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Between outside and inside? Prison visiting rooms as liminal carceral spaces

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Abstract This paper suggests that although carceral space seems to be sharply demarcated from the outside world, the prison wall is in fact more porous than might be assumed. The paper critiques Goffman's theory of the 'total institution' by deploying a geographical engagement with liminality to theorise prison visiting rooms as spaces in which prisoners come face-to-face with persons and objects which come from and represent their lives on the 'outside'. Drawing on a specific empirical example from recent research into imprisonment in the contemporary Russian prison system, it uses the example of visiting suites designed for long term 'residential' visits to explore the ways in which visiting spaces act as a space of betweenness where a metaphorical threshold-crossing takes place between outside and inside. The paper specifically explores the expression of that betweenness in the materiality of visiting, and in the destabilisation of rules and identities in visiting space. It contests the sense of linear transformation with which liminal spaces have previously been associated, suggesting that rather than spaces of linear transition from one state to another, liminal spaces can constitute a frustratingly repetitive, static or equilibriating form of transformation which is cumulative rather than immediate, and relates this suggestion to the wider study of prison visitation.

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Introduction

This paper contests Goffmann's (1961) interpretation of the prison as a 'total institution', echoing critiques which draw attention to its spatial porosity and permeability. The blurred nature of the prison boundary has been observed by Baer and Ravneberg (2008), who in their description of visiting Norwegian and English prisons highlight the indistinction that they perceived between outside and inside. The prison wall is permeable not only in that it permits the interpenetration of material things (people, supplies) but also intangible things (ideas, the internet, emotional attachments), and this paper identifies the visiting room as one of these spaces of interpenetration between outside and inside, suggesting that theories of liminality may be useful in understanding the experience of such carceral spaces.

The paper first explores Goffman's (1961) theory of the total institution and its subsequent critiques. It then surveys the particular research environment of the empirical material presented here, followed by a summary of the theorisation of liminality within geographical scholarship. Next it explores the experiences of visiting for both visitors and prisoners, characterising these, respectively as 'secondary

prisonization', and as the 'performance' of home, and drawing some conclusions about the liminality of prison visiting spaces in this context. It posits this space as lying between outside and inside, in terms of how it is experienced by both prisoners and their visitors, and highlights the curiously static, repetitive nature of prison visiting as a counter to the traditional understanding of liminality as a space of transition between two distinct forms of being.

The 'total institution'

Goffman theorised the 'total institution' as "…a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable length of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life" (1961, 11). This theorisation has subsequently been applied to a wide range of circumstances and contexts, such as homes for the elderly (e.g., Mali 2008), psychiatric units (Skorpen et al. 2008), the home (Noga 1991), the mass media (Altheide 1991), the military and the police (Rosenbloom 2011), and sport (Cavalier 2011). Whilst demonstrating remarkable utility, the appropriateness of this concept as a means of understanding the types of institution in relation to which it was initially developed has been widely critiqued.

The applicability of the 'total institution' thesis to the institution of the prison is particularly salient here, and in this context, there are a number of critiques which point out the disjunctures between this theory and the actuality of imprisonment. In relation to the US prison system, Farrington (1992, 6) argued compellingly that the 'total institution' thesis is 'in fact, fairly inaccurate as a portrayal of the structure and functioning of the… correctional institution' in that the modern prison 'is not as completely or effectively "cut off from wider society" as Goffman's description might lead us to believe'. At the core of the critique is the assertion that prison institutions have a relatively stable and ongoing network of transactions, exchanges and relationships which connect and bind them to their immediate host community and to society more generally (Farrington 1992, 7). In the period since Farrington's (1992) critique, and particularly in the recent development of 'carceral geography' (Moran et al. forthcoming a&b) these issues of connection between the prison and its 'host community' have received significant attention from geographers studying prison siting, (see, for example, Che 2005, Glasmeier and Farrigan 2007, Engel 2007, Bonds 2006, 2009, Moran et al. 2011, Pallot 2007). Wacquant's (2011, 3) description of the 'brutal swing from the social to the penal management of poverty' particularly in the United States, the 'punitive revamping' of public policy tackling urban marginality through punitive containment and establishing a 'single carceral continuum' between the ghetto and the prison (Wacquant 2000, 384), has seen the relationship between prisoners and wider society becoming a particular focus of study (e.g., Peck 2003; Peck and Theodore 2009).

