid to tell anyone in case I was branded like her for whatever I did. Inwardly I expected blame for things I probably couldn't be implicated in and this unreasonable fear can still pervade me, though I can reason away the immediacy of this fear". As well, "If I ever revealed the many moves we had, others would facetiously ask, "Was your father a criminal?" She felt she had no comeback in such a situation but felt it as punishment, which it was, especially as the personal meaning was a two edged sword; her father was living but had never been allowed reasonable access and she met him once at six years of age immediately after the divorce. Thus, the implication of coming from an intact family added to the hurt and personal meaning. It was also very close to the truth, since mother was the criminal. Amongst middle class university professionals, she was unable to say anything because of the enormity of the shame and the implicit societal attitudes. Some of her peers worked in prison settings so that vocabulary from that world became a

matter of wit and if used by Sally, the wit again had its personal meaning of hurt, shame, abandonment, multiple life changes. For someone to ask where she had learnt that word was baffling but suffused with numerous possibilities based on snippets of memory before age five, e.g. were the people they visited criminals? Were her mother's later references to well known underworld figures real connections from the past or just common knowledge available in newspapers or in memoirs of the times?

Socially there were other effects, e.g. Sally declined positions which were likely to increase the sphere of blame. Prior to the news she would accept almost any administrative job with great confidence and enthusiasm. Another effect she experienced was an immobilising anxiety in some circumstances in which police are involved. These must be partly due to the mother's voiced fears, partly to the happenings at the time of the arrest, partly to normal childhood disciplinary threats such as "the police will take you away if you do that." Thus Sally freezes when approached by a policeman for information or on being pulled up for minor traffic infringement; in fact uniforms engender various degrees of anxiety. In other words, the fear is far in excess of what the circumstances warrant, without being phobic.

Faced with these effects, all occurring in fairly quick succession and failing to obtain historical, legal or emotional details, Sally's cognitive or intellectual resources (defences) could not hold out for long, especially with an increase of social isolation at that particular time of her life plus the expected taboos and implications if she were to

try to explain to professional peers. With no answers to tie her questions together and settle her imagined fears of the past, it would appear that unconscious content broke out in the form of hallucinatory, nightmarish dreams which were certainly consistent with other material from the past, but may well have been condensations of the unknown or forgotten fragments of what happened at the most fearful, intrusive moments surrounding a further separation from mother and the circumstances of the arrest which may have taken part at night but certainly at the home they lived in. In any case, it appears that without information, clarification or validation of the truth and untruth. Childhood memories of a bizarre nature, e.g. of being threatened with scissors became conscious and formed the basis of even more bizarre suicidal wishes.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT AND TREATMENT

While Challinger (1982) raised the question of policies relating to mothers having their children in prison with them, the above case points up the difficulties of establishing general criteria. It is clear that a rubber stamp policy would not be efficacious, but that the individual and the family must be considered together with past history. This involves a comprehensive if not a multi-disciplinary approach raising more questions than can be answered, as the following statements demonstrate.

1. It would probably have been better to have been informed much earlier. From memories stimulated by the knowledge of her mother's imprisonment and about the circumstances of arrest, separation and upheaval

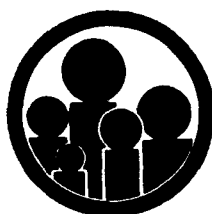
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which were traumatising, Sally is left still with little factual information which might have helped resolve the hurt surrounding these traumas. The people concerned who might have been able to report what happened are now dead. Second hand information from distant relatives is unavailable because of their own moral values, or other reasons not given. Secrecy still pervades references to the mother which has a tantalising effect on Sally.

