‘You feel like you’re doing something’: Foodcare as a family practice in the space of the prison visiting room

Abstract

Prison visits are important opportunities for those incarcerated to see their family members and maintain and strengthen family relationships. However, prison visits can be experienced as a stressful environment where family members lack control. This paper advances understandings of the prison visiting room as a space for foodcare – one that presents opportunities for incarcerated women and their family members to ‘re-do’ family by demonstrating care through food choices. Consuming refreshments together and purchasing items that would ‘treat’ incarcerated family members helped to evoke memories of eating together in childhood or prior to incarceration. The qualitative data from incarcerated women in a prison in England and their visiting family members documented how restrictions brought in concerning refreshments in the Covid-19 pandemic temporarily eliminated opportunities for family foodcare. Furthermore, when refreshments were re-introduced in a limited way, they were interpreted negatively due to an assumption that their pre-packaged nature meant they were lacking care, simultaneously demonstrating the social and familial importance of refreshments within the space of the prison visiting room.

Key words:

food, families, prison, qualitative, commensality

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Introduction

Maintaining meaningful family ties between those in prison and their family members is viewed as important in terms of reducing re-offending and maintaining order within prisons (National Offender Management Service, 2011, updated 2021, Farmer, 2019). Food is regarded as an important aspect of visits, with Prison Service Instruction (PSI) 16/2011 stating that visitors should be 'able to purchase snacks and hot/cold drinks during their visit' and visitor feedback should be taken into account (National Offender Management Service, 2011: 9). There are important limitations to the agency of families here because while refreshments can generally be purchased in the visiting room they cannot be brought in from outside (eliminating the possibility of providing home cooking for incarcerated loved ones) and they cannot be taken away at the end of the visit – they need to be consumed in that space. While studies have explored important aspects of visits including visitor treatment by staff (Moran, 2011; Dixey and Woodall, 2012; Hutton, 2016; Moran and Disney, 2018) more detailed information is needed about how refreshments contribute to the interactions between family members and incarcerated women in the space of the visiting rooms.

This paper explores the prison visiting room as a space that presents opportunities for family members to show care through food. Here, we utilise foodcare, a concept combining food-labour and care. This concept was developed to illuminate different emotional and practical inputs which family members, particularly mothers feeding the family on low incomes, put into feeding practices (Parsons, Harman and Cappellini, 2024). Connecting with Skeggs' (2011) writing on value and the intersections with selfhood, previous research has demonstrated that foodcare can be a way for low-income mothers to avoid devaluation within a wider context which stigmatises working class cultural practices, by offering them an alternative to the logic of capital for the demonstration of self-worth (Parsons, Harman and Cappellini, 2024). In their conclusion, Parsons, Harman and Cappellini (2024) also suggest the value of looking at how foodcare materialises in different locations and spaces. In this paper, we argue that the prison visiting room is an important space for foodcare– distinct in its salience for family members separated by incarceration.

Focusing on foodcare involves exploring the affective and moral dimensions of taking care of others (Parsons, Harman and Cappellini, 2024) which includes emotion work and is located within a wider political context. Here, we draw on the work of radical care theorists (Tronto, 1993; The Care Collective, 2020; Segal 2023) who illuminate the politics of care. For example, Segal (2023:1) notes that significant numbers of people in the UK 'now suffer from a serious lack of care, evident in the widening inequalities in illness and mortality rates' in a wider context of austerity policies since 2010. Tronto (1993) argues that caring practices are central to the functioning of society and thus have political implications. From this perspective, an ethic of care is vital because democracy itself can be undermined by systematic failures of care (Tronto, 1993). This body of literature emphasises the problems of

neoliberalism -including the marketisation of care infrastructures- and the extent of human interdependence which was particularly accentuated during the Covid-19 pandemic, revitalising conversations about care (The Care Collective, 2020). As demonstrated in the Corston Report, women in prison are likely to be highly represented among those suffering lack of care and also experiencing various forms of harm and abuse (Corston, 2007). Given the relative vulnerability of the women's prison population, the prison visiting room is an important space for family members to re-connect, which we situate in light of the widespread impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on family life, which placed limits on the capacities to practice 'foodcare'.