Farrington (1992, 7) suggested a replacement of Goffman's notion of the prison as a 'total institution' with a theoretical conception of 'a "not-so-total" institution, enclosed within an identifiable-yet-permeable membrane of structures, mechanisms and policies, all of which maintain, at most, a selective and imperfect degree of separation between what exists inside of and what lies beyond prison walls.' This interpretation has resonance with Baumer et al's (2009) description of prisons becoming 'porous' through the practice of prisoner home visits, and Hartman's (2000) discussion of the restriction of prisoner access to the internet in the language of 'walls and firewalls'. Whilst Farrington (1992) identified 'points of interpenetration' through which the prison and wider society intrude into and intersect with one another, Baer and Ravneberg (2008) problematise the basic conceptualisation of a binary distinction between 'inside' and 'outside', instead positing prisons as 'heterotopic spaces outside of and different from other spaces, but still inside the general social order' (Baer and Ravneberg 2008, 214), thus rendering problematic the inside/outside binary.

In their critique, Baer and Ravneberg emphasise that further understandings of the nature of the prison, whether as a 'total institution' or otherwise, should seek to go beyond the perspective of the external observer, to incorporate the experience of prisoners, whose perceptions of the 'inside/outside distinctions and indistinctions [may] take on different complexities and subtleties' (2008, 214). This paper seeks to examine a specific example of this blurred boundary; the spaces in which prisoners and their visitors meet, and suggests that these spaces might be considered

'liminal' spaces of betweenness and indistinction. In so doing, it draws directly upon the experiences of prisoners inside of one specific penal system—that of the Russian Federation.

The Russian prison system—observations on context, data and methodology

The data presented here were gathered through fieldwork as part of a wider project[1] within penal institutions across four Russian regions, via over 200 interviews with prison personnel and incarcerated women and girls, and also outside of these institutions, through interviews with recently released women living in three different cities in European Russia.[2] Research was carried out between 2006 and 2010, when a team of UK and Russian colleagues were permitted access to women's prisons by the Russian Federal Prison Service (*Federal'naya Sluzhba Ispolneniya Nakazaniya*, or FSIN). Research access to Russian prisons is exceptionally difficult to negotiate, and the research process itself brings logistical, linguistic, and ethical challenges, is always subject to institutional change and politics, and is strictly controlled by FSIN, which, like any prison administration, must consider practical issues of security and institutional arrangements when allowing outsiders in. Prison research anywhere in the world involves complex ethical issues (for a discussion, see Israel 2004, King and Wincup 2007; Roberts and Indermaur 2003), and this is doubly the case in Russia, with its problematic history of prisoners' human rights. In designing the qualitative research for the project, the normal protocols about informed consent were explained to the penal authorities and confirmation that these had been followed in obtaining volunteers for questionnaire survey and conversation was sought. However, it is almost certain that, as would be the case to a greater or lesser extent in any penal context, that prisoners adjudged suitable by the prison authorities for participation in the research (on the basis of their physical, psychological, and emotional state, and with concern for their health and well-being, and for the security of all concerned) were offered the opportunity to volunteer to take part, especially in the prisons where the visiting western research team conducted the interviews. As with any prison research, this probably delivered a partial sample of disproportionately well-adjusted, emotionally stable respondents, particularly amongst those presented for interview by the conspicuous 'outsiders' of the western research team. To mitigate the impact of this sampling and the on the data generated, a local Russian research team was engaged to conduct additional interviews with incarcerated women. Additionally, a group of experienced Russian ethnographers located and interviewed women who had recently been released from prison. Interviewed outside of the penal system, in their own homes or in public places of their own choosing, the intention here was to enable these women to reflect on and speak more freely about, their experience of incarceration, than perhaps might women interviewed whilst in prison. Since the project design could not include interviews with visiting family and friends of prisoners, alternative sources of information are used to illuminate their experiences of visiting rooms, notably the Russian website '*Arestant*', a mutual assistance resource for the friends and families of prisoners which consists of a number of internet chatboards on which members post advice and guidance for others in the same position as themselves (Pallot 2007).

Although the data presented here pertain to female prisoners in the contemporary Russian Federation, the paper does not critically analyse their gender as a determining factor in the experience of liminality, since the gendered dimensions of their imprisonment are explored more fully elsewhere (Moran et al. 2009, Pallot and Piacentini forthcoming). In order to provide context, however, some brief information about the Russian prison system and the nature of imprisonment for women is discussed below. A more detailed description appears in Pallot and Piacentini (forthcoming).

Prisons are of course not the same everywhere; they develop in context, and there are striking differences in penal interventions between countries with different historical and cultural traditions (Tonry 2001), Melossi (2001, 407) notes that '(p)unishment is deeply embedded in the national/cultural specificity of the environment which produces it'. 'Prisons are not simply institutions which (cor)respond to crime;

[1] ESRC award RES-062-23-0026, with Judith Pallot and Laura Piacentini.

