

## Prison visitation as accessible engagement

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## **Prison Visitation as Accessible Engagement: Encounters, Bystanders, Performance, and Inattention**

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### INTRODUCTION

It has long been recognised within communications and linguistic studies that human interactions cannot be reduced to merely exchanges between two participants. Beyond the dyadic model of communication (involving speaker and listener/hearer) are participation frameworks of different kinds, involving multiple actors in diverse contexts. Our focus here is prison visitation, and rather than seeing it as an exchange between two or more people, we bring to it a concern for the diversified participatory roles which characterise this social interaction. In so doing, we extend extant scholarship on prisoners' family contact which, although concerned with the visit as a significant aspect of that contact, rarely focuses in close detail on its specificities. We explore the social dynamics of prison visits by deploying, for the first time in this field of scholarship, a reading of Goffman's theorisations of the nature of social interaction. This approach enables us to identify factors which inhibit positive feelings of

‘closeness’ during visits, and to make policy recommendations intended to enhance the experience of visitation for prisoners and visitors, and the effectiveness of prison systems in enabling beneficial visitation.

Although we use Goffman’s ‘dramaturgical’ lexicon, we do not trivialise these interactions, caricature them as ‘play-acting’, or belittle their importance. Quite the contrary: our intent is precisely to advance understandings of factors which might unhelpfully inhibit visits interactions, detracting from their potential to support the relationships which may assist prisoners, and their family and friends, both during and post-custody.

Long-standing empirical evidence suggests that prison visiting, in addition to its value in upholding rights to a private and family life, and supporting wellbeing in custody, has a positive influence on likelihood of successful reintegration on release, and reducing recidivism. Foundational works (e.g. by Ohlin 1954, Glaser 1964, and Holt and Miller 1972) show more positive outcomes for male prisoners visited in custody, and more recent considerations emphasise the complexity of this relationship (e.g. Bales and Mears 2008, Berg and Huebner 2011, Derkzen et al 2009, Duwe and Johnson 2016, Mears et al 2012, Cochran & Mears 2013, Siennick et al 2013, Liu et al 2016, Mitchell et al 2016, Rodriguez 2016, Clark and Duwe 2017), while stressing the need for further empirical work to develop more sophisticated understandings.

In developing a conceptual framework to theorise prison visitation and its potential effects, Cochran and Mears (2013) noted that existing studies, in largely considering

visitation as a binary event (i.e. one that either happens or does not), had overlooked the ways in which its inherent *heterogeneity* may influence whether it is harmful, beneficial, or has no discernible effect. They also pointed to the importance of better understandings of the *experience* of visitation, by which they meant its perception as positive or negative. Data limitations are critical here, with ‘information about how inmates and visitors interact... not readily collected or included in administrative datasets’ (ibid 258), and arguably very challenging adequately to capture via survey instruments. However, reporting results of a meta-analysis of prior studies, Mitchell et al (2016) contrasted the effects on recidivism of conjugal visits, furloughs (home visits), and short in-person visits, concluding that the level of intimacy or ‘closeness’ of visitation – an important element of its ‘experience’ - matters in terms of its beneficial effects. This finding is in line with widespread observations from a range of contexts, based on qualitative data, that rather than being characterised by ‘closeness’, visitation situations can instead be stressful and intimidating (e.g. Arditti 2003, Austin and Hardyman 2004, Comfort 2008, Murray and Farrington 2008, Moran et al 2017, Moran and Disney 2017), with such visitation experiences discouraging some visitors from coming at all (Clark and Duwe 2017, Sturges 2002).

Common to much scholarship of prison visitation is an understanding that the visiting context is suboptimal – and that interactions therein are different from those which take place outside. That said, it is important to note that even if the ‘experience’ of visitation could be measured statistically, these interactions may not always be ‘worse’ than those that happen outside. As Tasca et al (2016) note, interactions during custody can be rare moments of sobriety and reflection, and Comfort (2008) has described conjugal visits as

*sometimes* offering an idealised version of interpersonal interaction. While visits are acknowledged to be ‘different’, the ‘difference’ that the visiting situation makes is not as well understood as it might be.

Within a wider literature on family contact during custody, relatively little attention has been paid to the micro-scale conduct of visits (i.e. to exactly what happens around a visiting table), and critically, to the specific ways in which elements of the visits situation impact on interactions. Further, these accounts largely reflect visitors’ rather than prisoners’ perspectives. For example, Tasca et al (2016) interviewed caregivers of children of incarcerated parents, identifying themes within the conversations reported to occur during visits with them, to offer an insight into family dynamics in this context. They explicitly distinguished these interpersonal exchanges from the ‘prison environment’; their focus was on the exchanges themselves, and although acknowledging the general constraints of the visiting situation, they did not address the *specific* ways in which they were constrained or enabled by the context in which they took place. By contrast, other work has focussed on the visits context, highlighting the liminal nature of visiting rooms, sitting somewhere between inside and outside, neither properly a part of the prison nor of the world outside, and governed by a set of rules that corresponds fully to neither context (Moran 2013a; 2013b, Hutton 2016, Foster 2017). Although aptly describing the specific circumstances of visitation, similarly, this work does not provide a theoretical framework for understanding the ways in which interpersonal exchanges are constrained in these contexts. These omissions are significant, because although we understand quite well in general terms that the visiting situation is stressful and intimidating, especially for visitors, we are poorly equipped to

address the questions implicit in the meta-analyses of the effects of visitation detailed above. In other words, if closeness and intimacy in visitation are important in supporting its beneficial effects, but if conjugal or home visits are not legal or practicable for all prisoners, can we identify the features of standard visitation that inhibit feelings of closeness?

