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# The emotional geography of prison life

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## Abstract

Accounts of prison life consistently describe a culture of mutual mistrust, fear, aggression and barely submerged violence. Often too, they explain how prisoners adapt to this environment—in men's prisons, at least—by putting on emotional 'masks' or 'fronts' of masculine bravado which hide their vulnerabilities and deter the aggression of their peers. This article does not contest the truth of such descriptions, but argues that they provide a partial account of the prison's emotional world. Most importantly, for current purposes, they fail to describe the way in which prisons have a distinctive kind of emotional geography, with zones in which certain kinds of emotional feelings and displays are more or less acceptable. In this article, we argue that these 'emotion zones', which cannot be characterized either as 'frontstage' or 'backstage' domains, enable the display of a wider range of feelings than elsewhere in the prison. Their existence represents a challenge to depictions of prisons as environments that are unwaveringly sterile, unflinchingly aggressive or emotionally undifferentiated.

## Keywords

Emotions, fronting, geography, prisons, space

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Every total institution can be seen as a kind of dead sea in which little islands of vivid, encapturing activity appear. Such activity can help the individual withstand the psychological stress usually engendered by assaults upon the self.

(Goffman, 1961: 68)

Accounts of prison life consistently describe a culture of mutual mistrust, fear, aggression and barely submerged violence. Often too, they explain how prisoners adapt to this environment—in men's prisons, at least—by putting on emotional 'masks' or 'fronts' of masculine bravado which hide their vulnerabilities and deter the aggression of their peers. This article does not contest the truth of such descriptions, which are informed by (or redolent of) the work of Hobbes and Goffman respectively. Instead, drawing on prisoner testimonies, it argues that they provide a partial account of the prison's complex emotional world. Most importantly, for current purposes, they fail to describe the way in which prisons have a distinctive kind of emotional geography, with zones in which certain kinds of feelings and emotional displays are more or less possible to experience and exhibit.<sup>1</sup> In this article, we argue that these 'emotion zones', which cannot be characterized either as 'frontstage' or 'backstage' domains, enable the display of a wider range of feelings than elsewhere in the prison. Their existence represents a challenge to depictions of prisons as environments that are unwaveringly sterile, unfailingly aggressive or emotionally undifferentiated.

### **Rules, roles and zones: The emotional climate of prison**

Descriptions of Anglo-American prisons often emphasize the volatility of the environment and the pervasiveness of violence (for a summary, see Bottoms, 1999). Some studies depict a world of rampant predation and unswerving machismo (Hassine, 1999; Johnson, 1987; Scraton et al., 1991; Sim, 1994). Violence within prisons is undoubtedly common, in the form of fights, assaults and various forms of aggression and exploitation (see, for example, Edgar et al., 2003; King and McDermott, 1995; O'Donnell and Edgar, 1998). However, it is also clear that some prisoners are victimized more than others (Edgar et al., 2003), that many prisoners report feeling safe from assaults (Bottoms, 1999) and that avoiding certain kinds of prison activities (e.g. involvement in trade and drug use) decreases the risks of violence (Crewe, 2009). Asking prisoners to evaluate their personal physical safety may, in fact, misunderstand the nature and consequences of prison 'violence'. For, as Sykes suggests,<sup>2</sup> it is the *possibility* of violence and predation, as much as the actual level of aggression and exploitation, which many prisoners find fearful and debilitating, and it is this insidious sense of threat that means that most prisoners describe the atmosphere of most prisons as tense and enervating, regardless of whether they are personally confident of their safety.

Considering prison culture in this way directs us to the work of Thomas Hobbes, whose description in *Leviathan* of the 'state of nature' is often used as a metaphor for the state of imprisonment. Most famously, Hobbes (1651/trans. 1999: 78) depicted life without an overarching authority as 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'. But a close reading of *Leviathan* reveals that Hobbes is not quite portraying a state of endless

warfare and aggression, but rather a constant *readiness* for (or fear of) warfare and aggression: ‘the nature of war consisteth not in actual fighting, but in the known disposition thereto during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary’ (1651/trans. 1999: 77–78). Such circumstances generate a state of tense anticipation and mutual distrust, in which even people who have no interest in using violence for gain or status need to wield a defensive threat. The deprivation of security—to use Sykes’s (1958) terminology—thus results in an emotional climate of what Hobbes calls ‘diffidence’, a generalized insecurity and consumptive wariness about those with whom one is forced to live.

Prisons are generally not the anarchic, unregulated environments that *Leviathan* describes. Staff police prisoner behaviour, they intervene to prevent and terminate violence, and all kinds of situational and bureaucratic control measures put barriers in place to preclude or limit theft and predation. Institutional mechanisms, including the ‘reports’ that help determine prisoners’ progression through the system, make prisoners more circumspect about employing violence in their daily interactions, and thereby diminish feelings of collective diffidence. At the same time, as a kind of bureaucratic gaze that looms over the prisoner, judging his or her actions and attitudes (see Crewe, 2009, 2011), they constitute a further layer of surveillance in the life of the prisoner, and an additional barrier to emotional authenticity and expression.