[2] Data generated during this project are also presented in Pallot and Piacentini (forthcoming).

rather, they are reflective of and mediate social, political, and cultural values, both at the level of the carceral state, and the individual prison' (Moran et al. 2009, 701). With this in mind, and before presentation of empirical material, a brief discussion of the Russian penal context of this research is required.

In Russia, the legacy of the Stalinist Gulag and later Soviet imprisonment practices has generated a particular penal geography (Moran 2004; Pallot 2005, 2007; Pallot et al. 2010; Moran et al. 2011, Moran et al. forthcoming a&b, Pallot and Piacentini forthcoming). Although the contemporary penal system is fundamentally different from its Soviet predecessor, amongst the continuities with the Soviet period are high imprisonment rates, and the location of many penal institutions in geographically peripheral locations. On 1 March 2011, 814,200 people were incarcerated in the Russian Federation, of whom 66,000 or 8% were women.[3] Many of the characteristics of Russian prison life are common to both men and women (communal dormitories rather than cellular confinement, compulsory prison labour, different levels of privileges assigned on the basis of good behaviour, and punishment and isolation cells), but women's experience of imprisonment in Russia differs in the assignment of the place of imprisonment, the institution where a sentence will actually be served. Of Russia's 760 correctional facilities, only forty-six accommodate women, and these are unevenly distributed across space, and away from the major centres of population from which most prisoners are drawn.[4] Almost one quarter of Russia's women's prisons are concentrated in only five[5] of its eighty-two regions, and women are, therefore, sent further from home to serve their sentences than are men, with implications for maintaining contact with home, family and children (Pallot 2008; Moran et al. 2009; Piacentini et al. 2009), and the ability of family and friends to visit the incarcerated. A treatment of the impact of distance from home on rates of visitation within Russian prisons is beyond the scope of this paper, being discussed in detail in Pallot and Piacentini (forthcoming). Instead, the focus here is on the nature of experiences within visiting space for those prisoners who do receive visits, which in the case of this empirical example was a minority of prisoners. The majority of prisoners globally are men, and the majority of visitors tend to be their female partners; incarcerated women are visited less frequently by their male partners than men are visited by women, and this extends to the Russian context. Of the women spoken to for the research from which this paper is drawn, the majority of visitors were female family members such as mothers and sisters, and occasionally children, rather than male partners. These visitors entered a space which is construed as 'liminal'.

Theorising 'liminal' space

The word liminal, from the Latin *limen* which means boundary or threshold, has been invoked in a variety of social and cultural contexts, and has been used by geographers in combination with conceptualisations of space to convey the specific spaces of betweenness, where a metaphorical crossing of some spatial and/or temporal threshold takes place. Introduced first to anthropology by Van Gennep (1909, translated into English in 1960), to describe the transition from adolescence to adulthood, the margin or liminal is a space in which social rules are suspended because the subject no longer belongs to their old world, or to their new one—they are temporarily in 'nowhere land'. Extending Van Gennep's work, Turner (1969, 81) developed the concept of liminality in more 'complex' societies, describing it as 'necessarily ambiguous, since this condition… elude[s] or slip[s] through the network of classifications that normally locates states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial.'

The notion of liminality has been invoked by geographers in a variety of contexts; for example in exploring hotels as liminal sites of transition and transgression (Pritchard and Morgan 2005), council tenants' fora as liminal spaces between lifeworld and system (Jackson 1999), the liminal act of breastfeeding demarcating specific spaces (Mahon-Daly and Andrews 2002), liminal notions of co-existence in

[3] www.fsin.su.

[4] The Central Federal District, with 26% of the Russian population, has just one women's prison, whereas two-thirds are located in the Volga and Urals Federal Districts, which together have less than half of the population.

[5] Perm', Mordovia, Chuvash, Sverdlovsk, and Chelyabinsk regions have ten prisons between them.

Australia (Howitt 2001), the street as a liminal space for prostitutes in Brazil (de Meis 2002), cyberspace as a performative liminal space for new and expectant mothers (Madge and O'Connor 2005) and most recently Gaza as a liminal territory (Bhungalia 2010). In each case, the notion of the betweenness of the liminal is highlighted and problematised, and the transformative nature of liminality employed to frame the transitive experiences of individuals engaging with or creating these spaces.

