

A psychological study on mother-child co-detention in the Italian prison system

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Abstract- This study addresses the issue of mother/child co-prisoners, from a psychological point of view. In general, children living in prisons live in unfavourable socio-environmental conditions that affect their natural and serene development, leading the public opinion to consider them real "innocent prisoners". As is well known, prison deprives the mother of her total autonomy in the management of her child and alters the natural daily rhythms of life that characterise a free and social life. Bowlby's attachment theory, the main scientific reference point for the study, underlines the importance of the close relationship between the development of the world of affection and environmental conditions, with particular emphasis on the child's exchanges with the caregiver. On the basis of this specific relationship and the quality of maternal responses to the child's needs, the child, in the case of co-prisoners, will be led by the mother's hand into a world of bars that does not belong to him, living an experience that he often does not understand but that could guide his behaviour throughout his life, especially after separation from his mother, for example due to a long sentence to be served.

Index Terms- co-detention, mother, child, body development, attachment.

I. INTRODUCTION

The right of the child not to be separated from his or her parents is internationally recognised. A parent's entry into the criminal justice system, whether charged with a criminal offence or executed, is not in itself a sufficient condition for considering parental responsibility to have lapsed. It is also true that the demands of social security for a mother or father who has committed a criminal offence cannot be disregarded a priori on account of parenthood. When these two factors coexist, a paradoxical situation can arise: the entry of an innocent child into a penal institution following the parent. International conventions and Italian national legislation address this issue by considering both the specificity of the adult (mother) and the reality of the child accompanying her. Despite this, a limited number of families continue to be permanently confined in Italian prisons with children in tow: on 31 December 2021, the number of mothers in prison is 16 with 18 children in tow (Italian Ministry of Justice 2021). The paths that have been and are being followed to tackle this phenomenon are different and involve a wide network of institutional and private social actors. While institutions and public opinion are questioning the issues of child protection, civil rights and overcrowding in penal institutions, there are "innocent" children condemned to prison life; these are the children of female prisoners who grow up, during their first three years of life, inside a prison structure (Antigone 2020). The phenomenon of children in prison with imprisoned mothers is constantly growing and has a high social impact because it represents the disintegration and transformation of the fundamental unity between mother, father and child and is configured as a kind of institutional abuse (Bellantoni 2017). The numbers are much higher if we consider all the minors, but older than three years, who remain far from their mothers and the newborn babies that mothers prefer not to take with them to prison, but to entrust them to their relatives (Forcolin 2020). Prison is a place of great suffering that renders one powerless, causes identity crises, disheartens and generates a feeling of anger towards society. Historically, from the early 19th century, the custody of women was entrusted to other women, initially nuns. Women's religious congregations entered Italian prisons in 1862 and remained there until the establishment of the Prison Police Corps. Today, apart from a few special cases, the management of institutions is also entrusted to men, who often determine the style and manner of relationships (Campelli, Facciola, Giordano & Pitch, 1992). It would be desirable to have a model of women's prison closer to a model of civil habitation, with female reference figures who are able to activate educational paths aimed at resocialisation, vocational training and the revision and intensification of family relationships, since the majority of women prisoners are also and mainly mothers (Mantovani 2020; Benelli 2012). The law allows prisoner mothers to keep their children with them until they reach the age limit. In Italy, children are admitted to prisons until the age of three, at which age they are separated from their mothers and entrusted to family members living outside or to third-party families. Childhood in prison develops in an unnatural context that affects the psychophysical development of the child, who is forced to live in a very difficult environment that is not suitable for his or her growth, an environment made up of bars on the windows and gates that regulate entry and exit together with the mother (Cattarin 2012). All this also has repercussions on the mother, who begins to experience states of anxiety and distress in view of the separation from her child, when the child turns three. Even if there are real legal benefits that can be granted to mothers or pregnant women, in fact, imprisonment is still the conclusion that the vast majority of them come to, given the lack of adequate facilities for this particular

type of prisoner or their social dangerousness (Malizia 2012). The only answer is that the sentence cannot be served in a totally intramural manner. Using the latter as a starting point, there have been recent attempts at a solution, but these have seen a major territorial limitation in their direct application, due to the insufficient numerical demand that this issue has. Mothers are given the possibility to undertake personalised paths with the aim of social recovery, aimed at a punishment that is more educational than detention, with a specific focus on education, training and accompaniment to work and cultural linguistic mediation (Lamarque 2017).