Taking this perspective forward here, and building on the work of Tasca et al (2016) and Turanovic and Tasca (2017), we consider the interpersonal exchanges of visitation by incorporating concern both for the environment in which they take place, and the role of individuals not intended to be participants – prison personnel. We do so by considering the ways in which the normal ‘rules’ of social interaction as described by Goffman might apply. We thus contribute to scholarship which has considered the challenges of visitation for both prisoners and visitors, and the restrictions on both parties which render this social context unusual and arguably unnatural, by considering exactly how the visits room ‘works’ theoretically as a social situation, ultimately with a view to suggesting ways in which it might become less unusual and more ‘normal’, perhaps to enable a more positive experience of the interpersonal interactions which take place within it.

## METHODOLOGY

The research for this chapter involved speaking with incarcerated men, their visitors, and the prison staff who oversaw their visits. Data were generated during a three-year project hosted by a local Category B and C prison in an English city. Access was granted by the UK National Offender Management Service (part of the Ministry of

Justice), and the prison director. The wider project explored the relationship between experience of visitation, and post-custody outcomes, and involved an initial opt-in paper-based survey of prisoners approaching the last few weeks or months of their sentences (n=100). Surveyed prisoners were invited to participate in follow-up interviews. The majority consented, and thirty-three 30-90 minute in-depth interviews were conducted during 2015, exploring experiences of visitation during current, and any previous, sentences. The number of interviews was constrained by availability of private interview booths within the legal visits area (intended for consultation with legal representatives), and by prisoners' own scheduled commitments to prison work and other programming, given limited time remaining on sentences. Interviewees ranged from 21-56 years of age, with a mean age of 34. Most described themselves as White/British; with a minority Asian/British or Black/African/Caribbean/Black British. The majority were serving at least their second prison sentence; some had already served more than ten. Although most were currently serving sentences of less than two years, the total time spent in prison varied, from less than one year to more than ten years. Some were married or in a relationship; many of these, and others who described themselves as single, had children. All indicated that they wanted their family involved in their life. The respondents were, therefore, well-placed to reflect on visits from loved ones; most speaking during the latest of several periods of custody during which they had received visits. Six interviews with prison staff, interviewed during shifts, were carried out in early 2016. (Although not drawn upon here, twenty-one interviews with visitors were also conducted.) All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and coded using NVivo software. All respondents are identified using pseudonyms.

The study site was selected as a broadly typical example, in terms of size, function and visiting policies, of other local prisons in England and Wales, serving local courts and holding both remanded and sentenced individuals. Although the prison system of England and Wales naturally differs from other national systems, in terms of its scale, its punitive philosophy, the variety of visiting provision offered, and so on, the standard domestic visits which are the focus of our study (i.e. monthly/bi-weekly in-person visits with minimal physical contact) are replicated in many prison systems internationally.

The visiting room in our case study prison was a large, functional room with hard flooring, strip lighting and no outside windows. It contained about fifty sets of fixed tables and chairs aligned in rows, each a low coffee table with a chair on one side for the prisoner, and three on the other for visitors. On one side of the room was a children's play area with colourful murals, and on the other, a small hatch from which visitors could purchase drinks and snacks. The room was arranged and lit to enable good visibility for prison officers; particularly via CCTV cameras.

#### Goffman on social interaction

Erving Goffman's overwhelming focus was on the mundane and the 'familiar'; via complex and practice-oriented 'symbolic interactionism' (Ritzer, 1992), he explored face-to-face interaction in everyday situations. Amongst his tools for understanding the sociology of interaction is the 'dramaturgy metaphor' (Goffman, 1959), wherein social agents 'play roles' in accordance with more-or-less self-conscious 'scripts'. Through such role-play, we unavoidably send, but attempt to control, messages about ourselves



which are then perceived by others: expressions that we both give, and ‘give off’ (Goffman, 1959, 2). In a series of highly influential books (Goffman 1959, 1963, 1967, 1971) he detailed the nuanced complexity of social interactions via dramaturgical sociological analysis. Viewing theatre as a metaphor for life, he deployed symbolic interactionism to understand the elements of human interactions dependent upon time, place, and audience, and the ways in which people present themselves to each other based on cultural values, norms, and beliefs. The dramaturgy metaphor led Goffman to the development of ‘front stage and back stage regions’ (1959), a notion which has had profound influence on understandings of personal expression in prison (e.g. Jewkes 2005, Faccio and Costa 2013). However, dramaturgical accounts of social interactions as ritualised exchanges have not yet been applied to prison visitation. Although a full exegesis of Goffman’s work is beyond our present scope, we deploy his theorisation of accessible engagements as a framing to help understand the social interactions of prison visits. In thinking through their applicability, we focus in particular on *Behavior in Public Places* (Goffman 1963).