2. Failing the above, reading the Police Reports about the circumstances of suspicion, relevant addresses, e.g., of home and work, the place of arrest and its circumstances would either validate the memories evoked by therapy or invalidate them, as some seem to be reconstructions to account for the snippets of memory and facts that are available to her.
3. Because of previous mother-child separations, all of detrimental length, visits to or from her mother during the imprisonment would have been reassuring. Another year's separation between the ages of four and five because of imprisonment, and constitute further traumatising according to most writers. Freud, Solnit and Goldstein (1973) estimate two to three months as the maximum separation period at her age, otherwise the sense of time and continuity cease to exist for the child. The lack of contact with mother virtually severed any previous good rapport. The content of Sally's dreams suggested psychotic fears and bizarre threats by mother in her fear of the police. Visits would have reassured Sally about blame or could have been dealt with by counsellors (if they existed at the time and if knowledge were sufficient to understand the feelings and dynamics). It is doubtful whether the effects on Sally and who would be her caretaker and the quality of care were even considered at the time.
4. Whether staying with mother in a city gaol of the 1940's would have been a stimulating and normal environment is questionable. However, mother skills (NOT care skills, since she was obsessive in all material feeding and hygiene skills) and maintaining or improving the relationship may have modified the effects of the past and alleviated the disturbance of the longest separation Sally experienced up to that time, i.e., the separation caused by imprisonment.
5. Psychiatric assistance for the mother would have been the most helpful thing. Again it is doubtful whether her previous psychiatric history and its traumatising treatments were known or understood or considered

by the authorities at the time of the arrest and imprisonment. It is also doubtful whether the fact she was a sole parent was considered, because no information at all could be obtained (Sally wrote to the Police Department and received a non-committal reply). The family revealed no information about her caretaker either but she was able finally to reconstruct that she lived with her grandmother in a country town but experienced a decidedly negative attitude from her after having been warmly treated at times previously.

6. Counselling for her extended family despite their middle-age would also have helped their anger and disillusionment and would have ameliorated the retribution which was taken out on the most vulnerable family members immediately and later. Family therapy could have aired these feelings and grievances and lessened the impact on a vulnerable child and a vulnerable mother, whose lawful punishment merely preceded the family's emotional punishment which lasted a lifetime. The mother's own stubbornness and determination to rise above society and the family put further stress on her as a mother and invited even more scapegoating. This spread to Sally once Sally knew her mother had been in gaol.

#### COMMENTS

The case history not only points up some of the needs around the particular circumstances but points to the need for assistance in the early stages of breakdown from the norm. From a proper assessment, it could have been ascertained that there were manifest indications for help for mother at least days after giving birth to Sally . . . . she disowned her.

Within another six months, the baby health centre corrected the failure to thrive situation which no family members could penetrate. When Sally was 15 months old, marital separation and abandoning the baby was another signal for help.

Before that and for six or seven years later, there were visits to G.P.'s, orthopods, etc. with the baby for mild congenital deformities and Vitamin D deficiency at the age of three.

The other took Sally to a child health centre when she was three or four, and apparently the next follow up visit was when she was six or seven.

There were no school counsellors to see the over-compliant and sometimes defiant child (usually in the interests of justice and injustice).

At a tertiary institution, there was yet another opportunity to involve the mother for counselling.

Withholding of information at all official levels subsequent to the unexpected, ill-timed revelation of the family secret repeated the tantalising experience in the family. "Something was wrong but no-one would tell me. I was being punished but I didn't know why."

#### CONCLUSION

Nearly 40 years have elapsed since the first secret - - 11 years since its revelation. It is hoped that the new Freedom of Information Act will assist people to know their past, especially those who wish to face it. This case only touches on some of the details in one child's life which would now be manifestly alien to the Rights of the Child (1983), as regards information, the child's best interests and necessary counselling and care. If such rights could be adhered to, early preventative work might have made this paper unnecessary.

This case also gives some indication of the nature of long-lasting personal disaster, especially of abandonment, repeated in the revelation of the mother's imprisonment, but having many acute exacerbations in the mean time, none of which were resolved within the six months Raphael suggests as optimal before the likelihood of psychiatric morbidity.

Despite all this, there have been mitigating attributes and circumstances as suggested by Rutter (1983) e.g. high intelligence and marriage, but also an inner capacity for overcoming disaster.

This case would probably be not unlike those of others in the last few years, in that early detection of family difficulties might have ameliorated the situation. Once imprisonment occurs, however, the material suggests avenues for assistance to the individuals concerned as well as the extended family, but especially children. It also points up the rights of the individual to know his history and the protean effects of secrecy, which at an official level was not protective (at least to the young woman who wanted to know her history and its meaning); instead official secrecy exacerbated her problems by repeating the family dynamics.

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