‘Diffidence’, as Hobbes defines it, thus seems a helpful concept in explaining the feelings of insecurity generated by the proximity of untrustworthy strangers, the psychological threats of the environment and the all-seeing institutional eye. Sykes’s (1958: 105) description of the prison as a ‘gigantic playground—a place where blustering and brawling push life in the direction of a state of anomy’ is purposely redolent of Hobbes (see Sykes, 1958: 108). But whereas Hobbes assumed that the solution to this state of mutual insecurity was the imposition of state authority and formal sanctions, Sykes emphasized the role of an ‘inmate code’ in alleviating threats to safety and masculine esteem, and diminishing the emotional heat of the environment. As well as promoting tolerance and restraint, this normative system encouraged a ‘silent stoicism’, in which ‘the excessive display of emotion is to be avoided at all costs’ (Sykes, 1958: 101) and the individual could maintain ‘integrity in the face of [institutional] privation’ (Sykes, 1958: 102).<sup>3</sup>

Defensive postures of this kind have been noted in a range of subsequent studies. Jones and Schmid (2000) talk of ‘conscious identity work’, arguing that inmates use ‘impression management skills’ to create false, toughened identities that allow them to interact with others; Jewkes (2002: 56, 2005) notes the necessity of maintaining a ‘hard’ façade and a certain amount of ‘controlled aggression’ in order to survive the rigours of imprisonment; other studies refer to ‘front management tactics’ (De Viggiani, 2012), or highlight the distinction in men’s prisons between public projections of hardened masculinity and private feelings of anxiety and powerlessness (e.g. Newton, 1994; Toch, 1992). Either implicitly or explicitly, many such studies connect ‘front management’ with wider forms of performative masculine culture (see, in particular, De Viggiani, 2012; Jewkes, 2002, 2005; Sim, 1994). As Jewkes (2005: 48) notes: ‘All forms of masculinity inevitably involve a certain degree of putting on a “manly front”.’

Such accounts have often been animated by Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical metaphor, as outlined in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*: the idea of life as perpetual performance, with roles and scripts that are socially determined and enacted. Here,

Goffman distinguishes principally between ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ behaviour, the former being the arena in which the performance is given to a social audience, and the latter being a private or hidden region where the public performance is relinquished, breached or contradicted. The appeal of Goffman’s framework lies partly in the fact that prisoners themselves use the term ‘fronting’ to describe their strategies of self-presentation. However, this particular reading of Goffman does not seem entirely adequate, not least because simple distinctions between a prison’s public spaces or frontstage areas (where emotional expression of most forms is taboo) and its private or backstage regions, where prisoners are more able to ‘be themselves’, are hard to maintain. For example, cells are often described as ‘private areas’ (Goffman (1961: 216) talks of private sleeping areas as ‘personal territories’), yet many prisoners live in shared cells or are housed in dormitories, meaning that even in their most domestic environments, they may have to maintain public or quasi-public façades (Jewkes, 2005). Furthermore, as Milhaud and Moran (2013) suggest, in prison, spaces of privacy—where the gaze of others and the challenges of communal living can be escaped—may be found in public places, such as workshops, ‘where the atmosphere turns out to be silent, everyone concentrated on the work’ (2013: 16) or where the clamour of machinery allows prisoners a form of solitude in which they can at least be alone with their thoughts (2013: 19).

In this regard, Goffman’s work remains fruitful, not so much in the form of his dramaturgical framework, but his comments in *Asylums* about the spatial dimensions of institutional life. For while Goffman is often associated with the idea of the prison as a ‘total institution’, cut off from wider society, he himself drew attention to the *non*-total nature of institutional life, in which certain domains were more normalized than others. In analysing the ‘underlife’ of a mental hospital, for example, Goffman outlines in some detail the presence of ‘free places’ that are ‘ruled by less than usual staff authority’ (1961: 204) where ‘the inmate could openly engage in a range of tabooed activity with some degree of security’ (1961: 205):

The staff did not know of the existence of these places, or knew but either stayed away or tacitly relinquished their authority when entering them. *Licence, in short, had a geography* ... All of these places seemed pervaded by a feeling of relaxation and self-determination, in marked contrast to the sense of uneasiness prevailing on some wards. Here one could be one’s own man.

(1961: 205–206, emphasis added)<sup>4</sup>

Concluding this section of *Asylums*, Goffman (1961: 268) comments that formal organizations ‘have standard places of vulnerability, such as supply rooms, sick bays, kitchens, or scenes of highly technical labor. These are the damp corners where secondary adjustments breed and start to infest the establishment.’ In other words, even total institutions have internal geographies of behaviour and emotional expression, rather than a single set of what might be called—following Hochschild (1979, 1983)—‘rules of emotional display’, that is, scripts that sanction what feelings should (or should not) be felt or exhibited in certain situations (see also Bachelard, 1994).

Within prison sociology, very little work has taken seriously the idea that prisons are complex and spatially differentiated emotional domains, beyond the binary metaphor of front or back stages. This seems surprising, given that the terminology in prisons of

'sterile areas', 'segregation units' and 'residential areas' points to the variability as well as the importance of space and place in such settings. Johnson (1987: 66) notes that prisons provide 'ecological diversity', including 'niches' or 'sanctuaries', which offer prisoners 'sheltered settings and benign activities that insulate them from the mainline prison' (see also Toch, 1992). Another exception is found in Crawley's (2004b: 414) account of prison work, where attention is drawn to the manner in which newly recruited staff need to 'learn the organization's "emotional map"' and express their emotions 'in clearly structured ways' (2004b: 416). While, for the most part, this means holding in check feelings of anxiety and remaining emotionally detached from aspects of the job, it also involves sentiments such as anger and disgust being encouraged in certain 'emotional zones' within the prison, for example, among staff who have overseen sex offender treatment programmes within de-briefing rooms.