II. SOMATIC AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF IMPRISONMENT: GENERAL PROFILES

With regard to the physical and psychological consequences of imprisonment on the human being, prison conditions, dehumanises, modifies and worsens both physically and psychologically (La Rosa 2006). In this hellish microcosm, rhythms, habits and existential boundaries are altered. Prison changes everything: the being, thoughts, the way of walking, of loving, of believing, of hoping, of dreaming (Costanzo 2013). The prisoner feels above all rejected by society, altered, raped in his essential features. Paradoxically, punishment as physical suffering becomes, for the detained person, a kind of anaesthetic; the milder it is, the more it compels an assumption of responsibility (Concato & Rigione 2005). In prison, the perception of oneself as a "person without rights" takes shape. Prisoners are subject to the trauma of imprisonment due to the lack of intimacy, forced promiscuity and loss of affectivity (Rizzoli 2012). Prisoners become aware of their 'status' and become an 'anonymous figure in a subordinate group'. Inevitably, the detainee goes through a phase of crisis to overcome it, through a complex process of transformation. The responsible element for this phenomenon is the "deprivation of liberty", but also other factors contribute to "interfere with the psychosocial balance of the detainee": space, time, instinctive-affective needs and pre-existing ties, relational system (Manconi & Torrente 2015). A psycho-emotional imbalance occurs in every detainee due to the amplification and exaggeration of emotions. Anger, joy, reflection, sadness, fear can occur (Buffa 2006). Dostoevsky experienced prison life for ten years, arguing in 'Memories of the House of the Dead' that 'every man, whoever he may be and however disheartened he may be, even if instinctively, even if unconsciously, demands that his human dignity be respected. The prisoner himself knows that he is a prisoner, an outcast, and knows his place before his superiors; but with no mark, with no chain, can you make him forget that he is a man. But no mark, no chain, can make him forget that he is a man. And since he is indeed a man, he must also be treated humanely' (Favero 2011). Foucault (1993) emphasises that prison, imprisonment, hard labour, the penal bath, a ban on residence, deportation, etc., are always physical punishments. In prison, the body finds itself in the position of instrument or intermediary, caught up in a system of constraints and deprivations, obligations and prohibitions. In our societies, punitive systems must be placed in a certain 'political economy' of the body: even if they do not invoke violent or bloody punishment, even when they use 'gentle' methods that lock up or correct, it is still the body that we are dealing with - the body and its forces, its utility and docility, its distribution and submission (Foucault 1993). Ayres (2012) states that all studies of sensory stimulation have shown that it is indispensable, at any age, for the healthy development and maintenance of the personality and that it is a primary necessity. Our body is a body-in-relationship, its survival is closely linked to the possibility of establishing a relationship with others, without which life itself would be impossible. Prison certainly condemns one to have short sight: walls, doors and gates limit the horizon. The narrowing of the field of vision is linked to both the lighting conditions and the reduced horizon due to the confined space of the cell and the numerous gate gratings. Hearing becomes increasingly acute. Prisoners have to put up with shouts, calls and moans; the sound of keys turning in cell locks and gates; the loud noise of bar controls. Touch is also involved in this destructive and degrading action for humans, due to the deprivation of both contact with various types of materials (glass, metal, etc.) and physical contact with someone, as the simplest gestures that serve to show affection are missing (Ahn et al. 2004). There is not only the 'explicit' aggression of physical abuse but also the more subtle aggression of searches. Asthenia is more difficult to locate, but very common, as is lack of concentration, difficulty in making decisions, memory lapses and the inability to remember. In addition, there are intestinal transit disorders, which can be traced back to lack of exercise, diet, but also the fact that they always have to share the toilets. The cell is often a place of a different kind of silence. There is no walking: there is movement, a movement without a place, a perpetual and abstract movement, an exercise for the day when one will start walking again, free to go somewhere or other, or to stand still. Prison is a world of repetition, of reproduction. A place of waiting and simulated patience, of undoing and redoing, of suspended time. Jail is a theatre, and as in the theatre one even grows old in a rigged way (Sofri 1993). Imprisonment involves a real modification of the concept of the idea that each person has of himself. The process of identity alteration is called "reduction and alteration of the self" and occurs primarily because of the barriers that the institution erects between the prisoner and the outside world. According to Goffman (2010), the deprivation of important roles for the individual constitutes a first cause for the alteration of the self, leading in some cases to a serious lack of self-esteem. The same author states that another form of mortification of the self is given by the violation of one's private space. In prison there is no privacy: forced cohabitation is experienced as a kind of physical contamination. One of the moments in a prisoner's life when the phenomenon of contamination and invasion of the self can be observed is the personal and cell search. Often the way in which this procedure takes place is very violent. One can also speak of a contamination of the self linked to the spatial dimension. Fearing to invade the "territory" of others, prisoners tend to keep their distance from others in order to build their own inviolate corner of identity. Another phenomenon, which contributes to the mortification of the self, is the "circuit effect", which consists in the rupture of the usual relationship between the individual who acts and his acts.

