

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

Faculty

Applicant

Habilitation thesis

Reviewer

Reviewer's home unit, institution

Faculty of Social Studies

Mgr. Jitka Navrátilová, Ph.D.

The Erosion of Relational Anchoring as a Mechanism of Social Disadvantage among Children of Incarcerated Parents

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Thank you for the opportunity to review the scholarly work and research agenda of Mgr. Jitka Navrátilová. I am well-positioned to assess this work, having spent many years researching outcomes for children with incarcerated parents. I also worked as a social worker in U.S. justice systems, both inside prisons and in rehabilitation programs for individuals convicted of crimes, and served as a senior researcher for the Minnesota Council on Crime and Justice. As a licensed social worker and social work educator in the United States, I have trained undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students in this topic, with particular emphasis on the importance of relationships to child outcomes.

This is an important and understudied topic with implications for children, families, social work practice, and society more broadly. In preparing this review, I read Mgr. Navrátilová's habilitation thesis and the six scholarly works included in the submission.

I was asked to determine whether the submitted work fulfills the requirements of a habilitation thesis in social policy and social work. I was unable to obtain a statement detailing the specific requirements within the Czech system, which may differ from those applied in the United States. I have therefore based my assessment on the following criteria commonly used in reviews of social work scholarship:

- The overall quality and development of the scholarly agenda, including the significance of the topic to social work and the populations under study.
- The rigor and appropriateness of the research methods and theoretical frameworks, as well as their alignment with professional social work values.
- The degree to which the body of research contributes new knowledge and practice concerning children with incarcerated parents.
- The relevance of the findings to social work policy, practice, and future research.

Quality and Salience of the Scholarly Agenda

Mgr. Navrátilová demonstrates a clear and purposeful research trajectory. Her work draws on original empirical data while also placing it in a broader context and engaging a theoretical framework to explain how parental incarceration affects children and their sense of future life and opportunities.

The first two studies she provided establish the value of the Capability Approach for understanding the experiences and wellbeing of children receiving social services for various reasons. Mgr. Navrátilová persuasively argues that conventional assessments often emphasize economic disadvantage while overlooking the impact of social and relational disadvantage. This work lays a foundation for her subsequent application of the Capability Approach to children with incarcerated parents.

A major strength of this research agenda is its reliance on data collected directly from children. In the methodology chapter from *Parenting Behind Bars*, Mgr. Navrátilová recognizes not only the importance of hearing children's voices, but also the principle that children should participate in defining their own wellbeing. Although child participation is discussed in child-welfare scholarship, it remains inconsistent in practice and nearly absent in research and practice for this specific population. Mgr. Navrátilová's commitment to ensuring that children's experiences and opinions are heard places her work at the leading edge of this field and strengthens the practical relevance of her recommendations.

In *Needs of Children with Incarcerated Parents in Their Own Voice*, Mgr. Navrátilová explained that the study was part of the first major project in the Czech Republic to examine the circumstances of children with incarcerated parents. This alone demonstrates the significance of the work. Its qualitative design also captures important variations among children's experiences. For example, some children experienced financial hardship because their incarcerated father could no longer contribute income. For others, incarceration brought financial relief by ending a father's theft of family resources. Similarly, some children deeply missed a kind and loving parent, while for others incarceration brought an end to domestic violence in the home. These findings appropriately resist treating children with incarcerated parents as a homogeneous group.

Childhood in the Shadow of Bars, together with the preceding study, further examines the relational consequences of losing a parent to incarceration and the effects on children's sense of their future. She describes the critical factor as relational anchoring that children acquire when both parents remain in the home and in active relation with the children. Because disrupted relational anchoring can lead to social isolation, a loss of belonging, and affect one's belief in a fulfilling future, the impacts are critical to understand and address. These findings are closely aligned with the tenants of the Capability Approach. In a well-organized wrap-up, the final submitted study on professional identity nicely links her

research findings and agenda to the discipline of social work and demonstrates its applicability to professional practice and service delivery.

Taken together, these works form a coherent scholarly program rather than a series of disconnected studies. They move from conceptual development to empirical application and then to implications for social work practice for an underserved and understudied population.

Rigor of the Research Methodology

Overall, the habilitation thesis and the submitted publications demonstrate rigorous methodological work grounded in theoretical frameworks that are well suited to the topic.

One of the most striking strengths is the composition and size of the samples, particularly given the substantial qualitative component. In addition to including children in their samples, Mgr. Navrátilová and her colleagues include other stakeholders who provide critical perspectives, such as primary caregivers and incarcerated parents. This creates a more comprehensive account of parental incarceration while preserving children's perspectives as distinct and independently valuable.