Liminal spaces are often seen as '…intangible, elusive and obscure…, a limbo-like space often beyond normal social and cultural constraints' (Preston-Whyte 2004, 350 cited in Pritchard and Morgan 2005, 764). Shields (2003, 12–13) draws particular attention to the transformation of social status allowed by liminal spaces, where 'initiates' are 'betwixt and between' life stages and where liminal spaces are bound up with ideas of becoming; for example in the case of Madge and O'Connor (2005), cyberspace allowing expectant mothers to 'try out' different versions of motherhood. Shields' (2003) work draws directly on Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1967) in privileging the role of liminality as a rite of passage between one world and another, and in particular Van Gennep's (1960) description of the three stages of passage; separation from a previous life, or the 'pre-liminal'; transition, the 'liminal', and reintegration in a 'new' life, the 'post-liminal'.

Turner's (1967) work focussed primarily on the liminal stage, in which he described individuals entering an unstructured egalitarian world which he termed '*communitas*', where comradeship transcends rank, age, kinship and so on, and displays an intense community spirit, in which social groups form strong bonds free from any structures which would usually constrain them. In the post-liminal (Van Gennep 1960) individuals leave *communitas* and reintegrate into their 'new' life, adopting a new social status and re-entering society in accordance with this new status. In applying these constructs to more 'complex', postmodern or hypermodern society, this linear progression of transformation through the pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal stages has been contested, for example by scholars analyzing the similarities between liminal status during rites of passage and the status of individuals with disabilities (Willett and Deegan 2001). Phillipps (1990, 851), for example, wrote that the permanently disabled may perceive themselves in hypermodern society, as 'suspended between the sick role and normality, between wrong bodies and right bodies', in a state of permanent liminality where disabling societies create barriers that prevent disabled individuals from completing the passage to social reincorporation.

This argument for a stasis of liminality effectively destabilises the notion that liminality represents a space of linear transformation from one state to another. Individuals may, for various reasons, become permanently identified with a state of betweenness from which they cannot emerge. Using the example of prison visiting rooms, this paper argues that the transformative nature of liminality can be static in another way, when the liminal is experienced not once, as a stage in a linear transformation, but repeatedly, with the liminal coming to constitute a temporary, transient transformation followed not by a post-liminal reintegration in a different social status, but by a return to the state experienced before pre-liminal detachment. In this sense, liminal space represents a temporarily transitive space, which although it may perhaps become for some a space of frustrated partiality, may also have a cumulatively transformative effect over time.

In her work on prison visiting in California's San Quentin jail, Megan Comfort (2003, 80) described the visiting suite as a 'border region of the prison where outsiders first enter the institution and come under its gaze', and she theorised the space as one in which visitors became subject to 'secondary prisonization' through the Sykes (1958) 'pains of imprisonment' thesis. Comfort (2003, 86) described 'a liminal space, the boundary between "outside" and "inside," where visitors convert from legally free people into imprisoned bodies for the duration of their stay in the facility'. In her work on prisoner families, Helen Codd (2007, 257) similarly described the ways in which visitors 'enter 'liminal space' in which they are not entirely prisoners; however, they are within the prison establishment and thus defined as not entirely free either'. Whereas Comfort (2003) and Codd (2007) have identified liminal space primarily from the perspective of prisoners' families and their experience of entering carceral space, this paper additionally considers the experiences of prisoners themselves, who come face-to-face with persons and objects which come from and represent their lives on the 'outside'; as well as visitors' experience of the institutionalisation of the 'inside'.

Prison visiting in Russia

The vast majority of Russian prisoners, held under the standard prison regime and not subject to any disciplinary measures for violations of prison rules, are entitled to both short and long visits in addition to telephone calls and postal communication. Short visits are carried out face-to-face, although sometimes through a plexi-glass screen, and are limited to a few hours at most. Long visits take place in a visiting 'hostel' within the prisons themselves, where visitors stay for several days, sleeping in the same room as their incarcerated host, and cooking, watching TV and eating together. Visitors pay for the accommodation, and may additionally bring in clothing, a restricted amount of food, a camera, and other personal items for the prisoner's use during the visit, at the discretion of the prison authorities. The precise spatial arrangement of the visiting suite varies between institutions, but commonly it is located next to the administration block of the prison, to minimise the distance into the institution travelled by visitors from outside. In one prison visited as part of the research for this paper, the short-visit room and long-visit hostel were housed in the administration block adjacent to the prison entrance. In this case, the short-visit room was small, able to accommodate about six pairs of prisoners and guests, and furnished very basically, much like the inside of the prison as a whole. By contrast, further down the corridor was the entrance to the long-visit hostel, a space consciously organised to resemble a domestic setting. Along one central corridor were bedrooms, each with several beds to accommodate multiple visitors; shower rooms, a communal kitchen, and at the end of the corridor, a communal TV room with armchairs. The floors of the rooms and the corridor were covered with linoleum, and there were potted plants, and pictures on the walls. Although the space was undoubtedly institutional, an attempt had clearly been made to make it feel 'homely' and welcoming to visitors and prisoners alike. One former prisoner described the visiting suite in the prison in which she had been incarcerated:

> The building was right there. There, on top of infirmary. There's a separate room, there's a kitchen, well, it's like at home. A refrigerator, microwave oven. It's good.

