

**Shame and secrecy in the familial context with a relative in prison\*****Vergonha e segredo no contexto da família com um membro no cárcere****Vergüenza y secreto en el contexto de la familia con un miembro en la cárcel****Received: 09/07/2019****Approved: 04/04/2020****Published: 14/10/2020****Julia Sursis Nobre Ferro Bucher-Maluschke<sup>1</sup>****Gabrielle Capeleiro<sup>2</sup>****Jonas Carvalho e Silva<sup>3</sup>**

This is a case study, conducted with a 25-year-old woman during the first semester of the year of 2019. This study aimed to understand the emergence and maintenance of family secrets related to feelings of shame when prison becomes a demonstration of a situation of social vulnerability. An interview was carried out with a semi-structured script for the preparation of the instruments: *Genogram*, *Ecomap* and *Life Cycle* of the interviewee and her family. The case was described in two aspects: *Period prior to offense, the offense and the arrest*; and *Relations with family and friends*. It was found that feelings of shame in the face of prison, the organization of intra-family secrets and the uncertainty of maintaining this secret throughout life. Thus, communication presented itself as a hindrance to resilience processes in the family.

**Descriptors:** Confidentiality, Shame, Prisons, Family relations.

Este é um estudo de caso realizado com uma mulher de 25 anos, durante o primeiro semestre de 2019, cujo objetivo é compreender o surgimento e a manutenção de segredos familiares envolvidos pelo sentimento de vergonha quando o cárcere se torna uma demonstração da situação de vulnerabilidade social. Foi realizada uma entrevista com roteiro semiestruturado para elaboração dos instrumentos: *Genograma*, *Ecomapa* e *Ciclo Vital* da entrevistada e de sua família. A descrição do caso se deu em dois aspectos: *Período anterior ao delito, o delito e a prisão; e, Relações com familiares e amigos*. Verificou-se que o sentimento de vergonha diante da prisão, a organização de segredos intrafamiliar e a incerteza da manutenção desse segredo ao longo da vida. Destarte, a comunicação se apresentou como complicadora dos processos de resiliência na família.

**Descritores:** Confidencialidade, Vergonha, Prisões, Relações familiares.

Este es un estudio de caso realizado con una mujer de 25 años durante el primer semestre de 2019, cuyo objetivo es comprender la aparición y el mantenimiento de los secretos familiares que conlleva el sentimiento de vergüenza cuando el encarcelamiento se convierte en una demostración de la situación de vulnerabilidad social. Se realizó una entrevista con un guion semiestruturado para la elaboración de los instrumentos: *Genograma*, *Ecomapa* y *Ciclo Vital* de la entrevistada y de su familia. La descripción del caso tuvo lugar en dos aspectos: *Período anterior al crimen, el crimen y el arresto; y, Relaciones con familiares y amigos*. Se observó el sentimiento de vergüenza ante la prisión, la organización de los secretos intrafamiliares y la incertidumbre de mantener este secreto a lo largo de la vida. Así, la comunicación se presentó como un obstáculo para los procesos de resiliencia en la familia.

**Descriptorios:** Confidencialidad, Vergüenza, Prisiones, Relaciones familiares.

\* Financing source: CNPq and CAPES.

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**he probability of a family perceiving itself in the face of unexpected stressful events increases when it is in situations of social vulnerability, such as the imprisonment of one of its members in a penitentiary after breaking the law. In these moments, the family receives demands that seem to surpass the psychosocial resources available to them. Thus, the accumulation of stressors can hinder the family reorganization process<sup>1</sup>.

In this context, the structure of family boundaries tends to vary in order to become more or less permeable to meet the needs of the family over time. The perception that it has of itself and its context also tends to change and, when facing stressful situations, families activate resources they have in an attempt to manage them<sup>1</sup>.

When necessary, the family has important resources to promote resilience in the face of stressors such as: structure, belief system and communication processes. Communication is a predominant factor that facilitates resilience, providing clarity to crisis situations and openness to the expression of emotions, in addition to contributing to collaborative ways of solving problems. Thus, it is easy to understand how the presence of secrets can be detrimental to family resilience<sup>1</sup>.