One reason children are excluded from research studies is that it introduces complications and is a harder path than only working with adults. Children they require special protections and it is more work to acquire permissions to include them. Questions and data collection processes must be tailored for every age group to ensure they are developmentally appropriate. As such, Mgr. Navrátilová's inclusion of children across a broad age range is particularly noteworthy. Qualitative research with children often relies on a narrow age group for reasons noted above, but Mgr. Navrátilová's work adapts data-collection methods to participants' developmental capacities. She and her colleagues designed the study such that children aged 9 to 14 participated in verbal interviews, while children aged 8 and younger communicated through drawings. Preparing and analyzing different forms of data is methodologically complex and time-consuming, but this approach produces a broader and more nuanced understanding of children's experiences.

The sample sizes are remarkable for studies of this kind. One study included 44 in-depth interviews, which is substantial for qualitative research. However, her 2025 study reported in *Parenting Behind Bars* far exceeded this sample size. It included questionnaires completed by 182 incarcerated parents, 96 caregivers, and 233 children with incarcerated parents, as well as 179 in-depth interviews and seven focus groups involving 54 children. This represents a rare level of breadth and ambition in mixed-methods research on this population.

Research conducted within prison systems presents significant practical challenges. Mgr. Navrátilová and her colleagues noted, for example, that correctional systems do not routinely collect information about prisoners' families. Similar limitations exist in many

countries (including the U.S.) and make the successful recruitment and participation achieved in this program of research especially impressive.

The analytic methods are also appropriate to the data and research questions. Although qualitative studies often present findings primarily through participant quotations, Mgr. Navrátilová and her colleagues also make effective use of tables and figures to organize their results. For example, *Childhood in the Shadow of Bars* presents the priorities of incarcerated parents, differentiated by gender, followed by comparable analyses for caregivers and children. The use of factor analysis to examine correlated variables, together with clear data tables, further supports interpretation of the findings.

Theoretical Framework

Mgr. Navrátilová's body of work offers a strong theoretical grounding, which is a noteworthy contribution in this topic which has heavily been studied atheoretically. Much of the existing literature on children with incarcerated parents reports statistics and outcomes without offering a well-developed theoretical explanation. Mgr. Navrátilová moves beyond description by applying the Capability Approach and connecting it thoughtfully with Attachment Theory.

The Capability Approach is particularly appropriate because it centers individuals' values, interests, opportunities, and ability to pursue lives they have reason to value. As Mgr. Navrátilová and colleagues discussed in *The Wellbeing of Children and Young People*, an assessment of wellbeing should not be limited to external social expectations or conventional economic measures. It should also consider what individuals themselves identify as important to happiness, fulfillment, relationships, belonging, and their future.

Mgr. Navrátilová's connection between the Capability Approach and Attachment Theory is well-conceived and fitting given the experiences of losing connections to a parent through prison. The Capability Approach highlights the opportunities available to children and the futures they can realistically pursue, while Attachment Theory helps explain the importance of relational security and disruption. Together, these frameworks provide a strong basis for understanding the varied consequences of parental incarceration on children.

Equally important, the theoretical framework compels the researcher to identify strengths and assets rather than focusing solely on risks and deficits. This is consistent with social work's commitment to recognizing both individual capacities and structural constraints.

Alignment With Social Work Professional Values

Mgr. Navrátilová's research is strongly aligned with core social work values that are recognized both locally and internationally in organizations such as the International Federation of Social Work. Core values that are repeatedly emphasized in her scholarly work include recognizing the dignity and worth of the person, self-determination, participation, empowerment, and the importance of human relationships.

As Mgr. Navrátilová observes in her work, the Capability Approach supports self-determination by prioritizing individuals' own values and assessments of wellbeing. Again, this is especially important in research with children, whose views are often filtered through parents, foster parents, teachers, therapists, and other professionals.

The research questions included in her studies are grounded in practical social work concerns. For example, Mgr. Navrátilová and her colleagues seek to determine what social service providers can do to support children at risk and what kinds of opportunities these children need. Their question to child participants - "Which areas of life should social services pay more attention to in the future?" - reflects an explicit empowerment orientation. People with the least institutional power are seldom asked directly what they need or how services could improve. Including questions like these demonstrates to children that their opinions matter and that service systems can be changed in response to their experiences.

The studies also identify agreements and disagreements among children, caregivers, and incarcerated parents. This comparative approach is valuable as it prevents adult interpretations from being treated as interchangeable with children's accounts. That said, there are also areas of agreement between children and adults. As the Capability Approach would predict, they found that both children and parents emphasized the importance of an open future, while also placing significant value on present relationships.

The focus on relationships is especially relevant to social work. Social services historically ignores the primacy of relationships in many settings, but especially for young adolescents and emerging adults. Mgr. Navrátilová's work brings us back to the core value of social work as seen in the U.S. National Association of Social Workers, the *importance of human relationships* and in the International Federation of Social Workers' Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles which emphasizes, *treating people as whole persons* which includes social relationships. Mgr. Navrátilová's work brings attention back to the importance of people whom children can trust, a sense of belonging, and opportunities to build stable and fulfilling futures. This, incidentally, aligns with results I found more than ten years ago among children with incarcerated parents and also with foster children aging out of care.