Perhaps it is unsurprising that much greater attention has been paid to the spatial organization of emotions in general, and social relations in prison specifically, in the fields of social and cultural geography. In such disciplines, space and place are considered determinants of social practice and personal experience, rather than as empty theatres or neutral backcloths within and against which they occur. Adey (2008) uses the example of the airport to describe how certain kinds of movement and emotions are choreographed and channelled by ambient aspects of the built environment (e.g. architecture, lighting and signage). Passengers are stimulated into different affective states, from security to consumer desire, at different points of their trajectory through the building, whether these are security or consumer desire. Likewise, people within public spaces are invited to inhabit and interact with the environment in particular ways not through direct exclusion and surveillance but through forms of orchestration that act much more modestly upon their states of feeling (Allen, 2006).

In prisons themselves, where body and soul are disciplined through a more repressive spatial apparatus, geographers have described how prisoners reclaim and protect the official functions and meanings of space. Thus, they construct improvised 'homes' and sexual sanctuaries beyond the gaze of supervision and authority, or simply persist in their activities regardless of surveillance (Dirsuweit, 1990). Here, space is seen as a site of power and counter-conduct. Elsewhere, the configuration of penal space is seen as a determinate factor in shaping prisoners' social relations (Van Hoven and Sibley, 2008). The 'internal geography of the regime' (Van Hoven and Sibley, 2008: 1015), its form of accommodation (e.g. dormitories or cell blocks) and security level, affect how prisoners are able to socialize with each other and cope with problems of privacy and safety. Other scholars, working within the emerging field of carceral geography, have highlighted the locations within prisons where the outside and inside worlds blur and collide. Moran (2013) describes prison visiting rooms as 'liminal carceral spaces', in which prisoners (and their visitors—see Codd, 2007; Comfort, 2008) find themselves in a temporary limbo, between one world and the next, with the normal rules of both domains suspended. The fleeting importation into the prison of familiar food, clothing and interpersonal routines from the outside world can, for a brief period, transport the prisoner beyond their more enduring carceral space (see also Jones and Schmid, 2000). Meanwhile, prison staff may allow exceptions to be made to normal rules and practices, again suggesting that these locations—what Wilson (2003, 2004) calls 'third spaces', discursively positioned 'between prison and the outside world' (Wilson, 2003: 294)—are set apart culturally from the wider institution.

All of this is to say that space matters, and that if our analytic framework limits itself to ideas of 'frontstage' and 'backstage', it is bound to over-simplify the prison's emotional universe and its spatial differentiation. In the article that follows, we seek to highlight these complexities. We begin by describing the dominant emotional climate of a medium-security men's training prison in the United Kingdom, detailing some explanations for prisoners' forms of expression management. We note that, due to mechanisms of institutional surveillance and an entrenched sense of 'diffidence', the culture is one of tense courtesy and calibrated confrontation rather than outright violence. Second, we mark out a distinction between the 'fronts' and 'masks' that form part of prisoners' self-presentational strategies, drawing attention to the ways in which some prisoners suppress 'positive' emotions as well as control 'negative' ones. We go on to note the leakages, sublimations and positive forms of emotion that could be identified both within the prison's private areas and its more 'frontstage' locations. Finally, we describe the way that emotional norms vary within prisons, with some zones enabling forms of emotional expression that could not be expressed elsewhere.

## Background

In 2002–2003, for a period of a few months, the co-authors of this article were all present in very different roles in HMP Wellingborough, a medium-security men's training prison in the East Midlands, UK. Ben Crewe was undertaking a study of power, adaptation and social life in an English prison (see Crewe, 2009), which involved him coming into the prison three or four days per week for a period of many months.<sup>5</sup> Jason Warr was serving time in the establishment as a life-sentence prisoner, coming towards the end of his sentence. Alan Smith was a part-time philosophy teacher within the prison's education department. Peter Bennett was the prison's governing governor, the most senior person working within the establishment. Many of the links between us formed around the prison's education department, and its philosophy class in particular, which Alan taught, Jason attended, Ben visited and Peter encouraged, as part of a conscious attempt to forge enclaves within the prison where prisoners and staff could develop relationships which were empathic and creative, and where emotional expression was encouraged.<sup>6</sup> The article that follows draws primarily on the interviews and observations undertaken by the first author during his time in Wellingborough (see Crewe, 2009). These interviews did not ask specifically about the spatial organization of prison life, but in addressing issues of identity and adaptation, they elicited numerous comments about the emotional adjustments and performances that the environment necessitated, and the ways that they differed within different zones of the environment.

## The emotional geography of prison life

Among the main explanations offered in the research literature for the culture, in most men's prisons, of tense machismo and vigilant emotion management are the prisoner's psychological need to re-establish his sense of masculine self-esteem (what we would call *compensation*), his need to develop a persona which saves him from exploitation (what we would label *protection*), and the benefits that can be gained, in a place where

status and resources are scarce, from developing a reputation for aggressiveness (what we would call *competition*). De Viggiani (2012) emphasizes the ‘survival’ functions of ‘front management’, while Jewkes (2005: 53) notes that ‘physical jostling for positions of power and status ... is perhaps especially visible in prisons because they are such blatantly status-depriving environments’. Interviews with prisoners in Wellingborough most often pointed to the protective functions of emotional self-control—the risk that displays of fear or hurt would be interpreted as signs of weakness, which could leave prisoners open to ridicule and exploitation:

I lock certain things away yes, because I don’t want to open up to certain people. [...] because I see that as a weakness and I don’t want people to see my weaknesses.