Morgan's concept of 'doing family' (1996; 2011) invokes the way in which families are created and reified through a series of practices including feeding children and celebrating birthdays. These doings are also displayed to others (Finch, 2007); both those within the family and external audiences (Harman and Cappellini, 2015). The existing literature shows that cooking for family members is a practical and material aspect of care interlaced with cultural expectations around motherhood and femininity (Cairns and Johnston, 2015; Parsons, 2015). Providing food within families is a task often falling to women (Bowen, Brenton and Elliot, 2019; Cairns and Johnston, 2015; DeVault, 1991) and research has found that food work often comes with mixed emotions as a 'complex, messy, joyful, creative, fraught process' (Bowen, Brenton and Elliot, 2019:219). Caring about food, and caring through food, is connected with cultural expectations around femininity (Cairns and Johnston, 2015). Home-cooked meals around a dinner table acquiring 'an almost mythical status' with food ideals framed as 'issues of morality' (Bowen, Brenton and Elliot, 2019:4). Qualitative research with families, however, tells us that the reality of families eating together can be challenging, due to the interactive nature of food work with parents

negotiating child agency and food preferences (Anving and Sellerberg, 2010; Anving and Thorsted, 2015; Lindsay et al, 2021), as well as parents being under various pressures including those relating to paid work, finances, and balancing different roles (Brannen and O'Connell, 2016). Family diversity also matters, with social class and ethnicity highlighted as important factors connecting to social and cultural expectations around food and access to resources (Bowen, Brenton and Elliot, 2019; Cairns and Johnston, 2015; Swan, Perrier and Sayers 2024).

Prison visiting rooms can be seen as a unique space connecting the inside of the prison, to life outside of the prison walls (Moran, 2011; Foster, 2019; Adams 2022). In this sense it is an 'exceptional space', whereby those incarcerated can express emotions that are not necessarily manifested in the mainstream prison (Jewkes and Laws, 2021). The visiting room presents opportunities for those incarcerated and their families to perform roles connected to the outside including maternal and paternal roles (Moran and Disney, 2018; Baldwin, 2018). Baldwin and Abbott (2024) advocate for increased understanding of the 'maternal pains of imprisonment' which includes 'layered shame' (Baldwin and Abbott, 2024: 94). This links to a sense of 'the loss of a 'good' maternal identity' (Baldwin and Abbott, 2024: 96), a subjective feeling which also relates to negative ways in which mothers in prison perceive they are viewed by others. Guilt has also been found to be a common emotion for mothers in prison, which sometimes manifests as anxiety (Baldwin and Abbott, 2024: 97). When mothers are incarcerated this can create practical, financial and emotional strains for other relatives (often parents and siblings) who may undertake additional caring responsibilities for children as a result (Epstein, 2012). Given this, the way in which emotions interact with experiences of consuming food in the visiting room of women's prisons has key analytic importance.

People in prison have extremely limited opportunities to eat with their family members. While existing literature notes that time and space are important factors influencing family practices (Morgan, 2011), less has been written about the way in which the unique space of the prison visiting room might be important for food consumption practices. A unique aspect of the visiting room is that it offers family members who are and are not incarcerated the opportunity to consume food in the same space. Commensality refers to eating together, a practice which helps to develop and sustain relationships (Sobal and Nelson, 2003). Parsons (2018), for example, discusses commensality amongst a group of men working at a resettlement scheme. This was found to evoke memories of previous family practices, like those experienced in childhood (Parsons, 2018). This paper argues that, due to both the cultural significance of family food practices and the unique and relatively stressful situation of prison visits, commensality in the space of the visiting room is an important way of practicing foodcare which can be important for both women in prison and their visiting family members.

Research Methods

The fieldwork took place in the visiting room of a medium-sized closed prison in South East England. The overall aim for this study was 1) to understand how food is utilised in the visiting room to strengthen familial ties between women in prison and their family members, 2) to explore the provision of food in the visiting rooms of a women's prison, and 3) to identify how food can contribute to women adopting their familial roles to bond with their relatives in the visiting room. Prior to commencement, this project received favourable ethical opinion from Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and the University where the investigators were based.

Participants were provided with an information sheet, invited to ask any questions they had and asked to sign an informed consent form prior to interview.

