

Liminality revisited: Mapping the emotional adaptations of women in carceral space

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Abstract

This article draws on interview data with women in two prisons in the UK to understand the emotionally nuanced and sensorially attuned relationship between confined individuals and carceral space. The article presents an ‘emotional map’ comprising: (i) living or ‘being’ spaces; (ii) free places; and (iii) ‘therapeutic spaces’ in prisons. This tri-spatial thematic analysis enables us to use Victor Turner’s concepts of ‘liminality’ and ‘communitas’ to uncover the complex, contradictory and sometimes transient emotions that permeate spaces in prison. This in turn allows us to explore the particular challenges that accompany transitional periods of adjustment to prison life, the environmental constraints that women in prison live with and navigate, and the careful ‘spatial selection’ strategies they implement in order to seek or avoid particular emotional states.

Keywords

communitas, emotions, environment, liminality, prisons, senses, space, women

Introduction

This article is about the intersections of space and emotion in prison. Although not the focus of prison scholarship until very recently when researchers in criminology and carceral geography prompted a ‘spatial turn’ in qualitative studies of

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imprisonment (see Jewkes and Moran, 2017, for an overview), it is now commonplace to highlight the architectural and spatial features of incarceration, even when the study is ostensibly about something else. We know from studies in environmental psychology that the built environment shapes our lives and identities, affects moods and emotions, enhances or diminishes a sense of wellbeing, and gives rise to complex and sometimes contradictory feelings, simultaneously and over time (Goldhagen, 2017). Our purpose here is to turn this lens on women's prisons, examining how carceral spaces intersect with and produce particular emotional states.

In her analysis of the prominent themes in the literature on women's imprisonment, Liebling (2009: 20) criticizes what she describes as an 'obsession' with emotional relationships; the emphasis almost always being on 'women's relationships with each other, and how sexual and family-like they are', rather than on themes relevant to the prison, such as power, authority and justice (as conventionally found in studies of men's prisons). She rhetorically asks why there is an emphasis in this literature on impulsiveness, manipulativeness and resistance to taking orders, but not on the emotions of anger and defiance (Liebling, 2009: 21,19). While we did not set out specifically to address these deficits, the themes identified by Liebling chime with our research objectives and underpin our findings. Our aim was to attend to the synthesis of spatial, sensory and emotional dimensions of prison life, highlighting the profound challenges for prisoners to survive, thrive or simply reach a tolerable state of being. In pursuing this line of enquiry, we have extended and developed the focus of scholarly attention from themes relevant to our participants' status as emotional – yet emotionally limited – subjects, to agents with a full repertoire of emotions that are pertinent to the dynamics of incarceration (Crewe et al., 2014; Laws, 2019; Laws and Crewe, 2016). The article also aims to contribute to the nascent literature on the sensory dimensions of imprisonment (Herrity et al., 2021), because we believe that an understanding of places of punishment and coercive control is deepened by paying due regard to the sensuous, atmospheric and visceral dynamics between people and space.

Our analysis is framed by the premise that the prison is a space that differs – physically, temporally and emotionally – from the world before and after the carceral experience. In attempting to understand the emotionally-nuanced relationship between individuals and space we draw on and develop Victor Turner's (1974) theorisation of 'anti-structure' and in particular his concept of 'liminality' – the 'betwixt and between' middle phase of any ritualised process, during which the individuals involved are understood to be 'no longer' and simultaneously also 'not yet'. Turner was influenced by the work of cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) on 'purity and danger', and both help shed light on the ambivalent relationship that some individuals have with places and spaces that might be deemed by the casual observer to be unproblematically desirable, e.g. environments designed to offer privacy or opportunities for association and sociability. However, in spaces where a spirit of equality, homogeneity and comradeship can be fostered, the shared experience of liminality enables participants to achieve an *acute* state of community – 'communitas' (Turner, 1969). Douglas and Turner both argued that all social

transition is perceived as dangerous because it entails an undefined status, meaning that persons experiencing transition have no place in society. 'Liminality' lends itself well, then, to studies of the socio-culturally and geographically marginalized and, while others (see Jewkes, 2005; Moran, 2013) have previously adopted the term in their prison scholarship, here a more labile notion of the liminal is introduced, which is sufficiently versatile to address the complex intersections between place, space and emotion.