(Ian)

It wouldn’t look very good if you broke down in tears in the middle of the yard, or anything like that. It would be frowned upon. You’d get the piss taken out of you really.

(Rhys)

Johnson (1987: 87) argues that, as well as serving a practical, defensive purpose, the prisoner’s ‘vener of cool, hard manliness’ often reflects a ‘chronically defensive’ attitude, rooted in deeply lodged feelings of self-doubt and social rejection (see also Newton, 1994). Rather than a surface posture, then, the prisoner’s front is a deep, internal defence against forms of psychic vulnerability which imprisonment threatens to expose. Certainly, many interviewees highlighted the need to ‘block out’ or control their emotions in order not to ‘crack up’ (Ellis), ‘lose the plot’ (Brian) or be overpowered by feelings of weakness and distress, particularly in relation to events outside the prison over which they had almost no control:

It’s heart-wrenching, being away from your kids and your Missus and things like that. But you have to do it. So you have to change yourself in certain aspects. [...] You just have to try not to let that side of things get you down, and try not to think about your kids that much. It’s your mind that will fuck you up whilst you’re in here, when you’re thinking about things all the time. [...] You can sit there and get yourself down, and probably cry every night, cry yourself to sleep. [...] But you can’t let that happen.

(Leon)

The norm of emotional self-restraint also had a collective coping function. Occasional displays of emotion were deemed acceptable if they were the outcome of bereavements or if they related to children (e.g. serious illnesses, custody issues). But to unload your emotions perpetually was unwelcome. To do so was proscribed both because it placed a burden on other prisoners and because it reminded them of the personal troubles that they were trying to suppress:

You have to hide your feelings from everyone. [...] They’ve all got their problems as well. I don’t want to be sitting listening to their problems day in, day out. And I don’t want them to feel that they’re sitting there listening to my problems.

(Ewan)



In relation to prison officers, Crawley (2004a, 2004b) notes that when performers ‘corpse’ their lines, their embarrassment disrupts the entire collective performance. Likewise, prisoners acknowledged that they were mutually complicit in a culture of masking:

It’s just men, isn’t it, macho bullshit. It’s like Joe. Out there he’s a good bloke, family man, top geezer. In here he has to put on a little bit of front to save face. I know that, he knows that, people that know him know that. We all know. We obviously don’t verbally mention it.

(Kyle)

As well as controlling their emotional expressions in front of each other, most prisoners also recognized the *risks* of overheating emotionally, or appearing angry or confrontational, under the gaze of the institution:

*So do you have to control your emotions in here?*

Yes, to a certain degree, I think you do. [...] Like showing signs of anger: in society, it’s accepted, it’s not a problem as long as you’re maintaining that control. But I’m more careful in prison, because it’s perceived in a different view. So I do take precautions. [...] I have to maintain a—a little front, I suppose. It’s like—I’ve bitten on my anger.

(Tommy)

If you let things aggravate you you’ll blow up, you’ll be put down the block on basic, you’ll do your bird hardcore, you don’t want that for yourself, you want your bird as easy and light as possible.

(Wilson)

Prisoners’ awareness of institutional oversight thus limited their postures and practices of aggression. Some prisoners warned against precisely the kind of presentational strategies that others recommended, noting that prisoners with excessive muscularity were considered ‘riskier’ by prison staff. In this respect, prisoners had to walk a tightrope of impression management, between appearing excessively passive and needlessly aggressive. Prison conflicts were dangerous both to ignore and to pursue, creating a strained culture of coiled but controlled aggression. Experienced prisoners in particular modelled a form of tense courtesy, in which they were careful to avoid giving anyone a reason to precipitate conflict (i.e. by being respectful of personal space, and dealing carefully with interpersonal friction) at the same time as communicating their willingness to defend themselves. Other prisoners engaged in a form of calibrated confrontation, with threats made in ways that communicated assertion without really demanding reaction (‘stay out of my way’; ‘don’t speak to me’). These threats were far more common than full confrontations: ‘Instead of just going straight at it, they seem to like warn people a lot more’ (Seb). As suggested here, then, considerable effort went into the management and social presentation of personal emotions.

### *‘Masking’ and ‘fronting’*

The language of ‘masks’ and ‘fronts’ is widespread in accounts of men’s prisons. Jewkes (2005: 52) states that: “‘Wearing a mask’ is arguably the most common strategy for



coping with the rigors of imprisonment, and all prison researchers will be familiar with the sentiment that inmates feel it necessary to adopt a facade while inside.’ However, it may be helpful to draw a distinction between these two strategies. Drawing upon Hochschild’s (1979: 561) work, ‘fronting’ can be considered a form of *evocation*, ‘in which the cognitive focus is on a desired feeling which is initially absent’, while ‘masking’ represents a form of *suppression*, ‘in which the cognitive focus is on an undesired feeling which is initially present’. In relation to emotional expression in prisons, this is the difference between cultivating or presenting a version of the (emotional) self that is inauthentic, and concealing or holding in a version that is authentic. Defined broadly, the former might entail prisoners exaggerating their criminal wealth and potency, constructing themselves as highly volatile (‘nutters’) or liable to use weapons (‘tool-merchants’), or building up their bodies to communicate aggressive potential. In contrast, ‘masking’ is more defensive, requiring that one stifles or contains traces of fear, pain, weakness and vulnerability (anything that appears ‘feminine’) (Johnson, 1987; Sabo et al., 2001; Scraton et al., 1991; Thurston, 1996).