III. PRISON AND THE MOTHER/CHILD BOND

Being a mother/prisoner is a difficult and painful condition. Being a prisoner means having to be away from your children for months or years. Being a mother in prison means not seeing your children grow up. Being locked up in prison with your child means being afraid of not giving what mothers give to their children. Those who choose to keep their children in prison often have no one to whom they can entrust them, but in many other cases, the reason why mothers keep their children with them is the need to have them close to them (Costanzo 2013). Others prefer to entrust their children to family members in order to spare them the traumatic experience of prison. It is not easy to establish which is the best choice, because perhaps there is not one. In addition to living in an environment unsuitable for normal psychophysical development, children in penal institutions are no longer allowed to live in prison when they turn three and are therefore removed from their mothers, unless the latter qualify for special home detention (Solomon & George 2007). Although proximity to the mother is of great importance for the child's development, children living in prison live in unfavourable socio-environmental conditions (Scanu 2013). The role that a mother would have in normal community conditions is limited by the norms in place within the prison. Mothers are allowed to interact with their children as they wish, as long as this is in accordance with the rules of the institution; it is therefore difficult to have a natural relationship with the child and to carve out a space with him that favours a serene development. Women with children in prison suffer from the constraints and traumas that their children are subjected to through no fault of their own; mothers with children outside prison torment themselves with the awful feeling of having abandoned them. In the latter case, the woman suffers from the sense of guilt of having abandoned her child, which is added to the burden of imprisonment (Cattarin 2012). The first three years of the child's life are spent in prison, among bars, policemen and restrictions on freedom and movement, even though the child has not committed any crime. This inevitably leads to a burden of frustration on the mother/child dyad. It is the prison institution that, taking into account the scarce parental autonomy acknowledged to the prisoner, intervenes in a series of daily issues related to the child: food, paediatrician or clothing. It also intervenes in external activities planned for the child: walks, vaccinations or accompaniment to the nursery, from which the mother is excluded (Caforio 2020).