These arrangements for what are variously termed residential, family or conjugal visits are relatively unusual in a global penal context, but not specific to Russia. As Comfort (2002) vividly describes, prisoners at San Quentin in California, who are not convicted of domestic violence or sexual crimes, and who have a release date, may receive a 'family' visit of 43 h' duration in one of a cluster of bungalows within a patrolled compound on the prison grounds, and family members may bring in produce (within strict regulations) for preparing meals. Comfort (2002, 467) described these prison visits, for women visiting their male partners on the inside, as constructing the prison as a 'domestic and social satellite', with visitors describing the overnight-visit bungalows as 'like your own house', and feeling 'at home' there (ibid 488).

'Secondary prisonization': visiting for visitors

Drawing on the Russian example, it is clear that the visiting space is outside the ordinary of both visitors' and prisoners' everyday social lives, representing as it does the space in which these two groups of people leave their lives on the outside and the inside and enter a space which, although spatially located firmly within the prison, is intended to recall a domestic environment and to feel like 'home'. For visitors, it means entering the space of the prison, if not as a prisoner then as a quasi-institutionalised being under the carceral surveillance of the penal regime, and subject to a form of flow control reminiscent of and intrinsically connected to, the prison schedule and system. Various security checks, the handing over of identification documents, the surrendering of mobile telephones, and the slow and noisy passage through the steel doors and turnstiles which demarcate the holding areas through which visitors pass, are markers of entry into carceral space, albeit the type of carceral space which is explicitly intended for visitors—who do not venture further inside the prison proper.

Since it was not possible to include interviews with visiting family and friends of prisoners in the empirical data generation within women's prisons, the experiences of visitors are accessed here via alternative sources of information, in this case the Russian website '*Arestant*'. A popular topic for discussion on the *Arestant* chatboards is the process of prison visiting, with visitors (predominantly but not exclusively women) in particular sharing information and advice for others embarking on journeys to visit their loved ones in prison, and specifically telling each other

what to expect from the long visit hostels in which they may stay. As discussed elsewhere (Pallot 2007), the conditions in these hostels are frequently poor, with the attempts to recreate a domestic environment (both on the part of the prison authorities and the visiting women) frequently stymied by lack of heating and hot water, and by rodent or insect infestations. The advice offered reinforces the perceived liminality of the space, in that women in particular encourage each other to bring fresh and tasty food that is reminiscent of home, and to bring bright and colourful clothes for the prisoner to wear while in the long-stay hostel, so that they may leave behind their prison drab for a few days. Visitor accounts urge such activities in order to mitigate the failings of the suite as a 'homely' space; for them, the symptoms of institutionalisation are its most prominent features. For example, messages warn that visitors should prepare for the high cost of the visiting hostels (rooms are charged for by the night), not take too literally the 'provide for yourself' regime in the long-visit suites (although certain groceries are allowed, alcohol is not) and that although the visiting suite is designed to replicate the facilities in a domestic flat, there will still be the intrusion of two inspections of the suite daily by prison staff. Additionally, admittance to the long visiting suite is officially restricted to the legal spouses of prisoners—unmarried partners are only allowed to make long visits at the discretion of the governor of each prison.

Drawn into the prison both spatially and institutionally, prison visitors in Russia are subject in this liminal space to what in California Comfort (2003, 101) terms 'secondary prisonization'; a 'weakened but still compelling version of the elaborate regulations, concentrated surveillance, and corporeal confinement governing the lives of ensnared felons' resonant with Sykes' (1958, 63–83) notion of the 'pains of imprisonment', notably the 'deprivation of autonomy' and the 'deprivation of goods and services'. Restrictions on visitation in Russia are strict. Visitors must bring identification documents which certify their own identity and their relationship to the visited prisoner, such as their passport, marriage certificate, or proof of guardianship for any children. On arrival, visitors' clothing and possessions are inspected, to ensure compliance with regulations about contraband items, and anyone declining the inspection, or found to be in breach of regulations, is refused a visit, regardless of how far they have travelled or how long they have waited. Contraband items include a wide variety of objects; obvious items such as weapons, alcohol, narcotic drugs, knives, and razors, but also cigarette lighters, money, homemade preserved food, computers, playing cards, video cameras, any communication device capable of making a connection beyond the prison, compasses and navigational equipment, maps, and any pornographic materials, all subject to the discretion and definition of the prison authorities. For explicitly permitted items such as foodstuffs, strict restrictions on quantities, and specific requirements for packaging are also imposed, such as the maximum weight permitted, and the nature of the packaging of those foodstuffs. As is the case in Comfort's (2003) accounts of visiting in California, rules are subject to change without notice, and prison visitors are entirely at the mercy, on arrival for a visit with carefully prepared and saved-for gifts for their loved ones, of officials' decisions about what is allowed and what is not.