Background and methods

While certain kinds of carceral design may appear (to an outsider) more oppressive or progressive than others, the extent to which prisoners actually *feel* oppressed, or otherwise, is an empirical question. In attempting to answer it, we present data from semi-structured interviews with 33 individuals; 25 prisoners in an English all-female establishment rebuilt in 1999, having previously held adult men, boys and, in its original incarnation, isolated hospital patients; and eight participants in a purpose-built Scottish facility opened in 2014, and holding men and women in separate accommodation.¹ In addition to the interviews, observational shadowing of prisoners took place in the English facility, and six focus groups were held at the Scottish prison ($n = 24$). The two establishments varied in location, footprint, architectural style and population size (the Scottish facility holds 50 women; the English one, approximately 250). The English prison was 'quietly thriving', having a relatively stable, mostly long-term prisoner population and a number of diverse, well-attended programmes, including several well-utilized therapeutic initiatives (Laws, 2018). The Scottish prison had a more mixed population, in terms of sentence length, and was still experiencing some of the 'teething troubles' that typically beset any new prison, but it was clean, modern and had reasonably good programmes and facilities. Despite the obvious disparities, the lived experience of imprisonment in both institutions was marked by consistency and commonalities, with our two prison field sites sharing environmental, aesthetic and atmospheric characteristics that are typically experienced in any custodial setting. They also contained broadly similar populations, in the sense that, in all jurisdictions in the UK, women in prison have predictable socio-medical and offending-victim histories.² Unsurprisingly, then, while individual responses varied in the way they were expressed, we found strikingly similar affective reactions to the underlying emotional textures of lives in confinement. Accordingly, we will only differentiate between data from the English and Scottish prisons if a quote is related to the unique architectural properties of the establishment in which the interview took place.

Our intention is to present a framework that helps us to theorize what prison *feels like* to incarcerated women in the context of liminality. In pursuit of this aim, we outline a three-zone 'emotional map' of: (i) living or 'being' spaces (the cell and house-block); (ii) 'free places' (small-scale settings removed from the direct control of dominant groups that offer temporary breaks from its more oppressive aspects); and (iii) 'therapeutic spaces' (more intense than free places, with distinct climates

that may be experienced as psychologically constrictive, personally transformative, or some combination of both). While we locate identifiable differences between these different conceptual ‘zones’ of the prison, they are not absolute, and we acknowledge the confluence and potential for overlap between them. Liminality is employed as a fluid concept, with temporal, spatial and experiential logics. We have designated it an identity marker (e.g. to discuss people in transition or limbo) and an architectural one (e.g. to describe prison spaces said to be liminal), while at the same time being cognizant of the fact that incarceration is itself a liminal phase of life.

Liminal living or being spaces: From turbulence to serenity

It’s a place for everything; all my emotions come out in that cell. (Olivia)

It is often assumed that the cell is a place of sanctuary, a ‘backstage’ refuge where individuals can retreat from the hurly-burly of life ‘frontstage’ in the public spaces of a prison (Goffman, 1961). We will explore this type of emotional attachment to the cell below. However, the comforting, enveloping, self-nurturing characteristics of a sanctuary can take on rather different connotations when refuge is enforced. Lock-up takes time to become accustomed to, and a common narrative in our research revealed that confinement could be emotionally turbulent, especially during the early stages, when a liminal ‘state of being’ meant the subject moving through a period of instability or chaos, to one of tolerance or even transformation and reinvention. Turner (1974: 259) notes that liminal space can be a ‘grave that is also a womb’; an apt description in the context of imprisonment, with all its connotations of ‘concrete womb’ (Watterson, 1973), tomb-like burial (Wacquant, 2002), a liminal ‘antechamber of death’ (Fludernik, 2019), ‘mortification’ (Goffman, 1961), ‘civil death’ (Liebling, 2009) and bare existence in cells that resemble chthonic spaces (Fiddler, 2007); metaphors that compete with ‘official’, social and (sometimes) individual aspirations for the ‘rebirth’ of rehabilitation.

Subsumed into a world that is ‘predominantly masculine and insensitive to their very different needs’ (Devlin, 1998: vii), a common aspect of mortification among our female participants, especially in entry and early stages of imprisonment, was simultaneous, paradoxical states of exposure and invisibility. In both prisons it was felt that specific design features and institutional decisions eroded privacy and dignity and were a barrier to recovery from trauma. A common complaint concerned the ‘spyholes’ that permitted officers to observe them while they showered. Leanne said it was ‘weird’ and ‘unnecessary’, and that anyone who felt suicidal should be in the ‘sui-room’ where they would automatically be checked every 15 minutes. The fact that, even when locked in their cells, officers and other prisoners could ‘just walk up and open the flap’ was a source of consternation: ‘It’s horrible because I’m in my room and this is my private space, but then they’re telling me that I’m meant to be dressed’.

The constant threat of exposure and intrusion resulted in many participants experiencing a diminished sense of self, but also led to feelings of invisibility *as*

women. While the examples most often recounted relate to humiliating procedures such as strip-searching, numerous smaller, everyday examples exacerbated pejorative feelings. Many participants endorsed aspects of an idealised femininity that emphasises physical and sexual attractiveness, and complaints about thoughtless cell design included poor storage facilities: 'we've got nowhere to hang clothes for obvious reasons, but it means you look crumpled all the time'; and 'no-one's thought to give us space to put our make-up and toiletries. You just have to leave them out on the side, and they get nicked'. Another example of casual disregard for the needs of women concerned the bathroom mirrors which were made of plastic with a thin film of reflective material adhered to the back, which had been positioned at the correct height for men:

The mirrors are little mirrors. And because they're right up, I can't see in it. I have to stand on a chair. About a month ago, I was standing on the mirror trying to straighten my hair and I actually fell and smacked my head and burst my head open . . . That mirror is for tall folk. They should do something for people that's shorter, like a mirror extension. But there's no good light in it. They're plastic as well, it's not that normal mirror. From one angle you look fat, one angle you look thin. Like a circus mirror, that's what it's like (Jennifer).