IV. MOTHER/CHILD ATTACHMENT: THEORETICAL AND SCIENTIFIC PROFILES

Classical and modern psychology has always considered the attachment bond between mother and child of fundamental importance for development and that in a particular context, such as the prison context, can determine consequences on the personality of children, due to the early separation from the mother in infancy. The first author who proposed the concept of attachment was Bowlby (2018), who elaborated the theory of attachment focusing, in particular, on the nature of the relationship between mother and child and on the consequences that a possible early separation from the mother in infancy can generate on children's personality. According to the author, the child, as soon as he is born, is led to develop a very strong bond with his mother or with his caregiver. According to Bowlby (2018), the mother figure has a fundamental importance for the child: the child's bond with the mother is the product of the activity of various behavioural systems, which predictably result in closeness to the mother. Since the ontogeny of these systems in children is slow and complex, and their rate of development varies greatly from one individual to another, it is not possible to define development during the first year of life in a simple way. However, when the child enters its second year, a fairly typical attachment behaviour can be observed, where the only stimuli that can put an end to a fearful experience or to the mother's distancing are the voice, the sight or the contact of the mother herself. Feeling in contact, even physical, with a loved one is fundamental for the child; deprivation of the need for attachment can have very serious consequences for children, as it represents a detachment from the secure base that is fundamental for the child's cognitive and emotional development. The child's need for attachment should be matched by the mother's ability to perceive and respond appropriately to the child's needs, signalled through crying, which can be of hunger, fear or pain. When the baby perceives a danger, the attachment system is activated by implementing the typical behaviours, such as crying that tends to attract and maintain the closeness of the mother, so that a condition of security is re-established. The attachment system will be conditioned by the external environment. Once the perception of danger has been eliminated, the child will begin to explore again. Bowlby (2018) distinguishes four stages of attachment: 1. orientation and signals without discrimination of the person; 2. orientation and signals directed towards one or more discriminated persons; 3. maintenance of proximity to a discriminated person; 4. formation of a reciprocal relationship correct according to the purpose. Tendentially, but not necessarily, attachment develops in the second phase. The older the child gets, the more the awareness of a possible detachment from the mother increases (Verardo 2016). The child carries out a gradual process: during the first year, he cries and protests when he is put in the cot; then, when he notices that the mother disappears from his sight. Finally, when the mother moves away, the child is distracted by other things and protests when it actually perceives that she is no longer there. After the first year of age, the child is increasingly alert to its mother's movements and, on the basis of the mother's behaviour, will be able to anticipate her departure and protest even before it happens. Up to the age of three, most children despair when their mothers leave. After the age of three, children are increasingly able to accept a temporary departure from their mother. After the age of three, most children feel safe in an unfamiliar environment, with secondary attachment figures such as a teacher or relative. This sense of security is subject to certain conditions: the secondary figures must be known persons, whom the child has known preferably in the presence of the mother; the child must be healthy and calm; the child must know where the mother is and must be sure of being able to resume contact with her (Bowlby 2018). In his studies Bowlby also deals with the psychopathology linked to an early detachment from the attachment figure, also based on the observations of Robertson (Turin 2019), who describes the condition of the child between fifteen and thirty months, who has enjoyed a reasonably secure relationship with the mother and has not suffered previous separation

from her, who reacts to the separation usually with a highly predictable behavioural sequence, divided into three phases depending on the predominant attitude towards the mother. These are the protest phase, the separation phase and the detachment phase. In the protest phase, the child, in the grip of severe distress, tries to get the mother back by exploiting her limited resources. Crying and rejection of substitute figures trying to assist him are manifest. In the separation phase the child's interest in the distant mother is still evident, but at the same time the loss of hope of seeing the mother again grows. In the third phase, of detachment, protest and desolation are followed by interest in the environment (Ramasso 2006). The child in this third phase accepts the care, food and toys offered and can even be sociable and smile. However, when the mother comes to visit, the child hardly seems to recognise her, may remain distant and apathetic and, instead of crying, will turn away from her listlessly, as if he had lost all interest in her. If the child temporarily attaches himself to other reference figures, each of whom then abandons him, with time the child will no longer invest in feelings towards other people. The child will become increasingly withdrawn and turn its desires to material things. This may mean that neither the mother's closeness nor that of anyone else seems to have any importance for him anymore (Sarti 2012).