#### *The coherency of the focused interaction*

A major Goffmanian theme was the fundamental importance of having an agreed-upon definition of a situation in any given interaction, to give the interaction coherency. In the case of the focused engagement, i.e. between parties directly interacting with one another, the agreed-upon definition has both explicit and implicit aspects. The prison visiting situation fits this bill. Visits is highly regulated – as well as a system of formal rules applied by the prison to clothing, conduct, security and so on, there are often less

formalised forms of etiquette pertaining to conduct, and implicit understandings between visitor and visitee about how their personal visits will be conducted.

Although visits are not necessarily intentionally deceptive ('acted' purely for the purpose of deceit), some of these understandings pertain to subtle practices of pretence adopted for a variety of well-intentioned reasons. For example, the practice of pretending, for the intended peace-of-mind of young children visiting an incarcerated parent, that a visit is to their place of work, has been observed in a variety of contexts (e.g. Lanier 1991). Arditti (2003) also reported a father's jail described to his visiting children as 'super-hero school' for building muscles. In order for this well-intended consensual deception to convince its young audience, adults and older children need to remain 'on-message' throughout (i.e. to maintain the agreed-upon definition). And instances of perhaps-consensual deception, (i.e. where one visiting party acts as-if circumstances are different to how they 'really' are, to conceal potentially worrying information from the other), are also common. In their study, Crewe et al (2014, 72) noted that 'authentic' displays of emotion may not be possible in the visiting room, with prisoners reporting that they 'masked' their true feelings to spare their visitors unnecessary distress.

With these understandings giving the visiting scenario coherency, we turn next to the distinctions between individual visits and the collective event of the visiting session.

### *Accessible Engagements*

In discussing communication boundaries, Goffman distinguished between face (-to-face) engagements which exhaust the 'situation-at-large', (i.e. those in which all persons present are accredited participants), and face engagements carried on in a situation containing bystanders *not* involved directly in the encounter itself – 'accessible engagements'. It is worth hearing Goffman in the original on this point (1963, 154, emphasis added):

Whenever a face engagement is accessible to nonparticipants there is a fully shared and unshared participation. All persons in the gathering at large will be immersed in a common pool of unfocused interaction, each person, by his mere presence, manner and appearance, transmitting some information about himself to everyone in the situation, and each person present receiving like information from all the others present, at least in so far as he is willing to make use of his receiving opportunities. It is this possibility of widely available communication, and the regulations arising to control this communication, that transforms a mere physical region into the locus of a sociologically relevant entity, the *situation*.

We can see the prison visiting room as the 'mere physical locale' transformed into the sociologically-relevant entity of a 'situation' via the presence of the persons in the gathering – that is, the prisoners, visitors and staff in the room (and, arguably, watching via CCTV). Goffman continues:

But above and beyond this fully common participation, the ratified members of a particular engagement will *in addition* be participating in interaction of the focused kind, where a message conveyed by one person is meant to make a specific contribution to a matter at hand, and is usually addressed to a particular recipient, while the other members of the encounter, and only these others, are meant to receive it too. Thus, there will be a fully shared basis of unfocused interaction underlying one or more partially shared bases of focused interaction.

So as well as the ‘fully common participation’ in ‘unfocused interaction’ through which persons transmit and receive information about each other, prisoner and visitor are also engaged in focused interactions. The situation of a prison visiting session is therefore *both* a set of focused interactions between individuals party to each separate visit, *and* a common pool of unfocused interaction participated in by physically proximate individuals (prisoners, visitors and staff). Prisoners and visitors take part in both at the same time, without necessarily consciously distinguishing between them; as their focus shifts and overlaps between the individual(s) with whom they are engaged in a focused manner (i.e. around their own visit table); and the ‘situation’ at large. This scenario is depicted in Figure 14.1.