The study was conducted by a team of researchers with a mix of expertise across families, food and prisons, with all of the observations and interviews being conducted by one of the authors, a female researcher with experience of researching prison life. The refreshments at the visiting centre are run by a charity and staffed by a mix of paid staff and volunteers. The researcher spent time in this space and engaged visitors and staff in conversation, introducing the study and asking them if they would be interested in participating. Observations were recorded in relation to visitor numbers, the types of food available and being served, spatial layout including seating, pictures on the wall, and sensory notes including sound and smell. The food menus and price list were also recorded by taking photographs of these.

The research design sought to include both the perspective of incarcerated women and their visitors. Interviews took place between May 2022 and February 2024 with 20 participants (9 women in prison, 9 family members and 2 staff members). At the beginning of the research, restrictions were in place due to Covid-19, and these limited the refreshments available in the space of the visiting room. Initially they were not allowed at all and then they returned in the form of pre-packaged see-through bags available for purchase (see findings section). The study was funded by a British Academy small grant and was envisaged as a focused piece of research running alongside a larger ESRC-funded study on food in women's prisons (see McCarthy *et al.*, forthcoming) conducted at the same time. The larger study involved interviews with 80 women and 10 staff members across four prisons, as well as observations, focus groups, diaries, and art workshops[i]. The Covid context made recruitment more difficult for the study of food in the visiting room because there were fewer visitors

coming to the prison at this time, with visits being offered by video-call which were known as ‘purple visits’. This meant that we recruited 9 women and 9 family members instead of our intended target of 10 in each category. While recognising that women in prison receive other types of visitors and not just family members, the framing of the research funding bid which supported this data collection was centred on families, food and the visiting room and therefore this was the main focus of the research.

Visiting family members were recruited in person aided through the display of promotional material in the visiting room in the form of posters and flyers. This included five mothers visiting their daughters, two fathers visiting their daughters, one woman visiting her sister and one uncle visiting her niece. The interview guide included the relationship with the person they are visiting, their experience of doing so and also of food in the visiting room.

At the end of these interviews, the interviewer asked for permission to contact the person they were visiting to see if they were also willing to participate which resulted in a further 9 interviews with women in prison. They were being visited by a range of people with some having many visitors and others having far fewer. Interviews with the women focused on relationship and visitation with visiting loved ones, and experiences of food in the visiting room.

To gain a broader picture of the logistics of providing refreshments in the visiting room and its impact on family visits, two members of staff were also interviewed, with the first during the Covid restrictions and the second interview after they were lifted. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed by a professional transcription service. Data was stored on a secure fileshare housed by the university of the

research team. All names given within the paper are pseudonyms. The different forms of data were then analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2022). This process of coding involved at least two researchers independently coding the same transcripts to improve the reliability of the coding process. Within the research team, regular meetings took place to deliberate on coding, the suitability of general themes and sub-themes.

Research Findings: Setting the Scene

The visiting room at the prison was large, bright, and airy. The word ‘welcome’ was painted on the wall, and the walls were adorned with pictures including some of a gardening project. Tables and chairs were scattered around the room with a distance between them to give the women and their visitors privacy. There was also a sizable children’s play area to the right-hand side of the room, which was well-equipped with toys to help keep children entertained during visiting (e.g. a play kitchen, games, dressing-up outfits). There was also a table for crafts, and an area for reading with books and beanbags. Security-wise, there was a desk for non-patrolling prison staff to sit at and observe, and security cameras on the ceiling and corners of the room.

The tea bar was a small tuck-shop style space with minimal worktops and a counter for visitors to stand behind to make their refreshment selection. The laminated menu listed a section of ‘snacks’ including sandwiches, wraps, rolls, sausage rolls, pasties and slices, ‘cuppa soup’, yoghurt, fruit, crisps, nuts, sweets and popcorn. Hot drinks including instant coffee and tea, and cold drinks including water, juice and canned fizzy drinks were available as well as a selection of sweets and cakes.

The discussion of the interview data begins by highlighting the theme of lack of control in relation to prison visits as well as connected practical and emotional difficulties which participants highlighted. We then examine the opportunities for commensality in this space, which links to family memories of eating together in the domestic sphere. Here, we argue that food offers a way of diffusing tensions and demonstrating care – re-doing family. It also provided an opportunity for visitors to treat their loved one, but this also highlighted the immobility for those in prison who could not reciprocate by going to the counter and choosing or paying for refreshments for their visitors. Finally, we consider how the changes introduced in relation to Covid-19 reveal how important refreshments are in this space for providing care, when the grab-bags were seen as lacking this.