V. THE THREE TYPES OF ATTACHMENT IN THE "STRANGE SITUATION"

Bowlby's (2018) theory has inspired a large and fruitful research movement. The expression "maternal deprivation" is often used to indicate a separation of the child from the mother (prison may be one of them); it can be used to indicate all unsatisfactory forms of interaction between mother and child; it can be proposed to indicate the generic nature of the mother-child relationship, such as to produce a confused and distorted relationship (Janetsian-Fritz et al. 2018). In the prison context, the relationship between mother and child is not free to express itself in a natural way. Ainsworth (2006) carried out a series of researches on separation anxiety, based, in particular, on systematic and repeated observations over time of the interactions between mother and child, during the first year of the child's life. They observed the ways in which attachment and interaction with the mother influenced the child in a particular situation: the 'Strange Situation'. The Strange Situation is a standardised observational procedure designed to assess the child's attachment and exploration behaviour in increasingly stressful conditions caused by the removal of the reference figure, usually the mother, or the arrival of a stranger. Ainsworth (2006) believes that the child's attachment to the mother is mediated by behavioural patterns that include not only smiling, crying, pushing, clinging and following the mother but also looking, vocalisations and greeting responses of various kinds. It has also been argued that one of the most important criteria for a healthy attachment is the ability to use the mother as a secure base when exploring the environment. The procedure takes place in a special laboratory, set up like an amusement arcade, where one can observe, through a mirror, what happens during the succession of a series of events aimed at activating the child's attachment behaviour. Four observers were used. The Strange Situation consists of eight episodes:

- The first episode consists of mother, child and observer; it lasts about thirty seconds. The observer introduces the mother and child into the experiment room. The room contains toys. The observer leaves.
- The second episode consists of the mother and the child and lasts three minutes. The mother puts the child down, then sits on the chair and pretends to read a magazine. She is told to answer calmly if the child asks her anything and, if necessary, to reassure him, but not to try to attract him.
- The third episode consists of mother, child and a stranger. Three minutes. The stranger enters, greets the mother briefly, then sits silently in his seat. After one minute he is signalled to start a conversation with the mother. After another minute he is instructed to attract the child's attention, gradually approaching him and seeking interaction. At the same time the mother sits in silence.
- The fourth episode involves only the child and the stranger. Three minutes (shortened episode if the child was particularly agitated). The mother is instructed to leave the room quietly, leaving the bag on her chair, while the stranger distracts the child. The stranger then returns in silence, but if the child is anxious about the mother's absence, he tries to distract or comfort her.
- The fifth episode again consists of mother and child and varies in duration. The mother returns and greets the child while the stranger leaves.
- In the sixth episode, which lasts three minutes, the mother again leaves the room leaving the child alone, after greeting him and leaving the bag on the chair.
- In the seventh episode the stranger re-enters, trying to interact with the child for two minutes and to console him for the mother's absence, if necessary. The duration is between two and five minutes.
- In the eighth and final episode, the mother re-enters the room, talks to the child, and finally takes the child in her arms, concluding the episode.

Ainsworth (2006), thanks to the observation of exploratory behaviour (exploratory locomotion, exploratory manipulation and visual exploration) and the emotional reactions of the child in the presence and absence of the mother, made a classification of the type of attachment that binds the child to the mother. The main attachment styles found are: secure attachment, insecure attachment of the anxious-ambivalent type and insecure attachment of the anxious-avoidant type. These different attachment styles are related to the mother's relationship with the child from the first months of life. Secure attachment is found in children whose mothers were sensitive to their needs, interpreted their signs of distress and gave them affection and security. The mothers of children with anxious- ambivalent

attachment, while not showing rejection, seem to be insensitive to the signals sent by the child and unable to interact and show affection. Finally, the mothers of avoidant children were perceived as avoidant, with explicit attitudes of rejection and often anger.