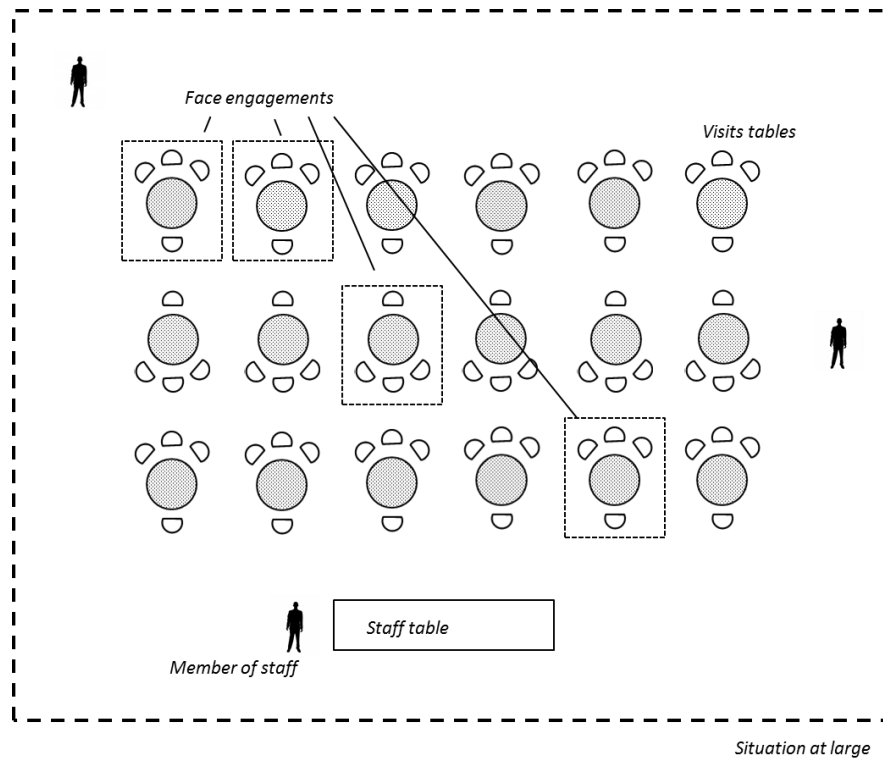


Figure 14.1 Prison visits as face engagements within a situation-at-large

Goffman noted that the difference between participation in the situation-at-large, and in face engagement is ‘easy to sense but difficult to follow out in detail’ (1963, 154-5). The sound level of voices has relevance for the situation as a whole, in that everyone would be able to hear the hubbub of other conversations, without necessarily distinguishing specific utterances (unless a level of deliberate furtiveness drew special attention to them). In the sections which follow, we try to follow out the differences between focused and unfocused interaction; in particular in relation to prison staff as bystanders.

*Participants, bystanders and conventional engagement closure.*

Goffman argued that persons present in a gathering are either participants or bystanders, depending on the engagement in question. They are participants in their *own* face engagement, *and* bystanders' to *others'* face engagements, while at the same time being participants in the whole gathering. In respect of these simultaneous roles, '...even while cooperating to maintain the privacy of the given encounter, both participant and bystander will be obligated to protect the gathering at large...' (Goffman 1963, 155).

We depict this situation in Figure 14.2.

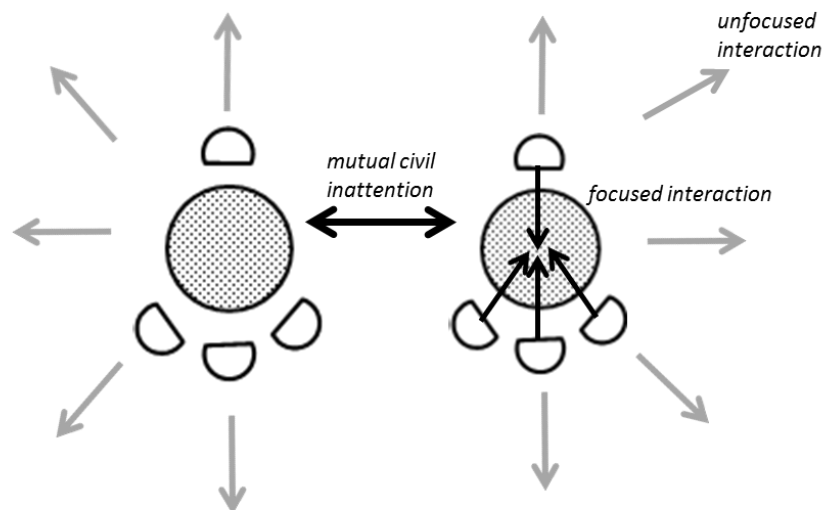


Figure 14.2 Types of interaction

The obligation to act 'as if' the face engagement were physically cut-off from the rest of the situation-at-large<sup>1</sup>, Goffman termed *conventional engagement closure*. This happens in two ways: first, bystanders extend a type of 'civil inattention' by giving visible expression to the participants of the gathering that they are focusing their attention elsewhere; pretending not to notice what is going on around them. (He pointed out,

<sup>1</sup> This is distinct from his later discussion of barriers to perception (Goffman 1966) such as 'involvement shields', the use of which allows an *individual* to control others' participation in their life, shielding them from their surroundings.

though, that this courtesy is complex, since ‘a too studied inattention to what one is in a position to overhear can easily spoil a show of inattention’ (1963, 156)). Second, there is tacit cooperation in maintaining engagement closure; that is, participants limit their actions and words to those that will not be too hard to ignore.