Prison visits and lack of control

Despite efforts to make the space appear welcoming, prison visits were seen a stressful environment for a meeting between family members, highlighting a relative sense of powerlessness and lack of control for both visitors and those being visited. Participants highlighted the long journey times which, while noted in the literature around family members visiting men's prisons (Dixey and Woodall, 2014), is exacerbated in the women's estate due to the fewer number of prisons. The average distance between a women's home and the prison in which they are held is 63 miles (Ministry of Justice, 2018). In our study, one mother explained that while her daughter's previous prison was an hour away from her home, now she had been moved into her current prison, visiting her has become a seven hour round trip. Many participants highlighted the emotional side of prison visits. Cleopatra explained that:

I look forward to it, but I'm also sort of nervous, you know, about my family coming into a prison because it can't be nice for anyone sort of thing... (Cleopatra, Woman in prison)

Shirley discussed the different facets of anxiety prior to being visited which included worrying whether the visit might be cancelled at short notice:

Even though you've spoken to them, and you know they are coming, they are on their way or things like that, you still have that anxiety that… are they going to come? Is the visit suddenly going to be cancelled because there's something kicking off in there and so they have to cancel it? So, you have all of that anxiety. Then obviously if you haven't seen the person for a while as well, you're like oh, what can you talk about? (Shirley, Woman in prison)

Others highlighted specific security procedures in place during visits as adding to the stress and the sense of it being a hostile environment. Patrick, a father visiting his daughter, described his experiences of visiting as 'chaotic' and lacking communication. For him, an important part of this was about the unpredictability in waiting times for entry: '*you can wait half an hour or an hour sometimes to get in. If your visitation is at two, sometimes you can be waiting until sort of, quarter to three'.* This account coveys a sense of powerlessness and frustration, being stood outside waiting to see his daughter not knowing when the visit will begin. Existing research has documented the waiting experiences of prisoners' families (Comfort, 2008; Foster, 2016; Hutton, 2016) noting that family members are also waiting before, and after the particular time of the visit, including for sentencing and release (Foster, 2016). Family members demonstrate various responses to the experience of waiting

for visits, including frustration (Foster, 2016; Adams, 2022), and feelings of being scrutinised, surveilled or treated with suspicion by staff members (Hutton, 2016). This is an example of how family members can experience secondary prisonisation (Comfort, 2008). What the present paper adds is an articulation of why, in light of these experiences of waiting and relative powerlessness, choice regarding food in the visiting room really does matter to family members and the women they are visiting.

As well as the difficulty waiting for the visit, several incarcerated participants suggested that the visible identifier the prison used to identify them – a yellow band worn around the waist – felt negative and stigmatising:

You have to wear a yellow dog tag over you like a lead, it's bloody awful… It just makes you feel… it's quite intimidating and it's quite totally unnecessary. (Carly, Woman in Prison)

Here, the reference to 'dog tag' and 'lead' shows that this was seen as a dehumanising experience, which can link to feelings of shame experienced by incarcerated women (Baldwin and Abbot, 2024), who often want to present themselves to their families as coping well in prison (Chamberlen, 2018). Yet despite such metaphors, the data also suggested that visiting rooms could be experienced as a warm and friendly space due the disposition of the staff, who are mainly volunteers in the tea bar. Vanessa, who was visiting her daughter, explained that:

I do suffer with anxiety, but the ladies are absolutely amazing and I don't know if you were there when she said, 'oh it's really nice to see you, I've missed you' because I

go to their little shop and buy stuff from the shop and things like that, I made it into a day out, if you get what I mean. (Vanessa, Visiting Family Member)

Such friendly interactions with tea bar staff helped to diffuse some of the stresses and to provide a friendly counterpoint to some of the seemingly de-humanising security processes described. Having arrived at the space of the visiting room, below we illustrate how refreshments act to diffuse tensions, normalise encounters and pass time together.