In view of this, any information omitted that concerns other family members or that directly influences them can be understood as a family secret. Unlike privacy, which content concerns only those who keep it, and is not considered important for life, for the choices or for the development of others<sup>1</sup>.

In the same way that each family group presents its particular way of signifying certain events, each individual also attributes meaning to some facts based on singular conceptions. Thus, the contents that mix between members of the same family unit can span generations. This can be called, according to the systemic approach, family myths<sup>2</sup>.

Family myths constitute the belief system that represents the basis of family identity, serving to balance and strengthen the social roles of each member. It also serves as protection for the maintenance of the family when it hides a reality that one does not want to face from a secret, that is, silence covers a certain negative situation and, therefore, goes against the family's myths and beliefs<sup>2</sup>.

Such negative situations, such as transgression of social order, vulnerability and crisis, can also allow the rise of feelings of shame. As an affection related to morality, a social regulator of human behavior, it appears when the transgressive act is exposed to the eyes of others. It is a feeling of public order, of a size directly proportional to the importance given to those who witnessed the act or may be influenced by it. Shame points to a flaw in the subject's image, a fixed, decisive flaw<sup>3</sup>.

Unlike guilt, which can be forgotten by avoiding contact with the pain that caused it, shame cannot simply be forgotten. The destination for this feeling is the use of strategies such as "burial" and "cover up" of what causes it. As a result of this cover-up, a movement to hide begins, of not being able to risk showing an unqualified image of you<sup>3</sup>.

About this phenomenon, the conflict that prisoners deal with in their family relationships is indicated, where secrecy has the function of protecting and preserving the family from shame and dishonor. Thus, this research looks on how imprisonment of one of its members places the family group in a situation of vulnerability and transforms group dynamics through the emergence of feelings such as shame and practices of secrets among its members. It is assumed that these aspects of family communication coexist and strengthen the bonds of affection in family systems and subsystems more difficult.

Thus, the present work aims to understand the emergence and maintenance of family secrets involved by feelings of shame when prison becomes a demonstration of the situation of social vulnerability.

## METHOD

This is a case study was carried out during the first semester of 2019, with sample selection criteria looking for women who are on currently serving or have already completed their sentence.

During the interview, the assessment instruments used were a structured interview to collect sociodemographic data; a semi-structured interview to collect information about her life story, retrieving moments from her trajectory before prison, as well as understanding her conception of future.

In terms of presentation, organization and data analysis we used: *Ecomap*, a graphic representation of the intensity of bonds between the participant and members of her family, identifying social structures of the environment in which she lives and, in general, the system of the family environment; the *Genogram*, built to analyze relationships and hierarchical organization of family and friends before and after the arrest. And, the *Life Cycle*, which corresponds to moments of the individual's life with great psychological impact, to better understand the dynamics established between the subject in question and these remarkable moments<sup>4</sup>.

For the protection of the interviewee's identity, the letter **A.** will be used. The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee in accordance with Resolutions n<sup>o</sup> 446/12 and n<sup>o</sup> 510/16. National Health Council/Ministry of Health under filling number 3.026.011 and CAAE 0261018.0.0000.0023.

## RESULTS

The case to be presented is a 25-year-old single woman, who became a mother of a boy at the age of 15. Born in a state in the Northeastern region of Brazil, she currently works as an assistant in a higher public agency in the Federal District, where the interview took place. The young woman is serving a prison sentence of 3 years and 10 months on a semi-open regime for the crime of drug trafficking. The case was described in two aspects: *Period prior to offense, offense and arrest*; and *Relations with family and friends*.

### ***Period prior to offense, offense and arrest***

When starting her story, **A.** tells about her life before prison. At the age of 15, the young woman became pregnant with her only child. The affair was temporary, but her son's father was always been present and had no criminal history. After some time, **A.** met another boy who was involved in drug trafficking, and she then began to circulate between two worlds: one of upper middle class, in which she worked, studied and raised her son; and another in which she met a man who kept her in a life of material goods, with which she raised her standard of living and also led to her involvement with drugs.