It was similarly noted that women in prison never have an opportunity to see themselves in a full-length mirror, though as Maureen poignantly added, 'not that I'd want to look at myself in this uniform'.

Around a third of participants held mixed or unfavourable attitudes to their cells, claiming they evoked negative emotions including anger, sadness, boredom, frustration, depression, claustrophobia, feelings of suffocation and anxiety. A common response was fixation on the fact of their confinement: 'you just can't get out of it and you're stuck there, it can be really dreadful'. Even the 'perk' of an extra hour's lie-in at the weekends was described as 'horrible' and 'a lot for some people to cope with'. The cell was framed as a place of deep internal strife and conflict in which participants mechanically or restlessly paced: 'I walk up and down my room, that's the hardest part of my day'; 'You get annoyed and angry, so you start bouncing around the pad'. These feelings were intensified by the restricted dimensions of the space: 'The rooms are so claustrophobic . . . I've got everything in there, but it just feels like I haven't got enough space'.

These accounts are strongly redolent of Turner's (1974: 239) argument that liminality involves encounters with 'grotesque and monstrous forms'. Deep existential fears were raised by cellular living: especially in relation to deterioration, stagnation and the loss of a sense of self. These women did not feel attached to their cells, nor did they find comfort in them:

The walls in my cell are empty, it's not my home. It's just a passing through place for me. It can never be my home. The place I grew up in does not look like this awful place. It's just a room with a TV (Wendy).

While most women were in single cells and therefore did not experience the indignity of having to share poorly-screened toilets and showers in a small living space, the idiosyncratic behaviours of others could make it hard to relax: 'You're in your cell and there's people screaming from their windows at night . . . you're trying to wind down, it's like "please stop it"'. Another said the noise from the landings was often so intense that it was impossible to 'hear the telly, even if we turn it up to the max'. Meanwhile, Leanne described how the layout of her cell and position of the bed meant that 'my head's right next to the door, you can hear the staff speaking and that, keys jingling . . . phones ringing, people speaking, keys, doors banging all the time. You hear the alarm go off all the time . . . if there's a fight or something'. The sound of metal on metal was a stark reminder of the reality of institutional life: 'when you hear the keys, it's like "shit I'm still in jail"'. The daily patterns of officers (un)locking doors produced a jarring metallic percussion that reverberated, in turn contributing to a sense of monotony: 'the same people, the same things, and hearing the same doors locking and keys rattling'.

Nonetheless, despite appreciating rare moments of peace, most prisoners were not immune to adding to the auditory cacophony that they themselves criticized; Melody complained about the 'noisy young girls' in her block but continued that she responded angrily by 'sometimes shouting my head off at them'. Many felt caught in a bind, disliking the excessive noise, but contributing to it because it had become normalised and, ultimately, 'if you don't shout, you don't get heard' (Val). Danielle explained that because noise was the status quo, silence was interpreted as an eerie and alarming disruption to the rhythm: 'When it's silent, you think "what's going on?". And you think, "something is boiling, it's going to kick off"'. There was no respite, then. Even when a wing was quiet, it seemed an ominous portent of things to come.

Other sensory intrusions included bright security lighting from outside that pierced through curtains, meaning 'you never have complete darkness' and interior lights on the landings creating enough illumination to see 'people's feet going under the door'. Ill-fitting cell doors made the problem worse in the newer, Scottish prison: 'when the door's shut, you can see there's a gap between each side of the door. You can see right through. I can see right over to the screws'. The odours encountered in various parts of the prisons – a powerful, yet frequently overlooked dimension of institutional life – were also mentioned frequently. Architectural theorists such as Pallasmaa (1996) have recognised smell as the most persistent memory of any space, but prison researchers rarely comment on it (though see Herrity et al., 2021). Certainly, the smells and scents – of food, bodies and bodily fluids, toiletries, cleaning products and tobacco – that mingled in the living spaces provoked strong reactions. Leanne said she raided the cleaning store cupboard to bring a comforting smell to her cell: 'I spray softener, so I've got a smell of Lenor in my room'. In the Scottish prison, where smoking was still permitted at the time of research, Maureen commented on the unwelcome smell of cigarettes: 'You can only smoke inside your cell . . . even as a smoker myself, it's not

hygienic, I don't like the smell of it, and I'm forever spraying things about'. Jennifer similarly noted:

'I scrub my walls all the time. The rooms are that little, and there's no air gets in the windows, your room stinks of smoke, everything, your clothes, everything... I was trying to stop smoking for a while but when everybody in the unit smokes apart from me... everything was still stinking of smoke'.