Re-Doing Family through Food

Refreshments in the visiting hall provided an opportunity for conversation, connection between family members and distraction from the prison environment. This helped to give a sense of transcending time and space. As one participant, Alice, said: '*I think providing food in a visits hall distracts you from that you're in prison*'. She explained that this is because it normalises the interactions:

Food makes it more comfortable. It makes it more… normal for families. I think that if… I mean I keep saying it, but if you're sat having a coffee and a sandwich, it doesn't matter where you are, as long you're with the people that you want to be with. (Alice, Woman in Prison)

The way in which food can normalise the encounter of a visit was echoed by Adele, a mother, describing visiting her daughter in prison:

It's not normal visiting somebody in prison. The many times we've been, it's still never normal. But it's quite anxiety inducing really for me and for her because she

doesn't see us very often and we're both sad that she's not at home. Even though she's doing really well. Yeah, so having something to nibble on, or say 'what do you want from the canteen, and do you want a… this is nice, Mum, try one of these', yeah, it's nice. It's like a distraction from where we really are. (Adele, Visiting Family Member)

In this way, refreshments acted as a point of conversation and a way of normalising the interaction (Foster, 2019). The data in the present study highlighted the importance of food as a means of bonding, and bringing 'a bit of normality' to the prison environment, thus recreating, or 're-doing' some aspects of family life (Adams et al., 2026) in the prison visits hall:

It's just like you're sharing something, if I have a packet of crisps, it just makes you engage with each other, if you have a sandwich, 'oh do you want half', yes, it's like at home, isn't it, if you have a family meal, you talk over having dinner. I guess for a lot of people, it will remind them of things they used to do outside. (Adele, Visiting Family Member)

By focusing on refreshments, some of the tensions of the context can be taken out of focus:

Ignore the officers patrolling, just block them out, and just pretend that you're just having a Sunday afternoon with your family, just having good conversation and that, so…. (Adele, Visiting Family Member)

Foster (2019) similarly identified that food has been a distraction for families while they wait for the visit to begin. Another woman in prison highlighted that food

consumption could be used to diffuse certain aspects of uncomfortableness or tension:

It's good for family, and your friends as well. If there were any awkward moments of silence, you can fill it by putting a crisp in your mouth can't you, so yeah… I think just food, you always associate food with social events don't you, so… yeah. (Sinead, Woman in Prison)

This echoes Adams (2022)'s observation that food can be used to fill silences between prisoners and their families. The context is likely the stress of the visit and the emotional guardedness of the interaction. Patrick, visiting his daughter, highlights that food provides a point of conversation and interest that can help to deflect away from difficult emotions and to ground the interaction in the present moment. He said:

We all know where she is and what she's done and everything else and that's by the by really. When we go and visit her, we go there to cheer her up, to make her happy and food is a big part of that because when we're all eating together, it's the family unit. (Patrick, Visiting Family Member)

In this way, consuming food together helped to bring family members together and to re-connect with, or 're-do' family roles pre-incarceration, and transcend the space of the visiting room.

Food connected to relationships outside of prison and helped to continue aspects of them that participants valued. Penelope, who was visiting her sister, spoke about their warm and humorous relationship which continued over food in prison:

I mean it's always and fun and laughter when I'm with her anyway because that's just the relationship we have, so I suppose it's not any different on location where it is… As long as we've got some food between us, and we can share it, we're alright.

Here she suggests that the close relationship with her sister and the wider identity of family was fully portable to different contexts – as long as food was available. She talked about food in this context as a way of diffusing tension and restoring a sense of the everyday: '*It definitely helps because it feels just more, like, natural as if, like, you're just on a picnic or something with that person'*. (Penelope, Visiting Family Member).

Foodcare through food choices

As noted in previous studies, the movements of people in prison are severely restricted on standard visits, where they must remain in their chair for the duration (Hutton, 2016). This means that only visitors can go up to the tea bar and choose items for those that they are visiting as well as themselves. Interestingly, while many women in prison said that would have preferred to be able to visit the tea-bar themselves, Penelope spoke about showing care through her food choices for her sister at the tea bar, saying *'she then realises that we remember her favourite things and that makes her happy*'. This does not mean that difficult emotions are not also present, but rather that they are enmeshed with food consumption practices: *'sometimes when she gets upset she'll still carry on eating. She's like crying but eating at the same time and that makes us laugh'.*