There is considerable overlap between children in foster care and children with incarcerated parents. Research on both populations has long emphasized a limited set of outcomes, including income, educational attainment, employment, housing, and future criminal behavior. These measures are important, but they present only a small portion of child wellbeing and completely ignore what we now know has the greatest influence on them: relationships. Listening directly to children reveals the central importance of dependable relationships, belonging, personal agency, and hope for the future.

Contribution to Knowledge and Practice

The combined body of work provides a careful and thorough mapping of children's needs from multiple perspectives, including those of children themselves, caregivers, and incarcerated parents. Its substantial empirical foundation and clear theoretical grounding make it an important contribution to the research literature.

The work is especially significant because it addresses a historically understudied topic within social work. Social work scholarship has been slow to engage fully with the experiences of children affected by parental incarceration, despite the clear relevance of the issue to child welfare, family services, criminal justice, and social policy.

Mgr. Navrátilová's research makes several important contributions:

- It provides substantial original evidence concerning children with incarcerated parents in the Czech Republic.
- It places children's own voices at the center of the research.
- It compares children's perspectives with those of caregivers and incarcerated parents.
- It demonstrates how the Capability Approach can be applied to parental incarceration and links capabilities with attachment and relational wellbeing.
- It reveals that these children not only suffer from standard social disadvantages, but also social exclusion that can have long-lasting consequences.
- It translates the findings into implications for direct social work practice and service provision.
- It broadens the assessment of outcomes beyond economic stability, physical health, and future criminal behavior.

The latter contribution is particularly important. Social development, belonging, relationship quality, and the perceived possibility of an open future are closely connected to life satisfaction, social participation, and the ability to contribute to society. These concerns are central to social work but remain insufficiently represented in research and policy concerning children with incarcerated parents.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Mgr. Navrátilová is clear about the nature of her samples and the inclusion and exclusion criteria that she and colleagues employed. However, when discussing limitations, those who were excluded are not discussed and it is not suggested for future research. In particular, as much as 50% of these children did not live with the parent prior to incarceration and that parent did not engage in a meaningful parental role. The experiences documented in this body of work are therefore be most applicable to children whose custodial or relationally significant parent was removed through incarceration. To have a narrow or well-defined sample is not necessarily problematic, but it is worth recognizing that a substantial subset of

children with incarcerated parents are excluded from this body of research and perhaps offer recommendations of future research that might apply to them.

Relatedly, incarceration may not always be experienced as a sudden event, which was described in much Mgr. Navrátilová's as part of the impact on relational anchoring. In the U.S. is it common to see some parents cycle through short-term jail sentences before receiving a longer prison sentence. As such, their children experience repeated disruptions rather than a singular, unexpected separation. Future research could examine how children's outcomes differ in a number of ways, such as the following:

- The quality, nature, and duration of the pre-incarceration relationship.
- Whether the separation was unexpected or followed repeated periods of detention.
- The frequency and quality of contact during incarceration.
- The length of incarceration and the child's developmental stage throughout the separation.
- The availability of stable caregiving and supportive relationships in the absence of the second parent.

These considerations do not diminish the value of the present research. Rather, they identify opportunities to extend its theoretical and empirical contributions to additional groups of children and family circumstances.

Overall Assessment

On the whole, this habilitation thesis and submitted works were impressive. Mgr. Navrátilová has developed a coherent, rigorous, and socially significant program of scholarship. Her work is distinguished by its unusually large samples, direct inclusion of children, comparative analysis of multiple perspectives, and strong theoretical grounding.

The body of research contributes new knowledge about the impact of parental incarceration on children who lived with the parent, particularly in relation to children's capabilities, relationships, belonging, participation, and sense of an open future. It also offers well-defined implications for social work practice by demonstrating how services can become more responsive to children's stated needs and priorities.

In my assessment, the habilitation thesis and accompanying publications represent a substantial contribution to theory, policy, and social work practice. The work demonstrates the scholarly independence, methodological competence, theoretical development, professional relevance, and sustained research trajectory expected of habilitation-level scholarship. I therefore conclude that Mgr. Jitka Navrátilová's submitted work fulfills the expectations of a habilitation thesis in the field.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence

1. A significant number of children with incarcerated parents do not share the characteristics of your specific sample group. For example, as many as half of all children with a parent in prison did not live with them prior to incarceration and may not have had meaningful contact with that parent. This is fine to have a clearly defined sample. However, looking forward, what questions or issues might you consider for these other children? Do you see an application of the Capabilities Approach for these other children? How might you expect their outcomes to differ from children who had an active relationship with this parent?
2. Do you have any plans for a prospective study that follows these children into early adulthood so that you can learn their longer-term outcomes? If not, perhaps a retrospective study could get at that.

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled “The Erosion of Relational Anchoring as a Mechanism of Social Disadvantage among Children of Incarcerated Parents” by Mgr. Jitka Navrátilová, Ph.D., **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Social Policy and Social Work.

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