**A.** then reports that, when she became involved with this man, she began to notice possibilities and benefits. She says that he offered her dinners, gifts, trips and anything else she wanted with the increasing amount of money he got over time from selling drugs. She says that, since then, everything changed suddenly. When she became aware of what was actually happening, she was already very involved in trafficking and its negative consequences, among them her arrest in *flagrante delicto* as an accomplice in drug trafficking.

The participant points out that she was never a drug user, but that she sold narcotics with her partner and other people. When they were approached, **A.** was leaving her mother-in-law's house, along with her boyfriend, both of whom were carrying drugs with them. The arrest took place in the act of committing the offence and the couple had no further contact since then.

### ***Relations with family and friends***

The participant's family nucleus, consisting of her parents, grandparents and her son, presents itself at a middle class level, well structured and with healthy dynamics. Parents are dedicated to their children and grandson, grandparents are present in this dynamic and there

is no history of any other relevant event that could be related to *A.*'s arrest, such as involvement with trafficking.

*A.*'s family presents themselves in conditions of social vulnerability when her involvement with drug trafficking caused her arrest. From that event, the family became exposed to risk factors, some dysfunctional social and emotional processes began to emerge, and were enhanced, in view of the implication of values incompatible with those transmitted by this family group. Therefore, when the members of this group are faced with unexpected stressful events, such as *A.*'s arrest, there is a difficulty in their own reorganization process.

Her cycle of friendships, stemming from her "daytime life", was made up of people who were not involved with drugs, whom she called "good natured and well educated". However, during the night, she maintained social relationships with people involved with drugs, whom she used to sell drugs with and frequent places characteristic of this sphere.

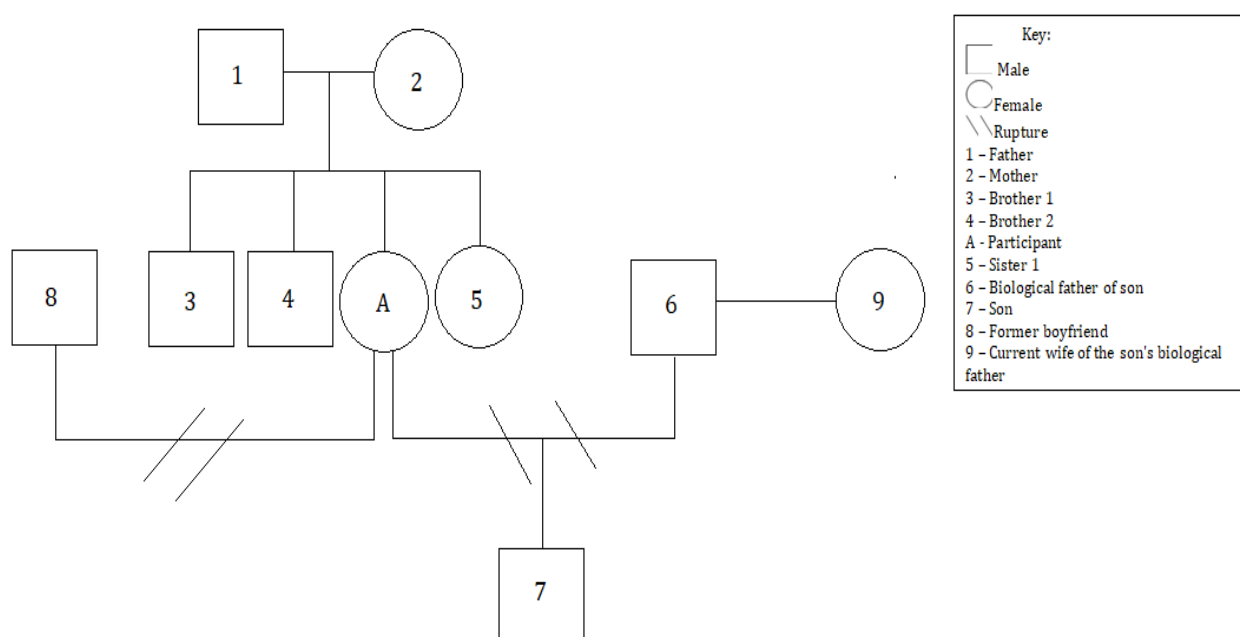
The young woman narrated that her family members were always present in her life, but they were never aware of her activities related to drug trafficking, that is, they did not know about her "nightlife" until the moment they received the news of the arrest, in which her relationship with crime became public. This episode served as a negative milestone for her parents, grandparents and siblings, who showed great disappointment for had happened.