In Wellingborough, many prisoners reported that they ‘locked up’ or ‘blocked off’ their feelings at the point at which they were imprisoned, or talked of going on ‘on auto-pilot’ for the duration of the sentence (what Hochschild might call ‘deep acting’):

Sometimes I don’t even realize I’m doing it, it’s just subconsciously you do it, your mind switches, you’ve got part of your brain that’s designated for when you come to prison and it just turns on.

(Kyle)

When you come in here your emotions are cut off. [...] Everyone’s emotions are in all these little boxes, on a box shelf when you come in, you park it beside the TV or near the cupboards, then when you’re coming out you take them back out again, and you resort to those emotions [...] Basically, they’re on hold.

(Colin)

These processes of emotion control involved more conscious forms of management for some prisoners than for others. Many found it difficult to sever their emotional nerve endings (Jewkes, 2005), and instead described a perpetual—and often painful (see Jewkes, 2002, 2005; Liebling and Maruna, 2005: 6–7)—process of public self-control and private release:

You can’t show no weaknesses. If someone cusses you, you cuss them back. You don’t let somebody say you’re a fucking idiot, or, you know, ‘are you some kind of poof?’ or something like that. You have to say: ‘What’s your problem, mate? You’re more of a poof than I am, look at what you’re wearing’, stuff like that. [...] It is hard to be like that 24/7 for however many years. When I’m in my cell on my own I don’t cry or nothing. But I look out of the window, and I probably do feel like crying.

(Seb)

I put a mask on, to hide the pain, so I try to have a laugh to bury that pain, and when I’m back in my cell I take that mask off and the pain is there again.

(Sid)

I'm an emotional person. And if I've got a problem, twice a month, I have to cry, just to let the tension out. [...] If I don't cry, I'm going to go fucking nuts. [...] I don't like people to see that.

(Zack)

Here, the emphasis is on the restraint and discharge of negative emotions, such as pain, loneliness and vulnerability. But prisoners also described the need to regulate and suppress more emotions or aspects of character that were more positive. A number of interviewees explained the difficulty of not being able to express warmth or show their 'caring side' (Ronan):

There's a lot I've got locked away inside me, you know what I mean, I won't open up them doors until I get outside.

*What sorts of things?*

Well, the kind of care and affectionate, loving person I can be when I'm out there with my mum.

(Ian)

*Are there parts of your character that you can't express?*

Yeah. I'm quite a caring person. But I can't really sit down and talk to someone and say 'how are you feeling?', because it's all male, and people will think 'what the fuck's he doing?' That's pretty hard. [...] A lot of my emotions are not in use.

*Which emotions?*

Love. I can't show love in here, do you know what I mean? I can't be caring.

(Ross)

Some prisoners reported having to stem feelings of excitement about the possibility of early release, out of concern for those in less fortunate circumstances, or because being seen to care excessively about such matters could in itself be interpreted as a form of weakness (an inability to deal with prison life; or an indication that one was willing to kowtow to the institution in order to speed one's release). As a result, prisoners often had to maintain an appearance of cool indifference to their institutional circumstances. In effect, then, imprisonment dulled and narrowed the positive end of the affective spectrum, as well as amplifying its negative frequencies. It forced prisoners both to be more emotionally toughened and less emotionally generous than they felt themselves to be.

### *Leakages and sublimations*

So far, we have outlined the ways that, in the prison's main public and residential spaces, a significant amount of emotion management was required to maintain the smooth flow of everyday life. The demands of impression control were heightened in certain areas of the prison, such as the residential wings and prison workshops, where prisoners were most 'on show', and where they faced a wider audience of strangers. As suggested above, many prisoners noted that they were only able to relax and release their feelings when in their cells, listening to music or watching television. Here, then, we see a conventional

distinction between ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ locations. Yet, emotional expression was not limited to private spaces, and could not always be contained within them. In a range of ways, emotions leaked into, or were sublimated in, more public arenas. Acts of self-harm occurred in private, but left scars that were publicly visible.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, many prisoners channelled their aggression and relieved their anxiety in public forms of exercise:

I take it out down the gym, working out and doing the weights. Make sure I get all that aggression out. [...] All the frustration I’ve gathered over a couple of days or over a couple of months, I take it all out in the gym.

(Cameron)

The prison’s taut state of collective affective control was also punctured by more visible emotional eruptions. Some prisoners channelled their feelings into culturally acceptable forms, for example, ‘smashing up’ their cells or engaging in outbursts of anger on the wings. Others struggled to keep their emotions in check even within public locations, for example, breaking down after difficult phone calls.

Emotional disclosure also occurred in bounded, semi-private arenas, within dyadic friendships, among cell-mates, within small friendship groups or with trusted members of staff:

A few times I’ve [cried] in front of people. You know, it’s been that much that I’ve had to let it go.

*In front of other cons?*

Not in front of other cons, no. [...] I’ve been talking to the Health Care staff. [...] A friend of mine who I went to see, I talk with sometimes. But I don’t really show any of the tears side of me. He’s seen me when I’ve been down.