It was also typical to hear expressions of disgust about 'women with hygiene problems' who 'don't wash and their room smells'. In the English facility, participants related how women with incontinence created a build-up of smells on the wings because the bins containing their disposable pads were emptied only once a week. Of course, this not only engendered feelings of hostility from those who lived in close proximity, but also inflicted shame on the women who were not afforded better privacy when dealing with an embarrassing medical condition. Such gendered constructions of pollution taboos (Douglas, 1966) highlight the awkward boundary-blurring that occurs in institutions that are also domestic spheres, illustrating that these women are in the midst of a 'profound experience of humiliation and humility' common to liminal experiences of transformation (Turner, 1974: 260).

However, as Jewkes (2005: 382) argues, while 'liminal spaces are characterised by disorder and chaos... if one can create a path through them, they can affect positive change'. After a period of emotional volatility, then, most prisoners were able to make peace with cellular confinement, especially valuing it for the privacy it afforded. Echoing Fludernik's (2019) comment that, 'Once the jailer has departed, the prison cell... provides[s] an intimate locus of personal space and safeguard[s] the inmate's physical integrity' (p. 34), we found that some women began to highly value and look forward to time spent alone in their cell: 'I know that when my door is locked no one can get in and I can't get out. I feel safe in my own little bed. That's my safe haven'. We do not mean to suggest that the threats of exposure, invisibility and sensory intrusion highlighted above disappeared, but that some women actively adapted, in spite of them.

For such women, the cell was regarded as an emotional void that needed to be filled, not with personal goods *per se*, but with a visual aesthetic that creates positive internal feelings: 'The cell is *my* serenity, I have my *own* prison'; 'It is my space'; 'It's my little *home*'; 'I feel free in *my* cell'. These women exerted agency over decoration and the spatial layouts of their cells, and explicitly spoke of the effects this had on their feelings. For example, Blanche explained that displaying religious iconography was a way to design in optimism: 'I've got loads of pictures on my boards, the one in front of me is all my religious stuff, so when I wake up, the first thing I see is positivity'. The emphasis on the use of objects to evoke feelings symbolises a kind of 'prosthetic of the self' (Gonzalez, 1995), wherein material possessions represent an important extension of prisoners' personalities and the kind of emotions they wanted to feel. In a similar vein,

colour was used, not only to de-institutionalize the cell, but to augment particular emotional feelings:

I have my own bedding rather than the prison issue bedding. I made my room bright yellow. I put yellow curtains in, yellow in the bedding, yellow everything. The normal furniture they give you is dark blue curtains, green bedding. Everything was just sort of dull and grey and black. I think it makes the room very depressing . . . so I try and make it the brightest colour possible to try and make me feel not so dull. Even when it's night-time outside it still feels bright in there. I don't want to feel dark and depressed. (Amber)

As Amber illustrates, and in common with other studies (Jewkes, in press), the colour that routinely evoked the feeling of incarceration was grey: 'if I was to describe this prison as a colour, I would say it's grey' (Rebecka). Not necessarily a literal description, 'grey' suggests atmospheric, corporeal and mental atrophy, and was frequently used in conjunction with adjectives including 'dull', 'dreary' and 'depressing'. By customizing their cell colours, participants created a contrast between the cold edges of the prison and their 'warm and welcoming' living spaces, distinguishing themselves from what they perceived as the uniform, drab, and alienating design choices of the prison environment. These accounts reflect the ways in which prisoners appeared to 'make space from themselves' by building 'mental walls' and finding 'comfort in the construction of a purified space' (Sibley and van Hoven, 2009: 201–202).

For some, a personalised, comfortable cell meant they could drop their defensive postures and not only behave more authentically but experience more 'real' feelings: 'You sometimes can have a little cry to yourself without anyone seeing, without anyone thinking or writing things down "oh, she's upset today"'. Even though the emotions that surfaced were often challenging, prisoners had a finite and predictable amount of time to process them before re-entering the public areas of the prison. In this sense, time in cell provided an emotional shelter for balancing moods and replenishing energy, in contrast with the wider prison environment: 'it's silent and I love it, I love it when my door is locked'. Cells were described as 'safe places' or semi-private cocoons 'away from people' where one no longer had to 'be on edge'.