As one might expect, we found these patterns of behaviour within our study. Jordan described being overheard during visits, and asking his mother to keep her voice down. ‘I always say to her, ‘Talk quiet’ and stuff... [I’m] always thinking everyone’s listening to me [laughs], even though we’re not even talking about anything important.... I think they’re just getting on with their own thing really.’ Since, in this instance, Jordan’s own conversation was not about ‘anything important’, he was able to maintain a comportment that did not attract attention to his table. However, sometimes conversations during visits are such that emotional responses are difficult to conceal. David told us that although he usually did not receive visits, during a previous sentence he had been brought to the visiting room because a visit had been organised by his brother (counter to the usual local practice, of prisoners booking their own visits and inviting visitors to come). During the visit David’s brother told him that their mother had died, and David was unable to hide his emotions: ‘I mean, obviously I cried, you know, and I’ve got all the people looking at me, you know, [thinking] ‘Why is he crying?’’. Although David’s example is extreme, it resonated with the testimony of other interviewees, who felt uncomfortable being watched by others. Tom considered the visits room to be a public place, and did not take kindly to his visitors attracting the attention of others. ‘I don’t want someone shouting at me in public. It’s embarrassing. Sitting on the visit... you’ve got someone shouting their mouth off airing your business

in public. I'm not into it... I don't want the whole environment to know what the conversation is about'. These three examples indicate the sensitivity with which prisoners interpreted the situation-at-large and the feeling of conducting their face engagement surrounded by others.

Prisoners described how they coped with the presence of other visiting encounters; Colin: "If I've got my three daughters there, I just hear my three daughters. I'm in a bubble. I don't care what's left or right, I'm focussed on what's in front of me and that's it". In their 'bubble', they acted almost as if they were shielded from view, giving civil inattention to other encounters. Another prisoner, Mohamed, reported trying *not* to watch, but sometimes being unable to avoid it:

...you know some people's partners are lying to them and stuff like that. I've seen it happen over and over. I feel sorry for people. I mean their partner is coming in with a love bite on their neck. I've seen someone get up and give her a slap. And he's told her to piss off. She's trying to hold onto him saying "I'm sorry, I'm sorry". He's like "No". We don't really pry into people's lives too much. [But] if it happens in front of you...

David described disattending other such altercations: "...there's always somebody kicking off. There's always a family having a row, you know? Me, I just try and ignore it, you know?" Sean expressed a similar sentiment, albeit more strongly, hinting at a code which applied in the visiting room: "...you're looking round at people and people are thinking "What are you bloody looking at?" Like your nose in other people's conversations. It's taboo, you don't do it." Talking about a similar situation, Chris noted that witnessing other people's conversations played out in this way was embarrassing.



He used the term “performing” to describe the spectacle: “...If you’ve got your kids there on visit and then you’ve got somebody performing or something, it’s a bit embarrassing, as well as not nice for the kids and stuff. Somebody performing or there’s some aggravation or something.”

Although these men described trying to give civil inattention, Ashley told us that he actively watched other visits: “Yeah I do look round on a visit, you know, I look around, see what’s going on, see what other people’s visits are like. I don’t know, I’m just nosy like that...” Other prisoners told us that other visits were watched only if something interesting was happening, or if attention was drawn by a loud noise or physical altercation. Andy:

Q: What if an argument happened on a visit? Do people look as if they’ve seen it?

A: They look and watch!

Q: They look at what’s going on over there?

A: Yes, a bit of excitement.

In these examples, then, it is the *nature* of the materially and acoustically conspicuous ‘performance’ (in Chris’s lexicon) - that rather than deflecting attention, instead invites it.

Prisoners may actively watch, idly observe, reluctantly witness or disattend what is going on around them, be that the spectacle of a performance, or other bystanders’ reactions to it. As theatre critic T’Jonck (2005) has argued, spectators do not just look at a spectacle, but also perform *themselves*, as spectators, in front of *other* spectators. They

choose whether or not to exercise civil inattention, pretending that they do not hear or see what is going on, and thereby maintaining the alienation that enables the performance, (whether that is a quiet conversation or an argument), to continue.

This awareness of being watched leads us to a consideration of audiences, or, in Goffman's terminology, bystanders. We do not claim that prisoners and/or visitors engage in the types of performance described in dramaturgical literatures pertaining to theatre; however, there are some points of comparison with the performative nature of the prison visit, perhaps most notably in cases where, with prior collusion, prisoners will knowingly 'put on a show', (i.e. cause a visible and audible disturbance during a visit), perhaps intended to draw the attention of the gathering at large, enabling a 'pass' (i.e. of contraband items) to take place unnoticed at another visiting table. As prison officer Jay told us, '...*they* could be making passes while *they're* having their little altercation, which is nothing really, just to get you [staff] all over in that direction'.