(Den)

I’m not ashamed to say there’s times when I really miss my son. It puts a lump in my throat and tears in my eyes. But that’s through myself. For no-one else to see.

*Would you not be able to show that more publicly?*

In front of a certain person. [...] There might be one or two people in your little clique that—the need arises and you could help them, fair enough.

(Brian)

Despite ostensible claims that emotion and intimacy were absent from prison life, as suggested above, many prisoners in fact exposed their vulnerabilities, albeit in controlled forms and within limited circles, soliciting advice on personal relationships and seeking kindness and support from trusted associates.

In other respects, emotions were secreted within the prison’s public discourse. Since it was a place where strength could be built and demonstrated, the gym was a place which seemed to exemplify the prison’s intense emotional regime. De Viggiani’s (2012: 278) fieldwork notes report the atmosphere of the prison gym as ‘intimidating ... with a distinctly macho atmosphere’. Yet, in the ways that prisoners ‘spotted’ for each other, in their mutual support and encouragement, it was also possible to discern sublimated forms

of intimacy.<sup>8</sup> In other forms of physical activity, such as football matches, prisoners likewise seemed to convey intense and physical forms of camaraderie. Certainly, the vivid and joyful ways in which prisoners engaged in collective exercise, and the sheer amount of physical horseplay among younger prisoners, pointed to submerged emotional sentiments. Likewise, some prisoners publicly denied that they had close prison friendships, often disputing in front of each other that their relationships had substance. But their descriptions and daily practices—waking each other up with cups of tea, knocking on cell walls to communicate goodnight wishes—were nothing if not intimate, and they suggested a more complex emotional topography than most accounts of prison life have suggested.

## Emotion zones

Many leakages and deviations from the prison's dominant feeling rules occurred in areas that cannot be characterized as private or backstage areas. Rather, these were *marginal spaces* or *intermediate zones* where many of the normal rules of the prisoner society were partially or temporarily suspended, permitting a broader emotional register than was possible in its main residential and most public areas. Any attempt to map the social and emotional terrain of the prison needs to take into account these locations.

One such space in Wellingborough was the visits room, where prisoners showed forms of warmth and tenderness that were taboo on the landings. For some prisoners, visits offered the only opportunity to display authentic feelings and show warmth:

When my family come every other week that's the only time I can show my true emotions, give my baby brother a kiss or give my dad and stepdad a hug, and talk about family life, where in here you don't give no one a hug, you don't show them kind of feelings to anyone.

(Ronan)

The emotional landscape of the visits room was palpably different from most other areas of the prison. Here, men held their children and touched their partners with tenderness, longingly embraced family members and friends and openly displayed joy and affection, as though their emotional identities had been resuscitated en route from the wings.<sup>9</sup> Some were visibly upset as their visitors left, or sat in silent contemplation, their stolidity contrasting with the animated tone of a few minutes earlier. Uniformed staff too seemed softened by the emotional microclimate—as Earle (2012) notes, the presence of children partially transcends some of the normal terms of staff–prisoner engagement. On returning to the wings, the emotional displays of the visits room were not subjects of public discussion. To mock someone for showing vulnerability with their children or for being tearful with a partner was not generally acceptable. Behaviour observed in the visits hall seemed to be disqualified information: barred from use in maliciously deriding other prisoners. In this respect, the visits hall was a sacred space of sorts.

Wellingborough's classrooms also harboured alternative emotional climates. In cookery lessons, where commensality was encouraged, prisoners shared food and complimented each other's efforts, in terms that were much more generous than those found on the prison landings. Ingredients were exchanged without the strict borrowing rules that applied on the wings. In pottery classes, there was an open camaraderie, as men praised each other's efforts, swapped tips and shared pride and disappointment in their produce.

Aesthetic appreciation could be vocalized without embarrassment. Warmth and emotion blossomed temporarily, nurtured by a female staff member who took on an explicitly maternal role. In sociology lessons, prisoners relaxed into student identities that allowed them to express hesitancy in their views, mock their own prejudices and disclose certain kinds of personal details. Again, these acts struck a sharp contrast with the tone of the wings, where the terms of public conversations were marked by certainty and bravado. As one prisoner said, 'I think people come to education for a bit of release, [from] the behaviour bullshit and the language bullshit, and the stories bullshit.'

Likewise, in the prison's philosophy class, discussions of religion and politics took place between prisoners with wildly different perspectives without tension or reprisal. In a range of environments, then, kindness, generosity and emotional disclosure were permitted, and there was some transient escape from the emotional privations of incarceration. Indeed, when prisoners talked about the value of educational activities, they spoke as much about its role in providing mental and emotional release as its practical benefits. One prisoner described his experience as follows:

When [the teacher] was reading Anthony and Cleopatra I was standing on the banks of the Nile, sounds and smells, I can close my eyes and I'm there. It's an escape, [...] it's opened up a whole new world, emotions I never knew I had.

(Alfie)

Asked what art achieved for him, Den provided a similar explanation:

It doesn't keep my mind in prison. I have to sit and think about things that are outside, that I've seen outside. Let's just take for example, objects, say—a jug, a glass, you don't see things like that in here. So you've got to open your mind to think about, what does this look like? [...] A lot of people's minds tend to slow down here because they haven't got much new, incoming information. It's very limited. So it's helped me progress quite a lot. [...] If I can't do my art work I'm lost. I'd be running around like a raging lunatic.