However, although disappointed, *A.* said that, during her time in jail, her family remained close. They kept in touch by phone calls, letters and visits by her parents. The participant also reported that her first boyfriend, the biological father of her son, also only learned about her "nightlife" when he learned the reason for her arrest.

The only family member who did not know what happened was her son. So, *A.* decided to keep the information from her arrest from the child and say that she was in a long trip, talking to him whenever she could by phone and maintaining this version of the story. Although the family was a little upset by her decision, everyone agreed and supported this story for the child, including the biological father.

From the configuration of the *Genogram* of *A.*'s family, in Figure 1, it is possible to indicate an organization and alignment of the members regarding family involvement. Although *A.*'s parents are separated, she has always received support from both in the same way, as well as from her older brothers and younger sister, since *A.* is the third child of the couple.

**Figure 1.** Genogram that represents the current relationships and hierarchical organization of the participant's family. Brasilia, 2019.



According to *A.*'s experience reports, presented in the Vital Cycle (Figure 2.), it can be listed as the most impacting and relevant factors of her life stages in the context of prison: the moment when she became pregnant with her son, aged 15; subsequently, her emotional relationship with a person involved in drug trafficking; her entrance into the world of drug trafficking; consequently, her arrest. After a while, *A.* reports the breakup with that boy and from then on they continue to be separated serving their respective sentences. Currently, she has been granted a semi-open regime, in which she can leave prison to work and return only at 7 p.m. This particular moment in her life allowed her to find a job opportunity and, thus, to envision even more possibilities for the future.

**Figure 2.** Life Cycle representing the main events in *A.*'s life since the previous period, during and after prison. Brasilia, 2019.