So far, the discussion of prison visiting in the light of Goffman's dramaturgical model of social interaction demonstrates that much of what we would expect to take place in accessible engagements within a situation at large is indeed to be found. In other words, the visiting situation seems to have much in common with, for example, interactions in a crowded café, or between passengers on a bus, in which face engagements take place in a situation-at-large, with similar processes of civil inattention and so on. However, we found that the visiting room is explicitly *not* experienced in this way. At interview, prisoners rejected such comparisons – the visiting room was very rarely considered to be 'like' any of these other social situations – but articulating exactly what was *different*

about it was challenging. Clearly none of these other social contexts entailed peripheral searches of parties otherwise separated from each other, and none took place in as secure and surveilled a setting. Tom put it this way: “It’s not *tense*, but it’s just not *right*, if you know what I mean? It’s not what you’d feel as a normal atmosphere, is it? Is it normal for people to be sitting in a room and have strangers around you and so on? And trying to hold a normal conversation with people? Not really.” Goffman’s theorisation would suggest that it *is* quite normal to interact socially in this way, with ‘strangers around you’; begging a critical question about what exactly it *is* about the visiting situation that makes the atmosphere feel ‘not right’. A critical factor may be the specific nature of bystanders in this context.

#### *The nature of bystanding*

Unlike a coffee shop scenario, where participants in face exchanges largely exhaust the situation-at-large, the visiting encounter is observed by bystanders of at least two sorts; participants in other visiting encounters, *and* prison officers (both physically present in the room, and watching on CCTV). This second sort of bystander seems key to understanding the visiting encounter, insofar as their presence influences both the interactions themselves, and the circumstances in which they take place, leading both to be recognised by interviewees (prisoners, visitors *and* staff) as something out of the ordinary, and socially unnatural. The role of prison staff in visits has not been overlooked by researchers. For example, Comfort et al. (2005) noted that correctional officers spoke of maintaining “decorum” in the visiting room, and enforced strict rules about clothing and touching. Visitors in her study described their excessive policing of any hint of sexual suggestion, with acts they regarded as affectionate construed as

hypersexualised, and prohibited. In a more general sense, Crawley (2004) explored prison officers' adoption of a performative attitude to manage their professional role. In the following section we consider how the bystanding role of prison officers is played out dramaturgically.

Whereas prisoners and visitors (as bystanders to face engagements), generally extended mutual civil inattention, in our study prison officers were recognised (and recognised themselves) to occupy a different position. Physically present in the room, they were known by prisoners and visitors to be actively watching. Some prisoners perceived staff presence to be too obvious. Ashley:

Honestly, I've had a visit last week, the bloke [prison officer] was stood next to me, like stood *there* [points to edge of table], I said, "What you standing next to me for? I'm not – You're interrupting my visit." Get me? I've not even done anything, never passed *nothing*. Don't even know why he was standing there to be honest, you know?

Although Ashley denied that he had had any intention of receiving a 'pass', he was probably right to assume that the officers' location was triggered by this suspicion. As prison officer Charlie told us:

If we think there's going to be a pass, say they're sat *there* [points to adjoining table], I'll probably stand *there* [points to side of table], right by them. I'll be there watching him because I'm thinking, "Well, I'd rather you *didn't* pass". Not saying they have got anything but... They'll either do it, or they get off, or maybe they're not doing anything, but it's just that deterrent, isn't it?

These two accounts of the same type of incident signal the unusual role of the prison officer in the visits 'situation'. Not part of a focused interaction around the visits table, unlike other bystanders the officer is not obliged to offer it civil inattention. In practice, though, although the officer is at liberty to intervene in the focused interaction at any time, social etiquette and respect for the civil inattention *sought* by the visiting party mean that officers use a range of tactics to effect their interventions. Spatial location is one. Mobile as they patrol the visiting situation, officers must eventually pause somewhere. Some locations which may appear arbitrary are deliberately chosen to influence, by mere physical presence, the nature of the encounter at a nearby table.

Whether or not physical proximity constitutes intervention when officers pause next to a particular table purely by chance, is debatable, and some officers noted that the range of simultaneous matters of interest could mean relatively little studied attention was paid to individual encounters. However, in other instances officers clearly exceeded the role of bystander by directly intervening in a face engagement to which they were not an intended party. How this was done varied according to circumstance, officers' personality and preferred mode of engagement.

In deciding *whether* to intervene, officers commonly described drawing comparisons between the visiting situation and more conventional social gatherings, by bringing their wider experience of social situations to bear. Derek told us:

If they're getting a bit "friendly" with their girlfriend and such, and hands are going everywhere, you have to sort that out, because you can't just do

that in public anyway, so they have to learn that or else they'll be back in!

So that's how I see it.

Kate remarked:

Personally, if I think it's something I am not uncomfortable with in public, so if it's a hand-holding, if it's a kiss, if it's a hug, and I would happily see that while I'm at the park, I think that's quite acceptable. If it's something that I think is awful, because you are in a public place and you're surrounded by other people and children, I would challenge it....

