Como Citar:
Visintin, C. D. N., Vilela, G. A. P., & Aiello-Vaisberg, T. M. J. (2021). Collective imaginary regarding imprisoned mothers. In L. S. de L. C. Tardivo & R. X. Marigliano (Orgs.), XVII Jornada APOIAR: Violência social e autoinfligida – propostas de atenção e pesquisa (pp. 281–289) [E-book]. Instituto de Psicologia, Universidade de São Paulo.

# 22- COLLECTIVE IMAGINARY REGARDING IMPRISONED MOTHERS

Carlos Del Negro Visintin
Guilherme Athayde Penteado Vilela
Tânia Maria José Aiello-Vaisberg

**Abstract**

This study is part of a larger set of studies addressing maternal suffering and its objective is to investigate the collective imaginary concerning imprisoned mothers from a concrete psychoanalytical perspective. This qualitative study uses the psychoanalytical method to analyze online newspaper news that specifically addressed motherhood in prison. The psychoanalytical investigation of 49 news stories resulted in the interpretative production of three affective-emotional fields: “The O.R. is yours”; “Do you think you’re a mother?”; and “Redeeming motherhood”. The results in general suggest that the idealization of mothers persists even in adverse contexts, such as that of a penitentiary setting, while at the same time mothers are censured for having had a child. This situation aggravates the suffering of these women and impedes recognition of the humanity of these women-mothers.

**Key-words:** Motherhood, prison, psychoanalytic method.

## Introduction

This study’s objective was to psychoanalytically investigate the collective imaginary concerning mothers serving a court-imposed sentence of prison detention. The justification for conducting this study is that it can support interventions and preventive measures concerning the care provided to mothers and their children in a prison setting. It is common in our society for women-mothers to suffer because of socially imposed demands. Suffering, however, may take different forms if women also face unfavorable conditions, such as detention.

According to Moura and Araújo (2004), who performed a bibliographic review of the history of maternity in Europe and Brazil, they verified how recent the conception of maternal exclusivism is in Western society. Only in the 18$^{th}$ century, through philosophical, medical and political discourse, did a supposed maternal instinct come to be viewed as inherent to the feminine nature.

This social organization of motherhood seems to remain in force in Brazil, as Visintin and Aiello-Vaisberg (2017) empirically verified. In a study addressing the collective imaginary of motherhood in Brazilian blogs authored by mothers, the authors found an idea/fantasy, according to which motherhood should be seen and experienced as the destiny of a woman. Thus, it becomes clear that mothers bear heavy cultural demands and a possible consequence is compromising other forms of personal fulfillment.

If, on the one hand, as researchers, we depart from a theoretical framework that values life's concrete conditions in order to produce knowledge of the affective and emotional dimensions of human actions (Politzer, 1928; Bleger, 1963/2007), we are also aware that Brazilian society, which experiences the phenomenon we are now addressing, is deeply marked by social inequality (Morgan, 2017), machismo (Silva, 2018), and racism (Fernandes, 2018). INFOPEN (Brazilian Prison Information Survey) supports this assertion (Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública, 2016). According to this report, 62% of the female prison population is Afro-descendent; 50% is aged between 18 and 29 years of age; 45% did not complete primary school; and 74% of these women has at least one child. Thus, we need to give critical consideration to such a context in which motherhood is experienced, in order to produce psychological knowledge.

Many recent studies, even though based on different theoretical frameworks, seem to agree that the prison system continues to contribute to the suffering of mothers. Diuna, Corrêa and Ventura (2017) worked with focal groups and warn that the discipline that is expected in a prison setting to control mothers who care for their children seems to significantly aggravate maternal suffering, as that kind of discipline restricts the care provided to children, in addition to threatening mothers with the possibility of being separated from their children. Chinalia (2017) investigated the collective imaginary toward women arrested for petty theft and verified that their existential drama may be strongly marked by the fact they are mothers. Martins (2016), on the other hand, conducted a psychoanalytical study, interviewing some imprisoned mothers, and found that the participants suffered due to forced separation from their children. These women seem to be socially abandoned, concluding that penitentiary facilities are not prepared to deal with motherhood. For this reason, Mariano and Silva (2018), in a qualitative study based on symbolic interactionism, argue that

breastfeeding seemed to be a maternal experience that made mothers feel encouraged due to being able to take care of their children.

