

The Incarcerated Pregnancy: An Ethnographic Study of Perinatal Women in English Prisons

Dr Laura Abbott

l.abbott@herts.ac.uk

Senior Lecturer in Midwifery. Fellow of the Royal College of Midwives.

The UK has the highest incarceration rate in Western Europe with pregnant women making up around 6% of the female population. It is estimated that 6-7% of the female prison population are at varying stages of pregnancy and around 100 babies are born to incarcerated women each year. Previous research has relied mainly on second order interpretation (Price, 2005; Ferszt & Clarke, 2012; Gardiner et al., 2016; Albertson et al, 2012; O'Keefe & Dixon, 2015) and there is scarce qualitative research examining the experiences of pregnant women in prison.

Research question and aims: What is the experience of being pregnant in an English prison?

- Semi-structured audio-recorded interviews with pregnant women, women who had experienced pregnancy in prison and staff.
- Deconstructing the daily patterns and consideration of the impact upon the pregnant woman, including observation of the spaces, rooms and prison wings.
- Interactions with significant people and the milieu that the pregnant prisoner was exposed to.

Methodology:

The study took place during 2015-2016 and involved semi-structured interviews with 28 female prisoners in England who were pregnant, or had recently given birth whilst imprisoned, ten members of staff, and ten months of non-participant observation. Follow-up interviews with five women were undertaken as their pregnancies progressed to birth and the post-natal phase. Using a sociological framework of Sykes' (1958) 'pains of imprisonment', this study builds upon existing knowledge and highlights the institutional responses to the pregnant prisoner.

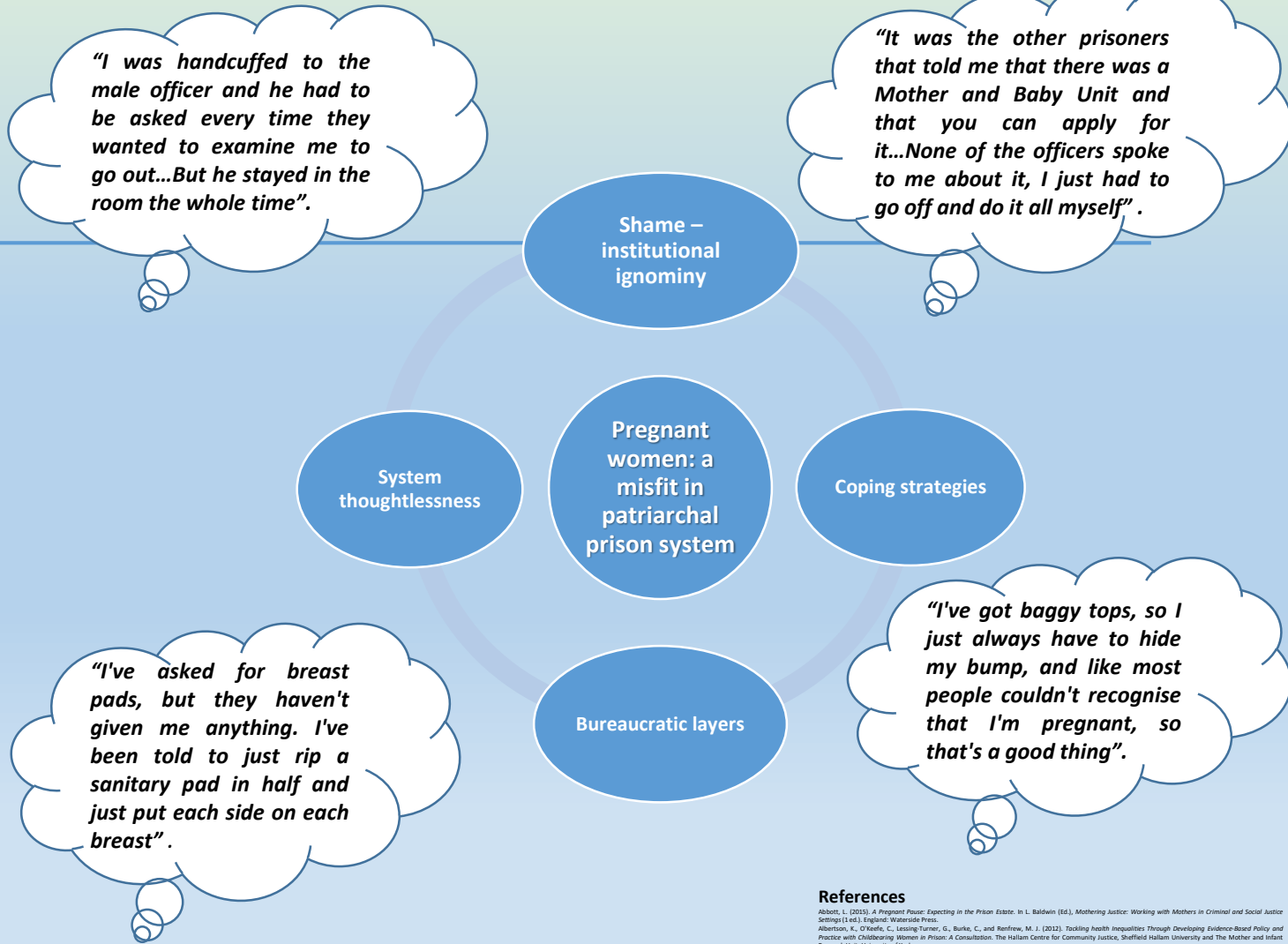
- Favourable ethical opinion was granted by National Offender Management Services (NOMS) through the Integrated Research Application System (IRAS) and the University of Hertfordshire.
- Thematic analysis using rudimentary methods (e.g. line by line approach) at first and then utilising the software package NVivo to code, organise and further develop emerging concepts.

Findings

My original contribution to knowledge focuses on the fact that pregnancy is an anomaly within the patriarchal prison system. The main findings of the study can be divided into four broad concepts, namely: (a) 'institutional thoughtlessness', whereby prison life continues with little thought for those with unique physical needs, such as pregnant women; and (b) 'institutional ignominy' where the women experience 'shaming' as a result of institutional practices which entail their being displayed in public and characterised with institutional symbols of imprisonment. The study also reveals new information about the (c) coping strategies adopted by pregnant prisoners; and (d) elucidates how the women navigate the system to negotiate entitlements and seek information about their rights. Additionally, a new typology of prison officer has emerged from this study: the 'maternal' is a member of prison staff who accompanies pregnant, labouring women to hospital where the role of 'bed watch officer' can become that of a birth supporter. This research has tried to give voice to pregnant imprisoned women and to highlight gaps in existing policy guidelines and occasional blatant disregard for them. In this sense, the study has the potential to springboard future inquiry and to be a vehicle for positive reform for pregnant women across the prison estate.

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@midwifeteacher



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