As expressed here, educational activities enabled certain forms of emotional experience and expression. In Goffman's (1961: 67) terms, these were 'removal activities', 'sufficiently engrossing and exciting to lift the participant out of himself' (see also Jewkes, 2002 re in-cell television).

The prison chapel was described in a similar way, as an island of respite. In the terms of one interviewee: 'It's a different atmosphere. The people there, they're more friendly towards you, they just talk to you differently and I reckon they listen a bit more.' Noah explained that the chapel was:

an outlet from prison. It's the only place really I tend to find people from outside coming in. And to me it's a break from the routine. You go up the chapel and you get people coming from [outside]. So you have a chat, and it's just a breath of fresh air. And then, boom! You're back in reality on the wing.

A few points are worth highlighting here. First, in Noah's terms, the wings represented the 'reality' of imprisonment, with alternative emotional zones offering only temporary

relief from the essential qualities of the environment. Prisoners who mixed beyond their normal cliques and hierarchies in these spaces relapsed into more stratified arrangements almost as soon as they left them. Relations were friendly but they were not friendships, and they rarely endured beyond these locations. In other words, it was possible, within some zones of the prison, to be a different kind of person, but the environment still placed limits on the nature of the relationship that might be formed within it (see Crewe, 2009).

Second, these intermediate zones required cultivation in order to be less prison-like. Much of this cultivation reflected a different philosophy of self among education and chaplaincy staff. By treating prisoners as students, worshippers or workers—using their first names, and addressing them as individuals rather than abstract units—these personnel created places where the fundamentals of power, liberty and authority could, for brief periods, be put aside. To maintain these alternative cultures and create spaces that were as *un*-carceral as possible, civilian staff had to play with, subvert or offer alternative displays of authority from those found elsewhere in the prison. They brought in minor treats, like biscuits, which symbolized care. They disclosed more about their lives than was strictly allowed, binding prisoners into a contract of mutual candour and humanity that they then met with each other, albeit within limits. They often let prisoners call them immediately by their first names, and asked not to be called ‘gov’ or ‘miss’. They made clear their interest in the personal advancement of the people they taught, imparting a sense of care, and a concern for the future, that was often absent from the wings. Even when education staff had misgivings about prisoners’ motives or post-release intentions (which they often expressed to their colleagues), as part of their professional ideology, they celebrated success and reinforced positive aspirations. They allowed their authority to be challenged, and deliberately differentiated themselves from uniformed staff by joking with prisoners about their colleagues’ more militant style. Some distanced themselves from the formal authority of the prison, by de-emphasizing the fact that they carried prison keys and could ‘write up’ prisoners for disciplinary infractions. They also downplayed their specific professional authority—often feigning uncertainty as a pedagogic strategy—while sometimes allowing prisoners to ‘run’ the class. At the same time, they used their distinctive professional skills to model legitimate authority: they instructed rather than ordered, and sought respect through stature and respect rather than fear, status or command.

Perhaps most importantly, civilian staff and volunteers brought in from the outside world forms of ‘ordinary discourse’ that were filtered out to a greater extent on the wings, in part because interactions with officers were much more superficial. Arguably, places like the visit rooms and chapel crossed the boundaries of public and private, bringing in prisoners’ external emotional lives or bringing out their private hinterlands (Comfort, 2008; Moran, 2013). Goffman (1961: 98) himself notes that visits rooms serve to remind everyone in the establishment ‘that the institution is not completely a world of its own but bears some connexion, bureaucratic and subordinated, to structures in the wider world’. Alongside the regulation of their own emotions, the ‘emotion work’ that some civilian staff were undertaking involved nurturing emotional expression in others, developing their empathic capacity, and creating a safe space for collective disclosure through benign control on behalf of the group (rather than some external authority). Participation in the kinds of moral conversations that occurred within many of the education

classes—from philosophy to basic literacy—required prisoners to lift their masks of studied indifference and allow buried vulnerabilities to come to the fore. One prisoner provided the following description of the impact of the prison's philosophy class:

[X] is a sensible lad but he's very hot-headed, he's got a short fuse [...]. He recently started philosophy classes, maybe he'll get some common sense and understanding of people's emotions and circumstances. [...] Through the philosophy, just common sense thinking, normal thinking patterns. [I've] learned to respect people for what they are, and respect their point of view. [In Alan's class] People have got the chance to give their opinions, and I like the respect shown to other people in the class—say a certain man has got an opinion, [you] sit and listen to him voice his opinion.

(Alfie)

Finally, it is significant that education occupied a kind of 'third space' (Wilson, 2003), which permitted a form of sanctioned resistance. Prisoners who got involved in educational activities were enabled and supported by the institution, credited for their engagement with its aims and often seen as model prisoners. Yet educational activities were experienced by prisoners as intensely personal, and educational achievements were 'owned' by the individual prisoner. Those who felt somewhat hostile to the prison system, and did not want their successes to be co-opted by it nor their commitment to be derided by other prisoners, found in education a middle-way. As Nathan commented: 'It's somewhere where, as a prisoner, you can advance yourself as an individual while advancing yourself within the prison system.' Here, then, it was possible for prisoners to forge a space that was comparatively free from the oppressive oversight of their peers on one side and the institution on the other. Within limits, and only temporarily, spaces emerged for a more authentic presentation of emotion and selfhood.