Our data highlighted that purchasing food for their family member in prison was an

opportunity to ‘treat’ their loved one and provide care, particularly in the wider context of prison food which is broadly experienced as low quality and often met with disgust by those required to consume it (Woods-Brown, Hunt and Sweeting, 2023). Some visitors discussed how purchasing items in the visiting hall for the person they are visiting can be seen as a ‘treat’ because it’s providing food that they might enjoy but wouldn’t usually get. Katherine, a mother visiting her daughter, conveyed in her interview that buying her daughter refreshments was a way of increasing the variety of food items she has access to. This was aimed at improving her daughter’s emotional well-being and providing a highlight to her day. In the context of incarceration and visiting arrangements where Katherine felt relatively powerless as a mother, this felt important to her as a way of being able to do something active and positive. This connects with the way in which mothering which is frequently associated with providing food for others, as highlighted by DeVault (1991) in her seminal work on feeding the family. The notion of ‘treating’ through food suggests making everyday activities more special and enjoyable and shows that the person receiving the treat is positively valued. In this sense, she is displaying her mothering to herself and her daughter (Morgan, 1996; Finch, 2007).

The possibility of ‘treating’ family members in this way was not available to incarcerated women who had to stay in their position and could not go up to the tea bar. One participant, Cleopatra, said of her visiting family members: ‘*they’re always treating us, and it would be nice to return the favour’.* She suggested it would be nice to occasionally be able to fill out a form and pay for visitors’ food herself as a way of treating them. This also meant that the women being visited were placed in a relatively infantilised position as they were the ones that items were being chosen for and paid for, reflecting their powerlessness within the prison regime (Crewe, Hulley

and Wright, 2017). This also means that at times, visitors without dietary requirements were trying to purchase for those with dietary requirements, sometimes without a full understanding of what they could and couldn't have.

Reconnecting with identity as 'mum'

When considering how food practices in the space of the visiting room connected with family role identities outside of prison, we focus particularly on the identity dimensions of motherhood, demonstrating the capacity for value accrual through the furthering of a sense of self as an active mother. This was important both for mothers visiting their daughters and incarcerated women who are mothers.

Adele explained that the visiting room provided an opportunity to share food with her daughter that was not otherwise available:

We don't get to share food with her ever. We haven't sat down at a table with her for a long, long time. So, when we do get to sit down and have something to eat it's really special. (Adele, Visiting Family Member)

For women in prison too, food could connect with their identity as a mother. Sinead described being incarcerated when her son was seven months old. She explained that she had started weaning him and then her husband needed to take over when she was imprisoned, although she still gave him some advice and input, she wasn't physically present. Being able to give new food to her baby son at visits and to see her son's reaction was a way of accessing this side of mothering which was very meaningful for her:

Although it's not food necessarily that I would have fed him at home, it's food that I can give him to try, just a small amount of, you know, he tried Quavers (crisps/potato

chips) the other day, and he loves them, he absolutely loved them. And he actually ate the whole packet before I realised how many he had eaten. (Sinead, Woman in Prison)

She explained how such interactions changed her sense of where she was and her social and material circumstances:

Just for those couple of hours you're in your head with your family, you're not thinking about, oh I've got to be back at roll call, you know, you are literally, sort of, like… it is those two hours that you escape being a prisoner. Even though… obviously you still are, you know, it's quite clear that we still are, but I feel almost like mum again for two hours. And being able to, you know, like I said, being able to feed (1 year old baby) stuff that he's not eaten before, you know, that's been lovely. Playing silly games with the kids. The other day they were playing 'can you fit a whole KitKat (chocolate bar) thing in your mouth sideways?' (Sinead, Woman in Prison).

This links to the gendered pains of imprisonment (Crewe, Hulley and Wright, 2017) and Baldwin's (2022) important findings on the sense of loss for incarcerated mothers. In Sinead's case, the interaction in the visiting room went a small way towards providing access to a type of practical mothering which she yearned for, but which was not otherwise available. She also described a sense of reconnection with mothering through the everyday act of cutting the crusts off of the sandwiches for her daughter in the space of the visiting room when she was in a previous prison. She additionally recounted examples of food as a source of fun with her older children and her parents during visits, describing competitions about how to eat KitKat and sour Haribo sweets without pulling funny faces. She also spoke positively about the

prison visiting centre giving her children easter eggs which helped to make the visits a more cheerful and less intimidating experience for them:

Although they know Mummy is in prison, it, kind of, makes it feel a little bit more, sort of, relaxed and more approachable for them.