It is important to underline that the liminal process of adaptation described here is complicated and non-linear. While many prisoners experienced affection for their cell, making them 'homely' and decorating the space with personal keepsakes and photographs, these artefacts also evoked feelings of guilt and loss, especially in relation to enforced separation from children and loved ones. Some women repeatedly transitioned in and out, back and forth, in their feelings of fondness/antipathy for and (in)security in their personal spaces. Time in cells created waves of intense emotional energy, but many prisoners felt overwhelmed by these forces, rather than able to navigate a progressive course through them. The juxtaposition of institutional fixtures and fittings and a few treasured personal items were, at

some times (though not necessarily at *all* times) counter-intuitively experienced as barriers to wellbeing, raking up feelings of self-disapproval and shame: 'If I lay there looking at my photos for too long, I feel sad because I've lost out on so many years of their life that I can't get back'; '[I have] pictures of my children on the wall but I try not to look at them'. Even those participants who had adapted to cellular confinement relatively well, and had 'domesticated' their space, had highly ambivalent feelings about describing it as 'home' or 'homely':

I get comfortable because I've got heaps of photos and that, all my family and my friends, so it feels like home. But it's nothing like home, you know what I mean? (Donna).

I've got, right above my bed, I've made things that look like a headboard. It's not really, but it just looks . . . just little pictures that you cut out magazine and you colour in and paint and just stick it on the wall. It looks more homely. But it'll never be home (Maureen).

In an attempt to quell disturbing thoughts, Gabriella chose not to display anything personal: 'I need to separate myself from outside . . . I don't want anything to feel like home'. Other participants described nightmares and acute anxiety caused by having reminders of their former lives surrounding them.

Without overlooking the subtlety and nuances of Gabriella's antipathy towards her surroundings, the accounts of most of the women point towards a form of liminal transition. Initial powerful feelings of disgust and existential fear about their cell spaces did not disappear entirely but morphed into a kind of acceptance, which required constant work to remain emotionally on top of. For many of our research participants, cells became 'projects' in which to cultivate their identities and emotional expression. As Jewkes (2005) surmises, during the early stages of liminality 'the self may be temporarily suspended but may reassert itself at a later point as the initial feelings of fear and loss subside' (375). When prisoners transitioned through this process the reassertion of identity was apparent through their renewed sense of ownership over their cells and increased levels of comfort with their emotions. What began as a space of disruption and isolation could become one of the few places where prisoners could exert control over the environment and their emotions – albeit with some lapses into ambivalence or antipathy.

Free places

Similar to living or being spaces – in the sense that a reasonable degree of privacy, autonomy and personal security were found in them – were what we are calling, after Goffman, 'free places', i.e. the spaces where prisoners felt most at ease with others, and where:

ordinary levels of surveillance and restriction were markedly reduced . . . where the inmate could openly engage in a range of tabooed activities with some degree of

security. These places often also provided a marked reduction in . . . population density, contributing to the peace and quiet characteristic of them . . . 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 (Goffman, 1961: 205).

While Goffman's definition suggests free places are rather more closed-off and illicit than what we are describing, his reference to (uniformed) staff being absent or putting aside their usual authoritative demeanour when entering them, is an accurate reflection of what we observed. In carceral free places, institutional control is lighter, and the rules are more relaxed about the expression of emotions that must be stifled in other parts of the prison. As Crewe et al. (2014: 70) note, temporarily, and within limits, it is possible for prisoners to be 'comparatively free from the oppressive oversight of their peers on one side and the institution on the other', thus encouraging a 'more authentic presentation of emotion and selfhood'. Free places were kept cleaner than shared living spaces, had softer design features and less visible emphasis on security. For example, in the hair salon in the English prison, barred windows were painted in lighter tones, posters and artwork adorned the walls, and the music coming from the radio and bustling conversations of the clientele made it easy to forget that it was a prison salon. Free places felt 'normal', providing a different texture to institutional life: 'I love my job . . . because when you come over here you see different faces. Some people come up and make a conversation; "you alright? How are you doing?" . . . It makes so much difference for me to see even one different person over here per day. That's what carries me, to be honest'.

While the sense of group identity and comradeship were highly valued, free places encouraged something more than community. They allowed the flourishing of 'communitas'; an 'acute point' of community that comes from the shared experience of liminality and is an 'undifferentiated, equalitarian' space where participants can enjoy a 'moment in and out of time' (Turner, 1974: 274). In contrast to the account of cells above, liminality here refers less to the identity change of individual prisoners and more to the shared suspension of norms in these spaces. For example, free places fostered the breakdown of prejudices and an atmosphere of inclusivity. Prisons – and pre-prison lives – typically place individuals below the threshold of 'truly human functioning' (Nussbaum, 2003: 40) but free places made it possible to feel, in Turner's (1974) memorable phrase, like 'human totals' and 'integral beings who recognizantly share the same humanity' (p. 269). The tutors, work supervisors, gym instructors and chaplains who oversaw activities in these spaces rewarded and incentivised positive behaviours and there was a spontaneous and organic quality to the relations and manifestations of care that emerged. In Nussbaum's (2003) terms, free places encourage people to 'live with and toward others' (p. 41).