Recalling Turner's (1967) *communitas* notion of the liminal as a space where bonds are formed and individuals behave in a way which belies the structural constraints under which they usually operate, there are some indications that in the liminal space of the visiting hostel, rules and identities are temporarily renegotiated in unpredictable ways. One former prisoner recalled an occasion when her mother brought food into the prison, carefully complying with the weight limit of twenty kilograms, only to find that a new rule about fresh food being vacuum-packed had been introduced. The transgression was, however, unexpectedly overlooked, apparently because of an acquaintance between the visiting room supervisor and the prisoner herself, and the prisoner recalled the experience as particularly unusual and noteworthy;

> There's limited access to food. If they say twenty kilograms, it means twenty kilograms. Whereas earlier whatever you brought went straight into the bag, [to enter the visiting suite] now they checked everything. Looks like there was some kind of [food] poisoning or something. All packages had to be vacuum-packed. Herring had to be vacuum packed, sausage, everything. And my mom did not know. But the woman here, [the supervisor] this woman here, she knew

> me. We were there, and I showed her the stuff and she just says 'all vacuum-packed?' They turn a blind eye to it, sometimes.

On this occasion, prison rules which would usually be strictly adhered to, were bent to allow contraband items into the visiting hostel, and according to the prisoner's account of the experience, this exception was made by the hostel supervisor on the basis of her personal acquaintance with the visited prisoner, and a temporary bond formed out of the unspoken mutual recognition of a rule overlooked. The hierarchy of supervisor and prisoner was not destabilised as such, but the structural constraints under which the supervisor, the prisoner and the visitor must usually operate were temporarily relaxed. Such relaxations of rules are, however, unpredictable. Writing on *Arestant* about her experience of visiting her husband in prison, one woman cautioned others that their conduct during a visit could have consequences for their loved ones.

> Don't be concerned when the guards are polite to you, especially if you have experienced rudeness in other prisons. They will smile at you and ask how the journey was and whether you have any complaints. Don't complain—remember that your loved one will be blamed for you telling tales and as soon as you leave he will be punished… (quoted in Pallot 2007, 584).

According to this testimony, although prison personnel may appear to act out-of-character, to feign a concern for visitors' and prisoners' welfare which in this visitor's mind they did not really feel, they are perceived to be doing so instrumentally, to extract information which can be used later to disadvantage the visited prisoner. It is not clear whether this visitor was speculating about such actions, or whether she had learned this lesson from experience, but the clear sense from both her website posting and from the former prisoner's recollection is that the 'rules of the game' in terms of what personnel, prisoners and visitors must do in the visiting suite are unpredictable and unstable, and that the prisoners and their visitors, those with most to lose, must proceed with caution in this liminal space. These findings resonate with the work of Muedeking (1992, 227), who suggested that in the prison visiting room prisoners construct temporal situated identities which give the appearance of apparent self-autonomy and freedom from constraints. These situated identities are sometimes tolerated by personnel because of their perceived beneficial effect on the prisoner, and are considered part of the rehabilitation process, with personnel intervening only if the newly situated identity has crossed a tolerance threshold. Conceptualising these as 'authentic/inauthentic identities', Muedeking (1992, 227) highlighted the instability of both prisoner and personnel behaviour in the visiting context.

These experiences of visitors within carceral space resonate with Comfort's (2002, 2003) and Codd's (2007) work, some of the most vivid and insightful within a body of scholarship based within prison sociology which investigates the effects of visiting on the families of inmates (e.g., Arditti et al. 2003; Gabel and Johnston 1995; Grinstead et al. 2001; Sims 2001). There are, however, far fewer studies which consider the effects of visiting on the inmates themselves (Casey-Acevedo and Bakken 2001). Accordingly, in the following section the views of Russian women prisoners on their visitation experiences are presented and explored, in a framing context of the visiting suite as a liminal space.