Starting with an approach known as concrete psychoanalytical psychology (Bleger, 1963/2007), we sought to investigate the collective imaginary concerning imprisoned mothers, keeping in mind that this population's suffering is often disregarded by society. For that, we used online newspaper news, given its wide circulation in modern Brazilian society (Ferreira-Teixeira & Aiello-Vaisberg, 2017).

## Method

The psychoanalytical method was adopted in this qualitative study. In agreement with Herrmann (1979/1991), considering the invariance of the psychoanalytical method, it logically precedes the establishment of theories and clinical procedures. Thus, we adopted this method to understand human actions and their meanings, even if the individuals themselves do not acknowledge such meanings. Therefore, in order to achieve this study's objective, the psychoanalytical method followed three investigative steps, namely:

1. Selecting material
2. Recording material
3. Interpreting material

To comply with the first item, Google News was accessed every day from September 25th to December 31st 2018 and the term "imprisoned mothers" was searched, while all news items directly available from the site were retrieved. All news identified was read and those that clearly addressed motherhood in prison were selected, 53 news items, in total. Four appeared more than once and were considered only once, so that a *corpus* of 49 news items was selected.

In regard to the second item, to prevent the loss of data, all news items were retrieved and stored in a specific file. This file also facilitated reading on the part of the research group.

The third procedure concerned the reading of news in light of the psychoanalytical method, that is, floating reading and the free association of ideas. This procedure is intended to interpret affective-emotional determinants of those communications; that is, fields of affective-emotional meaning, are understood here as

unconscious emotional subtract, which ground the collective imaginary concerning imprisoned mothers.

To finalize this empirical study, we discussed the results concerning empirical interpretations based on authors who favor deeper understanding of data. This point of the process is called reflective interlocutions, which coincides with what is usually called discussion, in empirical studies.

Interpretations as results and Reflective interlocutions as discussion

Considering the data from a psychoanalytical perspective allowed three fields of affective-emotional meaning to be interpreted, denoted “The OR is yours”; “Do you think you’re a mother?; and “Redeeming motherhood”.

The field “the O.R[1]. is yours” is organized around a fantasy that an imprisoned mother should be the only one responsible for the care of her baby.

The field “Do you think you’re a mother?” is organized around the fantasy that motherhood would be incompatible with being imprisoned.

While the field “redeeming motherhood” is organized around the idea that motherhood would redeem an imprisoned woman.

In the following, we present excerpts that convey each one of the affective-emotional meanings.

In regard to the first field, “the O.R. is yours” is a vignette understood as a manifestation of conduct. In the case of the following excerpt, the imprisoned mother is unhappy that she is not allowed to take care of her children, arguing she would be more qualified for the task because she was the biological mother.

*“Having children in a place like this is very difficult; it is not everyday that you can see and care for your children. No matter how well my children are doing, a mother always takes better care than others”*

Another excerpt exemplifies the second field, “Do you think you’re a mother?” In this case, the news listed cases in which judges denied mothers the right for home imprisonment or confinement. His justification is that those mothers would not be fit to exercise motherhood.

[1] T.N.: “O.R.” is an abbreviation of “police occurrence report”, and in Brazil it is used as slang, meaning anything that is a problem or trouble.

*Another [judge], whose name is not mentioned, denied* habeas corpus *to an inmate, arguing prostitution and her need to receive governmental financial aid: "People stated that the accused does not work and uses the money provided by governmental financial aid to support herself". Later, he contradicts himself, stating she "made sex programs and stored drugs". He concludes saying that "under the poor care provided by the mother, [the child] would be exposed to harm inherent to close contact with criminality; thus I consider the mother figure dispensable for the child's wellbeing."*

Excerpts that concern the third field "Redeeming motherhood" are also presented. This part of the news conveys the idea that there is hope as a consequence of the arrival of a baby, that a child would not only be a "promise of life", but motherhood would be "promise of a new life":

*What changes in their lives in a detention facility with the arrival of a baby? The painful separation from their children. Promise of change of life. Emotional fragility. The hope a child will bring to the history of inmates.*

The excerpt below portrays a mother who says that the experience of prison was strong enough to prevent her from doing anything that would jeopardize her freedom and the birth of her daughter reinforced this conviction.