On the whole, we found that free places were relatively unambiguous. Less overtly punitive than all other areas of the prisons, free places provided a

stabilising and replenishing oasis for the women, and the 'softer' architectural features enabled prisoners to 'tune out' of institutional life in the relatively uncomplicated company of others. The prevalence of thoughtless, masculinist and over-securitized design that unnecessarily characterizes female establishments made the incorporation or appropriation of such spaces vital for the women's sense of well-being. Free places also contained staff members who embodied an ethos of positivity and non-judgemental acceptance, contributing to a sense of *communitas* ('They lift your spirits'). That said, some prisoners resisted the notion that civilian and non-uniformed staff in free places were any different from uniformed custodial staff: when asked if there was a difference, Leanne said 'No. They're all arseholes'.

Some prisoners commented on their surprise at befriending others with very different backgrounds but found that the nature of particular activities constellated prisoners with shared interests: 'I'm with like-minded people and I feel we are all equals'. In these areas, then, prisoners felt able to slip into different identities ('worker', 'worshipper', 'artist', 'athlete' or 'student'), casting off the 'masks' typically worn on the wings. Nia articulated feelings of safety and collaboration in the hair salon:

I just happened to be on the course with a really good bunch of girls, so I felt safe. I felt that I could like, if I needed help from any of the other students, I could get it. They are all very encouraging to each other. They don't put each other down, it's like you're being nurtured and that was a nice experience.

For all these reasons, free places instilled a sense of emotional openness – 'it's somewhere where I can just cry and I don't care who is there'. Prisoners developed 'a certain amount of trust' and free places evoked 'a lot of love, joy and peace', emotions that were rarely described in such unqualified ways in prison: 'It gives you joy and that kind of... what is the word? Serenity! It's uplifting and... I can feel it in my body'; 'I feel joy because... I love my job. I feel interested. I feel optimism because I'm always looking to try and help people'. Some prisoners described intense blissful states: 'I've had some deep feelings in the chapel... but it has come out as tearful because I'm overwhelmed by whatever it is that's gone on... you just feel that presence within you'. These passionate testimonies highlight emotional experiences that contrast sharply with other prison spaces and are infrequently documented (Liebling, 2009). We do not have evidence that the fostering of *communitas* is more important for the ontological health of women than men, but we suggest that the feelings of spontaneity, camaraderie and liberation these spaces permitted facilitated a wider repertoire of emotional experiences than the women typically felt able to reveal outside of prison, as well as within it (see f/n 2).

Another space that could be regarded as a free place in prison – though arguably less 'free' than those already discussed – are the visits halls, which to a degree conform to Goffman's definition of spaces where 'surveillance and restriction were markedly reduced... where the inmate could openly engage in a range of tabooed

activities with some degree of security'. In these spaces, prisoners were likely to show their most authentic selves. Crewe et al.(2014) put it thus:

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. 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 (p. 67).

In our research, visits rooms were characterised as exceptional spaces, generating intense mixed emotions. Like the cell, visits halls are 'liminal' (Moran, 2013) in the sense of fusing the inside with the outside world, which frequently brought animated excitement and happiness before and during the visit, followed by a sense of grief and sadness (the 'big comedown') when the visit ended. One participant was so immersed in the experience of 'suspension' that she accidentally tried to leave with her family: 'my head was still on the outside'. The realization that 'you've got to go back to your world in prison' was a crash-landing for many.

For other participants, the visit itself was viewed ambivalently. Loved ones were physically present, suggesting the possibility of intimacy, but Francesca explained, 'It's not like a normal environment, like you'd sit at home and watch telly. On visits, it's like two hours, you're here and there, and you struggle to think of things to talk about'. These social interactions had a slightly ungenue, forced feel that brought into sharp relief the odd juxtaposition of closeness and distance that comes from being in rare proximity to loved ones yet constrained by the limits placed on gestures of affection: 'You can't be as tactile as you want to be or show your true emotions'. Prisoners were not denied physical contact entirely – hugging and kissing was tolerated when visitors arrived and left – but beyond this there were strict limits and during the visit itself, the physical environment reinforced the social distance between prisoners and visitors, as if intimacy had been purposely designed out of the arrangements:

The tables annoy me; if you have one person visiting you, you have chairs on the other side of the table. If you both sit back in your chair, you can't even reach one another . . . there's a big distance between you, you're trying to shout to that person to hear them talk. All I want to do sometimes just hug my mum or hold my mum's hand or lay my head on her lap, and yet I can't even touch the tip of her finger (Molly).

Because of these tensions, one participant said she felt 'fucking relieved' to leave the visits hall.

The various free places discussed here had qualities that contrasted sharply with other, less favoured areas of the prison. Whereas shared living spaces were often noisy, frenetic, dirty, poorly supervised and occasionally hostile, free places had the inverse qualities. That is, they were cleaner, quieter, more ordered, nurturing,

creative, and perceived as safer spaces for prisoners. In free places, peers and staff members offered collaboration and insight as opposed to resistance: these were largely judgment-free zones. Staff members often rewarded and incentivised positive behaviours rather than penalising prisoners for their mistakes. There was a form of emotional attunement between prisoners and staff and, unlike other prison zones, there was a spontaneous and organic quality to the relations and manifestations of care that emerged. Many of the features of these free places align with Turner's (1974) concept of *communitas*, with different temporal rules and a sense of inclusivity, openness, and degree of 'liberation' evident in these spaces.