Performing the materialities of home: visiting for prisoners

For Russian prisoners, the visiting space represents a form of escape from the everyday life of the prison; a life of schedules, flow control, communal living in prison dormitories and work in prison factories. Meeting a visitor means being allowed to leave the communal dormitory, the factory, the canteen, and to have a personal purpose of movement whose destination is a space which prisoners only enter for this specific reason. In the visiting space, prisoners come face-to-face with living embodiments of their previous life outside the prison—people from the outside—and can, for the duration of the visit, suspend the immediate reality of incarceration and discuss the affairs of their family, friends and hometown. For prisoners interviewed in Russia, the fact that their visitors were most frequently family members such as mothers and children meant that although some husbands and male partners did come, most visits did not constitute a heteronormative 'conjugal' visit of the kind described by Comfort (2002) in the United States, where women visitors were

reunited with their male partners in a romanticised domestic space. However, many of the characteristic of these visits, in terms of the significance of materiality, and the importance of the goods brought into the prison, have resonance with her example.

Prisoners and former prisoners reflecting on their experience of the long-visit rooms, expressed a sense of having had a taste of home, of life on the outside. One current prisoner remarked upon the facilities in the visiting suite

> Relatives and friends come on long visits. Relatives are allowed to bring groceries with them and to cook here. The visiting room is clean, and it's big. There are beds and tables. There's even a kitchen, shower and toilet. The bathroom there is very big and clean. And there is hot water, which is very good. It's located on the territory of the prison, and relatives stay for 3 days.

For another the experience of her husband's visit was one reminiscent of home

> My husband came to visit me, and I lived for 3 days with him in a separate room. He brought groceries and we prepared them ourselves there like at home.

For a third, a long visit from her children was an opportunity for them to look after her, cooking for her, bringing gifts, and taking memento photographs of the visit as if it was a family outing.

> What do we do [on the long visit]? Firstly, we talk around the clock. Then we spend a lot of time in the kitchen. My children want to feed me something homemade. We spend half our lives in the kitchen. In the prison the food is fine, but I want something special.
> They usually brought me some things [even though] I said that I do not need anything, just come with a bag, bring a bathrobe, pyjamas, slippers, empty containers for food and stuff. They can bring a camera to take pictures of me here. Of course, we have to ask permission to take photographs, but we are always permitted. Later on my daughter will send the pictures to me.

Prisoners recognised the efforts made by their visiting relatives, the significance of the visits for re-establishing relationships with parents and children, and just for doing 'normal' things like cooking together and watching TV.

> First of all, is communication with your child. That's all. Then we all talk, and I cook food. I tell my mom that I'll cook. I like it a lot. We watch TV. They bring everything you need. Well, they try their very best within their means.

These descriptions of the long visits demonstrate the nature of the visiting space as one in which home is 'performed', in which domestic activities such as cooking, chatting and watching TV, wearing clothes from home and just being together, enable prisoners to reengage with their family members in a space within the prison. Although the watchful eye of the institution is always there, restricting what can be brought in, requiring permission to take photographs, and of course spatially restricting the visit to the patrolled hostel, there is a sense in which a kind of 'normal' life can be performed in this context. The visiting lies between outside and inside, with prisoners released from their day-to-day prison life, and allowed into a space designed and furnished to feel more like a domestic environment, and visitors in turn allowed to bring in material items from the 'outside' with which to accessorise the experience, which take on a particular poignancy in this context.

Although, as Comfort (2003) and Codd (2007) have shown, and as the Russian carceral/domestic visiting rooms demonstrate, the visiting space can be understood relatively unproblematically as a liminal space in the sense of betweenness and indistinction, its transformative role is less clear. Although prisoners spoke fondly of the performance of home in the long-visit rooms, they also reflected on what happened afterwards, when their visitors left. After the 3 days of long visit are over, the bill paid, the food eaten, and the 'civilian' clothes exchanged for prison uniform, visitors leave the prison compound to return home, and prisoners return to the daily routine of prison life, going back to the communal dormitory, the canteen and the prison factory, once again complying with prison rules and schedules. Rather than representing a stage in a linear transformation, the liminal space of the visiting room is therefore a space which can be repeatedly entered and left, but from which there is no immediate progression to another status—a situation which many prisoners and their relatives found profoundly distressing.

Prisoners who had experienced long visits described this sense of inevitability and repetition

> It's hard to leave, because you know, when you go—that you'll have this same routine again.

Others felt that the lurch from the everyday to the intimate and domestic was too traumatic and decided not to have long visits at all for this reason.

> I don't want long visits. Why? Because short ones are hard enough. I sit with her [my mother], we talk, I know what it's about. She may be crying, but I'm holding it back. I want to cry, but I'm sitting and talking. There are moments here when her eyes are red, and I kind of want to cry, but I keep it in. It's difficult for her to leave, but she tries not to show it. But I know that once she gets beyond the gates, it will be hard, she'll cry—it'll all come out. I think with a long visit, if I stayed with her day, or two, it would be even harder.