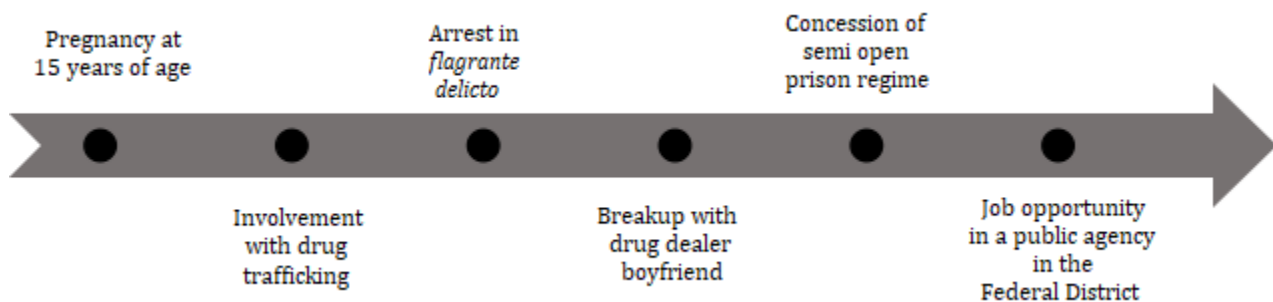
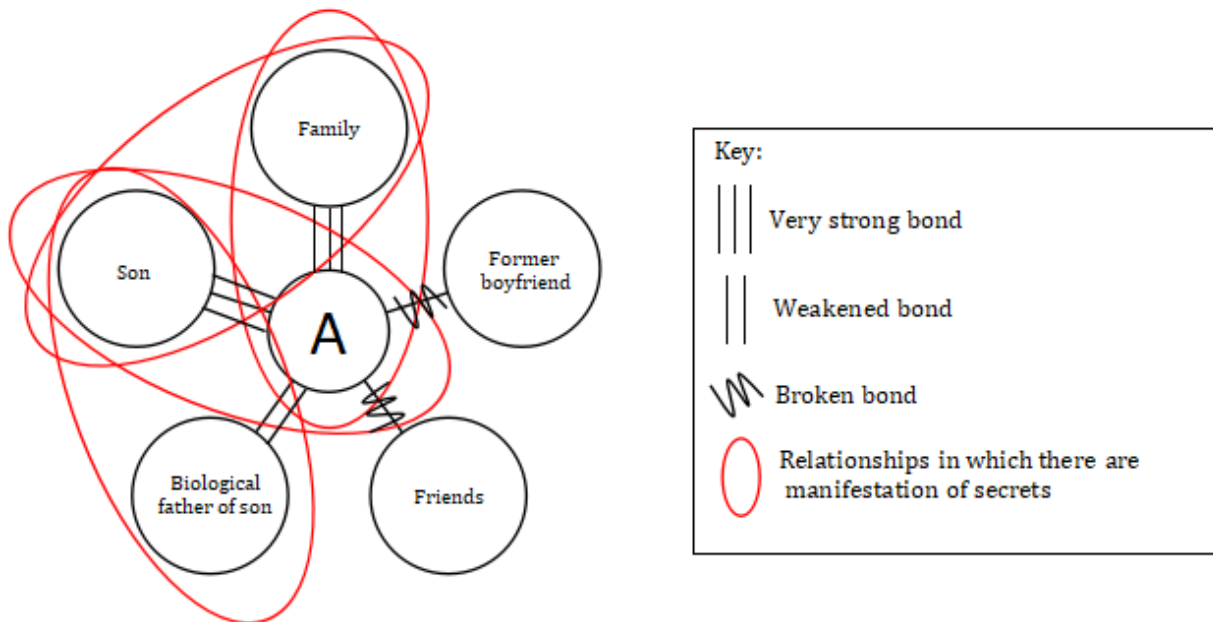


Figure 3 represents the Ecomap of the family of *A.*, who pointed out the bond with her son as being strengthened the most during the two moments (before and during the arrest). Then, she points to the bond with her family of origin, which has always supported her emotionally. On the other hand, the bond with her son's biological father has been weakened, with their mutual child as their only link. A non-existent bond was pointed out between the participant and her ex-boyfriend, a drug dealer, as well as between her and all the friends who were part of that sphere of her life.

The graphic representation (Figure 3) also highlights relationships in which there are secrets from *A.* in relation to her family. The participant hides her "night life" and all the activities she performed related to drug trafficking. The data also indicated secrets from her arrest, making it possible to observe the cover-up of this occurrence for her son. The secret was kept both by the biological father, the mother (participant), as well as by the other members of the original family nucleus (parents, grandparents and siblings).

**Figure 3.** Ecomap representing the intensity of bonds between the participant and the members who can configure her support network during prison, as well as in which relationships the secrets were manifested. Brasilia, 2019.



## DISCUSSION

It is possible to understand, from the structure of this family and the general perception of its members about the crime, that the participant's feeling of shame appears as a contradiction of everything she had received from the family. Prison represents an extremely negative event, especially when it symbolizes a confrontation with the belief system and values of the family group.

Bearing in mind that the family has a strong influence on the education, psychological, emotional and social development of its members<sup>5</sup>, one of the important resources that the family group has is its process of Communication, as it is a way to promote resilience and give resources to overcome negative situations in the best way. This brings clarity in crisis situations, encourages an open expression of emotions and contributes so that collaborative forms of problem solving flow in the the family system dynamics<sup>6,7</sup>. Therefore, it is easy to understand how harmful secrets are in building this family resilience<sup>1</sup>.

The young woman's transgressive act exposed to her relatives promoted the appearance of shame, which, in turn, originated the practices of secrets<sup>6</sup>. It can be said that the intensity of this feeling of shame is proportional to the importance given to those who witnessed the vexing act. And, without being able to hide that feeling, the way out is to cover up, hide what causes it<sup>3</sup>.