Therapeutic spaces

Another type of carceral space that encouraged horizontal affiliations, yet which contrasted with both free places and living spaces, in overtly and actively attempting to manipulate prisoners' emotional responses and disrupt their thinking patterns, were therapeutic treatment spaces. In the English prison, therapeutic spaces were pervasive³ and, although places on programmes were limited, many prisoners had experienced them and, at the time of the research 35% of the prison's population were undergoing therapy. Several participants spoke enthusiastically about its transformational effects, such as developing empathy and providing an ongoing opportunity to work on their problems collaboratively. Going through therapy alongside peers provided direct windows for insight and self-reflection, spontaneously and without pressure to adhere to behavioural norms, as is typical of *communitas*. Therapeutic communities led to learning opportunities and shared emotional introspection, and hearing other women's testimonies provided an avenue for cultivating self-awareness. Prisoners were mirrors for each other's pain, growth and collective healing. Deep relationships and 'really strong bonds' were forged, because to some extent 'the people you do therapy with are your therapists too' (Ellie).

Over time, some prisoners absorbed the language, tools and perspectives of the psychological environment in which they were being immersed:

In the end you do feel like a therapist. Because you are saying to someone "you're in denial" and "you're lying, I want to challenge you and I want to confront you because you did this", you're saying to her "but this is what you did". So, you're learning all the different skills of deflecting and of being challenged, and taking criticism, and being able to reflect and look at yourself, and being able to think: hang on a minute. Being able to see things in other people, it's a mad process; at the time you think it's a load of shit, but it's actually really powerful (Paula).

Yet for every utterance of empowerment and self-actualization, another participant expressed disillusion and cynicism. For example, Katherine explained that 'succeeding' in these spaces meant having to sacrifice one's true identity and beliefs: 'There's a lot of talk but there's no meaning behind it, it's just mechanical, it's just

bullshit'. Katherine was one of many participants who felt alienated by prisoners who co-opted the language of psychologists and clinicians because it was, she claimed, robotic and disingenuous 'psychobabble':

Use a bit of colourful language, swear if you have to, just don't be mechanical. As soon as you do that, you put me on guard and I feel very defensive very quickly, because I feel like you're trying to manipulate me, you sound like a therapist. I find it uncomfortable very quickly. Because you're quoting off people. They're not people. They go on there and become brainwashed and like zombies.

Some experienced these spaces as psychologically 'tight' in the sense that almost every form of behaviour and expression was carefully monitored (either by other prisoners or clinical staff) and interpreted as, for example, 'withholding', or 'projecting onto others', or 'denial'. These women also felt that when they questioned the wisdom of the programmes, they became crushed beneath an avalanche of clinical labels. The expectation of level-headed, open sharing was at times in conflict with the seemingly intense level of psychological scrutiny over participants' testimonies. This left some feeling lost in a kind of psychological maze: 'Sometimes you can't win . . . if you don't share enough, you're deflecting, if you hold the same opinion as your mate, you're colluding'. These accounts echo Kruttschnitt and Gartner's (2005) findings:

Prisoners were told to open up, disclose problems, and embrace the potential of treatment and getting well. Yet, as these women acknowledged, failing to partake in the rhetoric of disclosure would earn them the ire of staff while fully accepting could undermine their chances of release (p. 159).

Further, and recalling Liebling's (2009) observation that anger and defiance expressed by women in prison are viewed (when they are viewed at all) as *losses* of control, rather than attempts to *exert* control (as commonly characterized in studies of male prisoners), the women we talked to learned to hide certain feelings in therapeutic spaces while being cognizant of the need to express other emotions to demonstrate their willing participation in the psychological programmes. Specifically, they had to walk an emotional tightrope wherein disclosure was encouraged, but was subject to psychological scrutiny, which meant that expression of emotions such as anger and frustration, was admonished as being *reactionary* and *defensive*. Anger was not interpreted by therapists as cathartic or positively communicative, but was seen as an aberration that needed to be corrected. Some prisoners felt alienated by therapeutic treatment and experienced the 'over-sharing' in these spaces as psychologically suffocating ('Everything we feel is exposed'), while for others it raised fears that they were being broken apart and re-programmed. At the affective level, this raised discomfort about having to 'contain' authentic feeling states to align with therapeutic culture and values and conform to institutional narratives about 'rehabilitation'.