*The birth of the girl, according to her, reinforced her desire to choose the other side of life, often the most difficult one. "It is the first and last time, and now I don't want it anymore. I have to pay what I owe. First time was a blow and it is more than enough for me not to want this path anymore," she says.*

The first field of "the O.R. is yours" conveys an idea that persists, despite the difficulties of the current Brazilian prison system (Tavares & Menandro, 2004), especially female prisons (Pimentel, 2016), that mothers should continue to be almost fully responsible for their children. The field "the O.R. is yours" seems to agree with the results of other studies addressing motherhood and motherhood in prison (Ferreira-Teixeira & Aiello-Vaisberg, 2017; Halasi, 2018; Schulte, Gallo-Belluzzo & Aiello-Vaisberg, 2019; Visintin & Aiello-Vaisberg, 2017).

This field seems to indicate the naturalization of motherhood to the extent in which not only is the concrete context of life of these mothers disregarded, but they are also required to be fully responsible for providing care to their babies as if they

were the most fit for the task (Moura & Araújo, 2004), as the following excerpt shows: *"If I knew I was pregnant, I would not have gone to the drug dealer. It is scary realizing that you are going to have a child in prison."* Data indicate that an imprisoned mother feels hopeless and experiences feelings of guilt (Ambrosio; Aiello-Fernandes & Aiello-Vaisberg, 2013; Aiello-Vaisberg 2017).

Even though mothers are considered the ones to be responsible for their babies, there is also another field of affective-emotional meaning indicating that an imprisoned mother would be incompatible with motherhood. Thus, the field "Do you think you're a mother?", which also provides a foundation for the collective imaginary towards the imprisoned mother, portrays a situation that may even aggravate their suffering.

In certain situations, when affection is established between a mother and baby and there is a legal right to home confinement, babies are forcibly separated from their mothers (Gomes, Souzas, Oliveira, Santos & Esteves, 2018). That is, considering a model of motherhood idealized some centuries ago (Halasi, 2018), this separation is considered a violence. The history of Bruna is a moving example: *"At the moment you do something wrong, you know you'll come here to pay. But, how do they* [the children] *deal with it emotionally? At school, their mother is not going to the parent-teacher conferences. Their friends will visit and ask for their mothers. It messes with them."*

The collective imaginary of imprisoned mothers, as portrayed in the news, is clearly contradictory. On the one hand, mothers are supposed to take care of their children, but at the same time, they experience recriminations for being momentarily in detention. On the other hand, motherhood is seen as a possibility to salve these women, indicating that motherhood is still greatly valued by society. The field "Redeeming motherhood" would be a response to the first two fields. From an unconscious point of view, becoming a mother would be a realization for women, so that an imprisoned mother could redeem herself from her problems by having a child. Such an idea, which disregards these women's concrete life conditions, denies the various dimensions of human life, putting women in a perverse situation in which inmates would sometimes be considered fully responsible for their children while experiencing recriminations for having become mothers.

Therefore, imprisoned mothers constantly face two opposing ideals of motherhood. A potential consequence of this would be guilt, something quite common in the experience of modern motherhood. Recent studies corroborate this idea, as reported by Halasi (2018). "*I changed my life and it seems that everything becomes*

*more difficult. In the middle of last year, I got arrested and I was pregnant. I thought that God was working for me to change my ways. God is ridding me of something out there. To change my mind.*"

Considering not only the limitations of the source of the data, but also the scope that is inherent to a scientific initiation project, this study sheds light on the importance of concrete conditions amidst which human relationships take place. Because of social, economic, institutional, legal and historical-cultural determinants, imprisoned mothers are faced with a situation that needs to be changed, considering a fundamental respect for humankind. Caring for a baby under sufficiently good living conditions (Winnicott, 1960/2018) necessarily requires to give strong consideration to caregivers who assume parental tasks, father and mother roles, through cultivating a sufficiently good social environment in which respect, solidarity and equalitarian values prevail, while at the same time social distress with the potential to cause helplessness, humiliation, injustice and guilt are minimized.

References

Ambrosio, F. F., Aiello-Fernandes, R., & Aiello-Vaisberg, T. M. J. (2013). Pesquisando sofrimentos sociais com o método psicanalítico: considerações conceituais. In *L. S. L. P. C. Tardivo, & T. M. J. Aiello-Vaisberg. Anais da XI Jornada Apoiar Adolescência: Identidade e sofrimento na clínica social.* Instituto de Psicologia/USP. São Paulo, SP.