VI. THE FOURTH CATEGORY OF CHILD BEHAVIOUR

Main and Solomon (1986), in order to describe different types of frightened, strange, conflicting or disorganised behaviour, not identified or not classifiable in the other categories, introduced a fourth category of child behaviour to the Strange Situation, defined as "disorganised-disoriented behaviour", which is characterised by a manifest contradiction of movement that seemed to correspond to a contradiction on the behavioural level. They therefore showed a certain disorganisation. In the Strange Situation devised by Ainsworth (2006), these children show disorganised and strange behaviours, such as remaining motionless, covering their eyes at the sight of their mother or rocking. These behaviours are attributed to forms of abuse or maltreatment suffered by the child from the parent, or to unresolved trauma associated with the primary attachment figure. Main (2008) argues that unresolved trauma in the parent may underlie certain involuntary behaviours in the parent, referred to as 'frightened and/or frightening'. When a child who is alarmed for any reason seeks the closeness of his or her parent, who in turn is frightened and/or frightening, this can lead to 'disoriented and/or disorganised' behaviour in the child. These children lack a coherent and secure attachment strategy. In children displaying disorganised behaviour, highly contradictory behavioural elements can be noted; attachment seeking behaviour is followed by avoidance behaviour, and vice versa. This is considered to be the manifestation of a contradictory sequence of expected behaviour. A child may readily greet the returning parent and express a desire to be held, but then suddenly change attitude and become avoidant (Eagle 2008). The manifestation of contradictory behaviour can also be simultaneous: at the sight of the parent, children approach the parent but walk backwards, or with their head turned away. Disorganised children do not seem to have a coherent strategy for dealing with the tension of separation and reunification with the caregiver. Several studies have shown a close correlation between the child's disorganised behaviour and the mother's failure to cope with traumatic experiences of loss (Seligman 2018). The child has the right to full parenting. Parenting is not only a right, but first and foremost a duty for parents. But when these parental relationships take place on a daily basis in a prison environment (as in the case of imprisoned mothers), or involve occasional meetings with an imprisoned parent, certain material conditions are necessary to allow them to cultivate, during imprisonment, an educational and affective relationship with their children, exercising parenting, even in a condition of imprisonment, and maintaining a mutual frequentation that does not dissolve family ties (Iori 2014).

VII. CONCLUSION

It is widely agreed that children's development is characterised by a complex and delicate interaction between their growing competences and the opportunities offered by the environment. It seems reasonable to affirm that the prison environment, in its structural and relational aspects, significantly limits the child's field of action, not providing adequate stimuli and contributing to the development of some risk factors for the growth and development of the personality. The fact that institutions are not a suitable place for optimal psychophysical development of the child is quite intuitive; however, it would be possible to promote harmonious growth within the structures, through constant and targeted individual and group interventions, with particular attention to the needs and personal characteristics of the child and the mother, accompanying them in their daily life with all the problems that follow and with the elaboration of the future experience of separation. In addition, the availability of alternative measures should be made more accessible. It is essential that adequate alternative facilities are set up, without which there is a risk that nothing will change or that the situation in prisons will deteriorate further as the age at which children can remain with their mothers increases. Play is perhaps the means by which children acquire their identity, their sense of self and distinguish themselves from others. Through play the child can control his aggression by organising it in a social function and can also control a frustrating reality by overcoming experiences of suffering. Playful activity would be useful for repeating and reworking frustrating and emotionally burdensome situations. The "key game", which is frequently observed in prisons, where children imitate the symbolic action of opening and closing doors, seems to be an expression of the attempt to elaborate the situation of segregation. This leads to the impression that the easy adaptation to the prison environment visible in children is more apparent than effective. In this sense, the possibility of repeating an event experienced as negative, of being able to modify and enrich it, leads the child to alleviate a state of tension that could lead to suffering if it remained unexpressed. It is therefore of great interest that in the prison environment children can express themselves freely through play. The spaces in which children play in prisons are often the nursery areas, the organisation of which is dictated by rules that provide for arrangements that are aimed as much as possible at promoting a serene and stimulating atmosphere, such as the location of the area on the ground floor in order to annex green spaces. In some prison nurseries, attempts are made to make the place more welcoming, with graffiti on the walls depicting animals, cartoons and colourful furniture. However, a space with stimulating structural characteristics is not enough if the child is not stimulated to relate. The question is not whether the child plays inside the prison, but how much, when, how and with whom. Through play the child can create a balance between the demands of the adult world and the possibility of dealing with situations that are not always understandable. Play can also help the child to cope with fears and frustrations transmitted consciously or unconsciously by the mother.

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