Moreover, women in prison are particular targets for individualized psychological programmes, where the aim is to reinvent themselves, as if this were possible when the deep-rooted problems of many are not going to disappear during their time in prison (Carlen, 2008). In therapeutic spaces, many of our participants uncritically absorbed and regurgitated the gender-biased official rhetoric concerning psychological interventions in which the problem is perceived to be *with them*, not in their social circumstances. Comfort has aptly termed this the ‘quintessential validation of the incarceration-partnered-with-rehabilitation thesis’ (Carlen, 2008: 261). Other participants, however, instinctively understood that a punitive sensibility remained central and that rehabilitative therapy and disciplinary modes of containment co-exist to produce ‘the mixed economy of the therapunitive prison’ (Carlen and Tombs, 2006: 339). Even the advocates of these environments acknowledged their invasive qualities:

You feel like you’re on eggshells. A lot of people tell me that you’re too honest and too open, you let them know far too much. But I tried to do the programme like they wanted me to do it, even though sometimes I would shoot myself in the foot, I guess that was the whole point of it’ (Paula).

Conclusion

As noted in the Introduction, spatial environment shapes identities, affects moods and emotions, enhances or diminishes a sense of wellbeing, and gives rise to complex and sometimes contradictory feelings, simultaneously and over time (Goldhagen, 2017). In this context, prison design serves women especially poorly. While others have explored the emotional geography of men’s custodial spaces (Crewe et al., 2014), our relatively novel focus on the emotional experiences of women, and our sensitivity to the architectural and sensory dimensions of institutional life, brought into sharp relief the profound challenges for women to survive, thrive or simply reach a tolerable state of being in spaces designed largely by men for men. Jennifer’s comment about the Scottish mixed-gender facility – ‘Honest to god, everything is for the guys. This is meant to be a mixed jail and it’s really not’ – summed up the problem. Decisions about what women in prison want are inevitably shaped by patriarchal assumptions that result in gender-blind design that is only partially mitigated by the women’s personalising of cells with artefacts that augmented their femininity and their status as (especially) mothers and daughters.

We have argued that understanding places of punishment and coercive control can be deepened by paying attention to their emotional textures and to the sensory dynamics between people and space. Contrary to much of the literature on women in prison, which presents female prisoners as passive or disempowered figures with limited emotional responses (Liebling, 2009), our research findings show that female prisoners are agents who exert control over space to regulate

their feelings. Whether customizing their living spaces with signifiers of self in an attempt to evoke particular 'feeling states', avoiding certain spaces because they were sensorially repellent, developing horizontal affiliations in the most relaxed environments of the prisons, or negotiating the emotional tightrope that required an understanding of the seemingly contradictory positions that were permissible within therapeutic communities, the women we interviewed were emotionally sophisticated actors, who understood how to navigate space and place, and adapt accordingly. When participants did not have complete control over spatiality, they nonetheless exercised some degree of bounded agency. For example, seemingly 'micro' changes to cell spaces through colour-schemes and customization signalled agentic choices, as did orchestrating their time in some prison zones over others.

Sometimes, however, the restricted economy of space and sensory intrusions made individual emotional management strategies impossible. For some, the disorientating and chaotic period of adjustment to incarceration was prolonged, and they found themselves trapped in cycles of negative emotions, unable to move to a state of equilibrium or self-actualization. A few of the women we interviewed had internalized societal opprobrium or were only able to fill the emotional void that the cell represents with feelings of shame, anger, fear or anxiety (Douglas, 1966), resulting in permanent or near-permanent liminality. For most, though, pain eventually gave way to, or at least existed alongside, positive feelings, illustrating that experience of imprisonment was fluid, not fixed. Turner's theory of liminality is usually conceived in relation to social and spatial marginality, which seemed apt for our analysis of people at the margins, confined in places at the margins. One of the ways that the majority of participants 'centred' or 'grounded' themselves in the face of their liminal status was by developing a strong sense of identity and 'place' within the prison, whether in their prison cell, or in a communitas, or (for some prisoners) in therapeutic groups, all of which had potential for facilitating a freer and broader repertoire of emotions than found elsewhere in prison.

Most participants in the research appeared to be emotionally reflective agents, and were able to distance themselves from, and reflect on, the strategies they used in prison. Their openness to our questions was perhaps surprising given that they almost universally claimed that prison was a place where 'people can use your emotions against you'. However, talking to women about the emotional contours of their lives in prison felt humanizing and helped to build rapport. Crewe (2013: 20) notes that prisoners are 'so used to being disbelieved, un-recognised, and un-trusted [that] listening to their life stories in an active and attentive way is a powerful act...it communicates their humanity is being taken seriously'. Their receptiveness to talking about emotion arguably bolsters their sense of being individuals, not just a homogenised body of 'prisoners', and underlines that prisons are highly complex systems in which relationships between people and environment are dynamic, fluid and complex.

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2. Women in UK prisons report an acutely more painful experience than their male counterparts, with many suffering complex emotional biographies and histories of community-based trauma and abuse pre-imprisonment, including often having been victims of much more serious offences, e.g., rape and/or grievous bodily harm, than those for which they are convicted; predominantly non-violent drugs and property offences (see Jewkes et al., 2019 for an overview).
3. These spaces encompassed a therapeutic community, a Psychologically Informed Planned Environment (PIPE) and an alcohol and substances programme (RAPt) on one of the wings.

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