Bleger, J. (2007). *Psicologia de la conducta.* Buenos Aires: Paidós. (Original publicado em 1963).

Chinalia, M. J. S. (2017). *O Sofrimento Emocional de Mulheres Presas por Furtos de Bagatela: Estudo Psicanalítico*. Tese de doutorado, Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Campinas, Campinas

Diuana, V., Corrêa, M.C.D.V., & Ventura, M. (2017). Mulheres nas prisões brasileiras: tensões entre a ordem disciplinar punitiva e as prescrições da maternidade. *Physis: Revista de Saúde Coletiva, 27*(3), 727-747. doi: https://dx.doi.org/10.1590/s0103-73312017000300018

Ferreira-Teixeira, M. C., & Aiello-Vaisberg, T. M. (2017). Maldade, drogas ou desespero: o imaginário sobre a mãe que abandona seu bebê. *Memorandum: Memória e História em Psicologia*, 33, 128-141.

Gomes, S. A. A., dos Santos, A. M., Souza, A. J., de Oliveira, L. G. B., & Esteves, J. L. N. (2018). Substituição da prisão preventiva ou provisória para prisão domiciliar das gestantes ou mães de filhos menores de 12 anos. *Revista do Curso de Direito do Centro Universitário Brazcubas*, *2*(1).

Fernandes, R. A. (2018). *Racismo e Psicanálise em Produções Acadêmicas.* Tese de doutorado, Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Campinas, Campinas

Halasi, F. D. S. (2018). *A mulher brasileira contemporânea e a maternidade da culpa.* Dissertação de Mestrado, Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, São Paulo

Herrmmann, F. A. (1991). *Andaimes do real: o método da psicanálise*. São Paulo: Brasiliense. (Original publicado em 1979).

Mariano, G. J. dos S., & Silva, I. A. (2018). Significando o amamentar na prisão*. Texto & Contexto - Enfermagem, 27*(4), e0590017. doi: https://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0104-07072018000590017

Martins, M. A. D. S. (2016). *Filhos concebidos no cárcere: mães apenadas do Complexo Penitenciário Anísio Jobim–COMPAJ*. Tese de doutorado, Universidade Federal do Amazonas, Manaus.

Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública. (2016). *Levantamento Nacional de informações penitenciárias INFOPEN – Mulheres.* Brasília: Departamento Penitenciário Nacional - Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública. Disponível em: http://depen.gov.br/DEPEN/depen/sisdepen/infopen-mulheres/infopenmulheres_arte_07-03-18.pdf

Morgan, M. (2017). *Extreme and Persistent Inequality: New Evidence for Brazil Combining National Accounts, Surveys and Fiscal Data, 2001-2015.* Disponível em http://wid.world/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Morgan2017BrazilDINA-.pdf .

Moura, S. M. S. R. D., & Araújo, M. D. F. (2004). A maternidade na história e a história dos cuidados maternos. *Psicologia: ciência e profissão*, 24(1), 44-55.

Pimentel, E. (2016). As marcas do patriarcado nas prisões femininas brasileiras. *Revista Eletrônica da Faculdade de Direito de Pelotas*, *2*(2).

Politzer, G. (1928). *Crítica dos fundamentos da psicologia.* Lisboa: Presença. (Originalmente publicado em 1928).

Tavares, G. M., & Menandro, P. R. M. (2004). Atestado de exclusão com firma reconhecida: o sofrimento do presidiário brasileiro. *Psicologia: Ciência e profissão*, *24*(2), 86-99.

Silva, I. C. D. (2018). Análise da construção discursiva das leis Maria da Penha e do feminicídio. Dissertação de Mestrado, Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto, Ouro Preto.

Schulte, A. D. A., Gallo-Belluzzo, S. R., & Aiello-Vaisberg, T. (2019). A experiência emocional de autoras de mommy blogs. *Estudos Interdisciplinares em Psicologia, 10*(1), 107-130.

Visintin, C. D. N., & Aiello-Vaisberg, T. M. J. (2017). Motherhood and social suffering

in Brazilian mommy blogs. *Revista Psicologia-Teoria e Prática*, 19(2), 108-116.

Winnicott, D. W. (2018) *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment.* London, Routledge, Karnac Books (Original publicado em 1960).