As we have seen, mothers in prison also wanted to 'treat' their children in the space of the visiting room, to help normalise the situation, help them relax and enjoy the visit more and to provide refreshment. However, participants also made some recommendations for changes to the food provision so that they could prepare food for their children. For example, Kate said:

For the breakfast, for the children, for the early visit, I said you need to get some breakfast options, whether you get a toaster or something behind and I can just make them a slice of toast with some jam or something or the pots of porridge, where you just add the water to, just so they're having something, rather than having crisps.

These suggestions resonate with ideals of good mothering– demonstrating care through food choices (Harman and Cappellini, 2015), and an awareness of travel time and the implication for hunger and thirst. The limited ability to act on these concerns is illustrative of a wider discussion around the ways in which prison limits women's opportunities for mothering (Baldwin, 2018; 2022). While the women can be mothered by those who are able to 'treat' them in the visits hall, the prison takes on a parenting role for the children of incarcerated mothers by deciding what food is

available to them. In this way, the scope of food in the visits hall to 're-do' family is limited.

Lack of opportunities for foodcare: Restrictions during Covid-19

In many ways Covid-19 compounded difficulties for families with a loved one in prison (Barkas *et al*., 2021). Our data shows that restrictions concerning refreshments were viewed negatively by family members. In the strictest period of restrictions, not even being able to drink water during the visit was described as putting people off wanting to visit, or encouraging them to shorten the visiting time. Patrick talked about the impact of the lack of refreshments on the visits with his daughter:

It's very hard for us, I have to admit. When we get down there, you just know that you're in for two hours of… You want to go and obviously see your daughter, then you can't wait to get out because you want a cup of coffee or a sandwich. It's wrong. You shouldn't want to get out of seeing people. (Patrick, Visiting Family Member)

Furthermore, he described that they felt qualitatively different to pre-pandemic times:

You don't relax. You don't feel like… You feel like the visit is very formal where you want to… Where really you want to have a relaxed visit, a chat to your daughter and a bit of food. It makes it more like the outside than the inside.

Beatrice echoed these sentiments by highlighting the contrast between Covid and non-Covid times in terms of their visiting routine and practices around refreshments:

They'd get all their snacks, literally just lay them out on the table, and you get that kind of picnic vibe, where you're just sat there and you're just chatting and you're

picking at your nibbles and taking a sip of drink, so it just, it feels more sociable. Whereas, when you're just sat there with no food, you couldn't tell the difference between a social visit or a legal visit, it could be solicitors sat opposite, you just don't know, whereas the food it's just, I don't know, there's something about food that just relaxes you and just makes you feel good. (Beatrice, Woman in Prison)

During Covid-times, the 'picnic vibe' was lost because food was not available to help normalise the situation of meeting family members in the space of the visiting room. The act of sitting across the table from a friend or loved without the aid of food, drink or technology is unusual, and these experiences make visible the significant role that food plays in 're-doing' the family when family members are, individually and collectively, experiencing the consequences of imprisonment.

Re-emerging but limited opportunities for foodcare: grab bags

As Covid-19 restrictions changed, the prison visiting room introduced grab bags for sale, containing a fizzy drink, chocolate bar and packet of crisps which were available for £3 for a standard bag or £5 for a double bag (containing two of each item). Grab bags were criticised for their fixed content which did not always match family members' needs and tastes, but some families tried to overcome this by buying several and mixing the contents so that their loved ones' preferences could be met. As one Dad, Dennis, visiting his daughter described:

They were already made up so you couldn't pick what you wanted in reception. They were already pre-done, so in some of the bags there isn't always – there might only have been one item that somebody might have liked rather than let you pick and

make your own grab bag up. Instead of five items, like a KitKat, a Mars bar, plain crisps, some people don't like salt and vinegar or cheese and onion crisps, do they? They don't like Diet Coke, or they don't like Tango. So, it's all different stuff in these bags but somebody would go and buy two bags or three bags to get what they want to make it a one, if you follow what I mean? (Dennis, Visiting Family Member)