Diffidence is diminished in parts of the prison system which are less 'deep' (see King and McDermott, 1995)—that is, where one finds non-custodial personnel and shards of the outside world. Both put prisoners in touch with otherwise suppressed parts of themselves, while providing audiences for whom masking and fronting are un-necessary or counter-productive. Bible reading and prayer, sociological discussion and philosophical debate, creative activity and contact with families, both encourage and require prisoners to put aside their normal postures and expose attitudes and emotions that are normally withheld. And whereas—to return to the Hobbesian allegory—prisoners normally submit to the higher authority of the institution, or to powerful prisoner groupings, to ensure some form of order and to counter-act diffidence, in education, religion and artistic activity, they find alternative normative systems, and somewhat transcendental sources of meaning, comfort and psychological safety.

## **Conclusion**

Despite prisons being in many ways defined by walls, boundaries and spatial demarcations, relatively little consideration has been given to the ways in which space itself shapes the penal experience. The adoption in many studies of Goffman's dramaturgical framework, while helpful, is limited by its binary description of 'front' and 'back' stages, or public and private domains. As we have suggested, the differential behaviours and



experiences of prisoners in different locations within the prison exposes the need for a much more detailed and nuanced spatial analysis of prison culture, which would recognize a multitude of normative and emotional domains, and could describe the transitional moments from one to another, as character is masked and modified. This might resemble Goffman's work on impression management in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, and draw on Foucault's (1979) comments on the spatial inscription of power. It would pay much more attention than is usual to the social architecture of different penal spaces—comparing, for example, the cellular, standardized and linear nature of the wings (cells, queues, etc.) with the more open, circular and intimate arrangement of classrooms. It would recognize that, in some prisons, such as high-security establishments, where prisoners are more circumspect both of their peers and of institutional power (Liebling et al., 2012), there may be less space to open up emotionally, and more risk in doing so. It might demand particular research methods, such as the shadowing of prisoners (and prison staff) as they move between different stages, and the fine-grained observation of social interactions. And it would need to explore the possibility that the overall cartography of the prison looks different depending on where one is located in the institutional hierarchy: perhaps more vertical for senior managers, and more horizontal for prisoners—the next gate, the next room and the wall that keeps them in. Most importantly, it would recognize that the determining force of space is not just physical or architectural, but resides in the ways that places carry meanings, harbour and cultivate particular practices and sentiments, are devised for specific activities, and are populated by certain personnel.

Bringing to bear a spatial perspective on the study of prison life might help to integrate more closely some of the findings emerging from within carceral geography with those of mainstream prison sociology. It might also advance the ways in which prison researchers think about the gendered nature of prison life, and the various versions of masculinity that can be found in men's prisons if one looks in some of their under-explored sub-domains. It is noticeable, for example, that some of the emotions zones that we have detailed here involve activities that are conventionally regarded as feminine (e.g. cooking and caring for family members) or are deliberately cultivated as places of nurture. Since these are places where masculine norms are temporarily softened, it might also give grounds for optimism that prisons could promote forms of gender and selfhood that are more progressive than the hardened masculinities described in most accounts of prison life.

## Notes

1. A distinction is sometimes drawn between 'emotions' (relatively undifferentiated and primitive affective states) and 'sentiments' (the determinate, social form that is given to these states) (see Gordon, 1981). For the purposes of this article, we instead adopt the former term as a shorthand for patterns of sensation, arousal and affect which are constructed and enabled within specific cultural contexts (see Bachelard, 1994; Bennett, 1990).
2. 'While it is true that every prisoner does not live in constant fear of being robbed or beaten, the constant companionship of thieves, rapists, murderers and aggressive homosexuals is far from reassuring' (Sykes, 1958: 77).
3. Another outcome is that many prisoners form mutually beneficial associations in order to

minimize the likelihood that they are exploited, and to alleviate some of the other deprivations of imprisonment. For current purposes, our interest is less in these social adaptations than in the individual adjustments that prisoners make in order to ward off the ambient hostility of the environment.

4. Likewise, in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman notes that there are often regions where people with different formal roles engage together with an understanding that normal rules do not apply. Thus, on ships, the galley 'is the only place where officers and men meet on a footing of complete equality' (1959: 194), functioning as a kind of 'safety-valve', where 'every man can speak his mind with impunity' (1959: 195).
5. This research was supported by the Nuffield Foundation (award NCF/00076/G).
6. Bennett was an anthropologist by background, and had contributed to a volume on emotional constructionist theory at a time when it was a relatively new direction in sociology (Bennett, 1990).
7. Prisoners who self-harmed talked of the emotional functions of cutting the skin—its capacity to remind them that their feelings still existed, or to liberate their emotions from within: 'all that stress and tension, it flowed out with the blood' (Fin).
8. 'Spotting' in weightlifting is assisting someone to undertake an exercise safely, often in a way that enables them to lift a greater amount than they would be able to on their own.
9. This is not to say that all prisoners were authentic in their emotional displays in this location. Some reported still having to mask their true feelings, in order to provide reassurance to their visitors:

You can't show your family that you're down, or anything like that. You've got to show that you're coping, like I try and have a laugh with them and that. And to show them that I'm the same person out there that I am in here. So I try and make them laugh, do the best you can.

*So you're not putting on a front when you're in visits? Or are you?*

A little bit, I am. [...] I can't let them know this is getting me down.

(Joey)

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