Having decided to intervene, choosing the appropriate method of approach also required consideration. Sometimes staff 'joined' the face engagement, as if hoping to become a participant. Kate again:

I normally go over and ask if I can "join the party", and it will stop them...

And most of them go, "Yes, sorry Miss, I'll invite you next time!"

Derek again:

Personally, if I find somebody is being daft or you have to keep saying, "Don't do that. Don't do that", I'll actually go and sit with them. I just plonk myself down on the chair. And they'll say, "What are you doing there, boss?" I'll say, "Just waiting for you to calm down." "Okay, boss." And that'll do it.

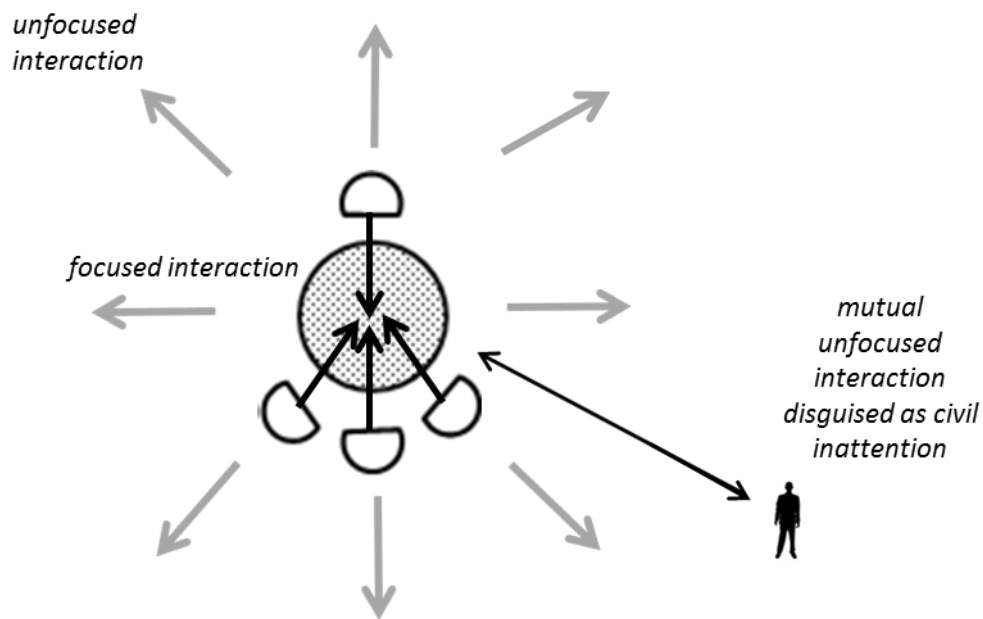


Figure 14.3 Mutual unfocused interaction disguised as civil inattention

Prisoners and visitors felt watched by staff. Some staff felt that observation was sometimes mutual, and were suspicious of this type of focused interaction. Derek:

Sometimes I'll sit there and I'll think, "He's watching me and *he's* watching me, so why are they watching me? If they're watching me, are they getting ready to do something, waiting for me to walk off?" So I'll say on the radio, "He's clocking me over there; just keep an eye on him".

So although visiting parties and prison officers would usually regard each other with disattention, prisoners and visitors are aware of officers' ability to intervene, and that their job is to observe and keep order. Although there may be a *show* of mutual civil inattention, with both going about their business as if they are looking nowhere in particular, both are (idly or furtively) observing each other. We depict this in Figure 14.3, as mutual unfocused interaction disguised as civil inattention.

When Derek consulted colleagues ‘on the radio’, he was communicating with prison officers monitoring live footage from the CCTV cameras in an adjacent room. If the presence of prison officers, in their peculiar bystander role, influenced the atmosphere in the visiting hall, then arguably the presence of these cameras had a similar effect. Prisoner interviewees were aware both of the purpose of bright lighting in the room, and the camera locations. “It's really bright in there. They have to, for the cameras and stuff, you see, for people doing things and sneaking things and whatever they're up to.” (Simon). Prisoners also knew that specific movements were regarded as suspicious; Ashley:

You're under the watch of a camera. It means someone's in an office watching you on a camera. You get me? Watching your hand movements. Watching to see if you're putting anything in your pockets. Watching your visitors' hand movements, you get what I mean?

Officers described utilising the cameras to enable better views of specific visits encounters. The allocation of tables to visiting parties allowed persons considered at risk of making a pass to be in full view of a camera. Although staff shortages meant that sometimes live CCTV footage went unmonitored, when staff *did* view the screens, they were able to work as a team. As Kelvin described:

Once or twice a week there'd be a strong suspicion [of a pass]. If it's backed up on the cameras.... because we can then say, “Is there anything on there?” and whoever the camera operator is can rewind and say, “They definitely had something.”



Cameras in the visiting room can enable staff to observe face encounters in a very specific manner. Camera operators are able to scrutinise individuals and interactions in a way which would be socially awkward for staff in the room. The presence of cameras meant that prisoners and visitors were always aware that although interactions might be disattended by other visiting parties, and that officers would be deterred by etiquette from directly intervening unless circumstances called for it, they were still subject to studied attention (Figure 4), if not focused interaction.