While the creation of a self-made combined offering across the different bags may create further financial burden for prison visitors, it also became a way to re-do care and demonstrate love within the very limited refreshments context in place during Covid-19. The wider context at the time was one where family members had experienced long periods of being unable to meet, with high levels of anxiety about health risks from coming into close physical proximity, combined often with distrust of government-led Covid-19 restrictions (Twamley *et al*., 2023). In this context, the creation of bespoke grab bags shows evidence of the creativity and competence needed to tailor the very limited offering to meet individual family members' needs in changing circumstances. Caring through customisation of bought pre-packaged and sealed items may not have been families' ideal scenario but it did provide a way of demonstrating foodcare.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the existing literature, foodcare has been associated with avoiding devaluation which might occur connected to a working class social class position, a fall in income and a lack of recourse to the market (see Parsons, Harman and Cappellini). In this study, families with a member in prison may also be conscious of family devaluation whereby the very fact of having a loved one in prison becomes associated with family dysfunction in certain media representations and political discourse (Jensen,

2018; McCarthy and Adams, 2023). This is because parental determinism is a key assumption in relation to contemporary parenting (Lee *et al*., 2014), as well as in relation to political discourse and media reporting, which often blames parents in general, mothers in particular. Through the focus on parental determinism, child outcomes are assumed to be due to parenting rather than other factors such as social class inequalities, the erosion of the welfare state or failures of care structures (Gillies, 2006).

This paper contributes to the existing literature on foodcare by showing why and how foodcare matters in the environment of the prison visiting room, and for family relationships in particular. Family foodcare can be defined as actions combining care and food-labour which help to strengthen family times. In the present study, opportunities to show foodcare are limited due to the institutional context and rules which govern the location in which foodcare occurs. Family members cannot cook a home-made meal or bake a cake and bring it into prison, for example. Neither can incarcerated women cook for loved ones in prison or gift food they have prepared to their families in the visiting room. Foodcare therefore rests on the purchase of refreshments available at the tea bar – typically snack items. In non-Covid times, careful choices at the tea bar could also demonstrate foodcare, but this was then reduced further in the context of Covid-19. By maintaining family roles through accentuating the limited food work that they can do, this helped family members to avoid devaluation and reaffirm family roles (Parsons, Harman and Cappellini), and to communicate to members that they are loved and they do constitute family members, despite their different physical locations (Morgan, 1996). It was a way of making a potentially hostile and unsafe institution feel more homely, albeit in a very limited way. Foodcare was therefore shown to have an important social role, helping

to ‘re-do’ family by diffusing some of the stresses of the visiting room situation and reconnecting with identities and memories outside of prison. These actions both recalled the past (e.g. sitting round the dinner table together as a family, where this was the case) and helped them to re-imagine a future post-incarceration, which invoked emotional sensitivities for family members. Sustenance and refreshment were just one part of the picture, but the social context of doing family through doing food was important. It was viewed as more salient because of the hostile and stressful environment of being within the prison walls, and also the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic separated family members and restricted everyday commensality. Refreshments therefore become a central way to re-do family in the stressful space of the prison visiting room.

The qualitative data shows how important the everyday and seemingly unremarkable food practices are in this space – both in the consumption of refreshments themselves, and in social the interactions around food (choosing refreshments, interacting with tea bar staff, bringing choices back to the table, display and consumption). The data also contributes to existing knowledge on incarceration and maternal loss by highlighting the role of food and family practices in the unique space of the prison visiting room. Further research could examine how foodcare operates during family visit days where incarcerated women may be able to cook and eat a meal with their family members. This is important because, whilst cautioning against unattainable and de-contextualised standards for family cooking (Bowen, Brenton and Elliot, 2019); women and their family members expressed the need for informal opportunities to prepare food and eat together. Opportunities to cook and eat together would allow women and their family members more of a naturalised interaction and a way to show practical care, as well as helping to open

up practices which might be in place post-release. Finally, and most notably, this paper demonstrates the importance of the prison service maintaining access to varied food during the prison visits and looking at ways to expand the offerings where possible, as this was so clearly important for women and their family members.

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[i] Overall 108 women in prison participated in at least one method of the study.