The secret arose, possibly, due to feelings of shame expressed by A. regarding her new relationship with people involved with drug trafficking. This situation, most likely, would not have the approval of those that the young woman most admires and appreciates, like her parents, her grandparents and her son, therefore, A. chose to omit her family from this sphere of her life, as well as hiding her incarcerated status from her son, justifying her fears of the stereotype of the condition of imprisonment.

It is also observed that the secret passed through several different subsystems within this family group, extending and occupying a common and normalized place. It has become a way of life and living with each other. It is possible to understand the family dynamics to reframe the stressful event and maintain a minimally satisfactory relationship between its members, as a homeostatic mechanism whose function is to maintain group cohesion and strengthen the maintenance of social roles for each of the group members<sup>8</sup>.

It is understood, then, the practice of secrets as a protection and defense mechanism of this relational group, which stems from an invasive and uncontrollable feeling of shame about a transgressive act<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, this is a psychological feeling that has effects of social control, in which the subject presents an internal stimulus, evaluated by third parties and inwardly, reinforcing or invalidating certain misconduct<sup>10</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

The case study identified the formation of communication processes within the family group from an external demand, which modifies its structure and interferes in relational processes. The young woman's arrest represented an event that triggered a series of individual processes, such as feelings of shame and the need to cover up her actions; and intrafamily, such as the formation of secrets among several members of this group.

Faced with this challenge, the family sought to find ways to maintain its dynamic and healthy structure. However, it begins to encounter obstacles in the face of discovering certain events about the life of the young protagonist in this story, such as covering her involvement with other people who did not cultivate the same values disseminated by her family members, in addition to covering up her romantic involvement with a boy who offered her a luxurious life with the income from selling drugs.

The results made it possible to understand how the situation of social vulnerability of a family group interferes in the construction and maintenance of secrecy practices among its members. There is a rupture in the moral conscience and the "protection" against the pain of the truth becomes justification for these practices. It can be seen how fear and shame support the choice to keep the present secret, but without realizing it, this practice can be harmful to her future relationship with her child, for example, considering that he is the only one who does not know of the truth about his mother's arrest.

As this is a case study, this research brought limitations regarding the need to investigate intra and extra-family communication of groups with one member in prison, involving larger samples. Unlike the participant in this research, the few productions about women convicted of drug trafficking in Brazil identify the socio-demographic profile of families marked by low income and exposed to various forms of vulnerability.

This study, therefore, presents aspects in the communication of a small portion of individuals, still unknown in the state of the art about the prison environment. Thus, research on the topic is suggested so it is possible to understand, in a thorough way, how these phenomena are manifested in intrafamily processes and the possible impacts on interpersonal relationships, so that it is feasible to think about the strategies of action.

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### CONTRIBUTIONS

**Julia Sursis Nobre Ferro Bucher-Maluschke** contributed to the conception, design, analysis and interpretation of data and writing. **Gabrielle Capeleiro** and **Jonas Carvalho e Silva** participated in data analysis and interpretation, revision and writing.

### How to cite this article (Vancouver)

Bucher-Maluschke JSNF, Capeleiro G, Silva JC. Shame and secrecy in the familial context with a relative in prison. *REFACS* [Internet]. 2020 [cited in *insert day, month and year of access*]; 8(4):952-959. Available from: *insert access link*. DOI: *insert DOI link*.

### How to cite this article (ABNT)

BUCHER-MALUSCHKE, J. S. N. F.; CAPELEIRO, G.; SILVA, J. C. Shame and secrecy in the familial context with a relative in prison. *REFACS*, Uberaba, MG, v. 8, n. 4, p. 952-959, 2020. Available from: *insert access link*. Access in: *insert day, month and year of access*. DOI: *insert DOI link*.

### How to cite this article (APA)

Bucher-Maluschke, J.S.N.F., Capeleiro, G., & Silva, J.C. (2020). Shame and secrecy in the familial context with a relative in prison. *REFACS*, 8(4), 952-959. Retrieved in *insert day, month and year of access* from *insert access link*. DOI: *insert DOI link*.