Prisoners interviewed during incarceration, and speaking about their experience in the present tense, tended to echo these feelings, balancing the benefits of closeness with their visitors and the relative freedom of the long-visit suite with the heart-wrenching sadness of parting and returning to everyday prison life. The liminal space of the visiting suite appears, from these testimonies, to offer a curiously paralysed transition, in which prisoners can assume a persona of home in a pseudo-domestic setting, but from which the post-liminal represents only a return to prison life. Considering the experience of former prisoners, however, who look back on their experience with the benefit of hindsight, we gain another perspective. Although there is no *immediate* progression from the visiting suite to another life status, former prisoners hinted at some form of cumulative effect, through which long visits reminded them of what life on the outside was like and motivated them to complete their sentences successfully in order to be able to return to it.

> [My visitors] stayed for 3 days, preparing things for themselves. It helped me, and at least you know what you are living for, and you realise that you want to go to them as soon as possible.

Such a cumulative effect of visiting on prisoners has resonance with research into the impact of visiting on visitors, in which authors such as Comfort (2003) have suggested a transformative effect of visitation. If visitors similarly experience a pre-liminal detachment from life on the 'outside', and a liminal experience in the prison visiting room, then their post-liminal is also a return to 'normal' life outside the prison, once the visit is over. However, they are not unchanged by the event. As Comfort (2003, 103) has observed, 'while the ostensible function of the prison when handling visitors is that of a 'people-processing organisation', the cumulative dishonour it inflicts… make it akin to a 'people-changing organisation''. Dixey and Woodall (2011)'s work similarly hints at the strain placed on family and friends who visit prisoners repeatedly over a long period of time, incurring considerable financial expense and enduring the repetitive emotional strain of seeing their loved ones incarcerated. Comfort (2008, 28) further suggests that in relation to the repeated experience of prison visiting 'one can posit that recurrent exposure to this ordeal will itself become a transformative course, especially if each occurrence is followed by immersion in a distinctively abrasive and depersonalizing environment constructed to modify and control behaviour'. These insights suggest that the transformative nature of liminality may take a particular form in this context, in which the cumulative or repetitive aspect of prison visiting is unusually significant.

Conclusion

This paper suggests that, in line with critiques of Goffman's (1961) 'total institution', although carceral space seems to be sharply demarcated from the outside world, the prison wall is in fact more porous than might at first be assumed. Through a geographical engagement with liminality, in the context of imprisonment in the contemporary Russian Federation, it theorises long-visit rooms as liminal spaces in which prisoners come face-to-face with persons and objects originating in and representing their lives on the 'outside', and which act as spaces of betweenness where a metaphorical threshold-crossing takes place between outside and inside. In contrast with much of the geographical scholarship which invokes liminality to theorise a space of betweenness and indistinction, it contests the suggestion, originating from Van Gennep's (1960) description of the three stages of

liminality, that liminal spaces are a location for a linear transformation from one life stage to another. Drawing on scholarship which posits the possibility of a stasis within liminality for certain groups, it suggests that the space of prison visiting spaces operate as a location of partial and repetitive threshold-crossing, where transformation is temporary and transient, but also cumulative, rather than decisively or immediately transitive.

The temporal perspective is significant. Testimony from former prisoners suggests that although there is no immediate post-liminal transition to another life stage for prisoners returning to their everyday lives of incarceration following visitation, the sense of visits contributing to some form of cumulative effect, as they are observed to do in the case of prison visitors, may in turn shed light on the functionality of prison visiting in terms of the punitive and rehabilitative intentions of prison systems. Within criminology and prison sociology, prison visiting is held to be an almost exclusively positive phenomenon; empirical evidence suggests a positive influence on inmates, in terms of improving successful reintegration on release, and lowering rates of recidivism (Holt and Miller 1972; Hairston 1991; Schafer 1991, 1994; Visher and Travis 2003; La Vigne et al. 2005; Bales and Mears 2008). The mechanisms through which visiting has this effect, while poorly understood, are assumed to relate to the maintenance of contact with family and community, in order to smooth what can be a traumatic transition to life on the 'outside'. The evidence presented here, while pertaining to one particular penal context, suggests that an understanding of prison visiting as a liminal space repeatedly and cumulatively experienced by both prisoners and visitors may be a useful theoretical construct for understanding the positive effects of prison visitation. Future research on prison visiting might therefore usefully integrate a consideration of the spatial and material context of visiting rooms, employing a critical constructivist approach to deconstructing the liminality of visiting space.

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