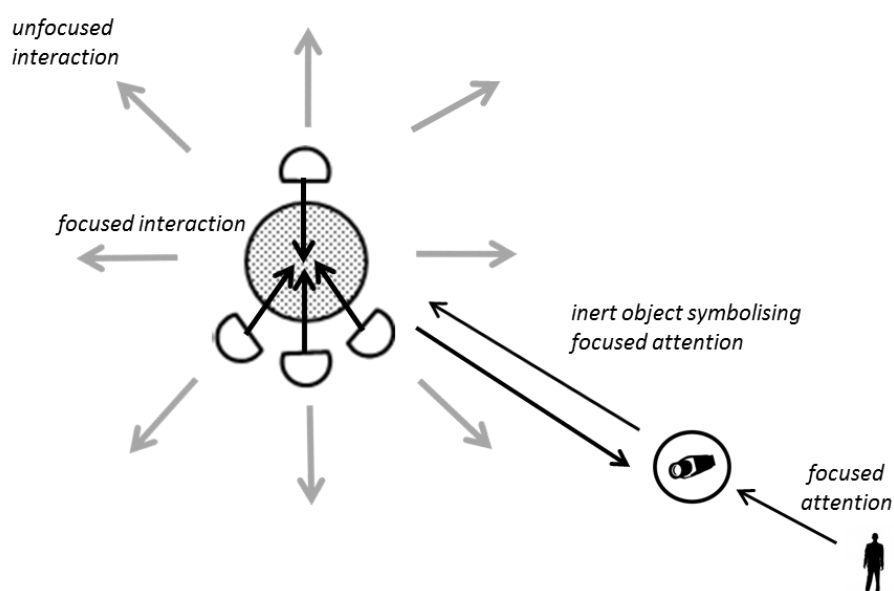


Figure 4 Focused attention via CCTV

Staff noted that on occasion, working on a visits felt like ‘watching a show’. When they suspected that a pass might be planned, they described trying to maintain a normal, calm demeanour despite being on high alert.

When... visitors come through [from the search area], if there is anything that there’s suspicion from somebody else, the dog handler will say, “Can you keep an eye on such-and-such, table such-and-such”. (Charlie)

... you're all watching, waiting; you're just waiting for something to happen then, aren't you, because you're waiting for a pass. If there *is* a pass, will he come quietly or is he going to fight? Is his missus going to fight? You don't know, do you? (Kelvin)

Some of this anticipation and anxiety arises from knowledge that if there is an incident requiring intervention, mutual disattention will dissolve into overt spectatorship. Once an incident is resolved, officers felt their role to be akin to 'host at a party', as one described it, responsible for enabling a tense atmosphere to dissipate. Derek:

It's a bit like *EastEnders* where they go [imitates dramatic drum intro to closing theme]. And they always turn round and look. And then they'll start talking again after a couple of seconds. So it's like the films, where everything goes quiet around them. You have a little bubble of, "What's going on?" and then people start talking again. It might be a bit louder because they're just, "Did you see that there? Didn't think they'd do *that!*"

Charlie used another theatrical comparison:

There's a scene in *Star Wars* where somebody gets their arm cut off in a bar and as soon as it happens it just goes back to normal and they just start playing the music again and it goes back to normal. That's exactly what it's like.

Jay reflected that in this context:

You're a bit of everything. It's hard to explain. You're everybody's friend whilst everybody's enemy at the same time.

Unlike conventional bystanders, obliged to offer mutual inattention, prison officers are able, and expected, to intervene in face engagements, either to prevent a 'pass' taking place, to halt inappropriate conduct, or to defuse confrontations; at odds with the conventional role of bystander in Goffman's social interactionism.

## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Statistical research into prison visitation has identified the importance of understanding its subjective experience (e.g. Cochran & Mears 2013), and meta-analysis has suggested, based on the differential effects of conjugal visits, home visits and routine in-person visits, that the intimacy or 'closeness' of visits experiences is critical to their success (Mitchell et al 2016). Through a deployment of Goffman's notion of accessible engagements, we have sought to better understand, in the context of routine in-person visits, the specific ways in which such closeness is inhibited. We find that although face engagements in the visiting room resemble to some extent similar types of interactions in other situations, there are critical differences. Conventional engagement closure involves participants in face engagements both giving mutual inattention to each other and also conducting themselves in a way which does not invite attention. And indeed we see this in the visits room, with prisoners maintaining a comportment around their table that did not attract attention, and, on the whole, giving notice to other face engagements that they were not being observed. However, it was also clear that factors which are characteristic of the circumstances of incarceration, such as the separation of prisoner from visitor outwith the visit itself, and the tensions to which the relationships which underpin visits are subjected by the mere fact of incarceration, affected

engagement closure. The fact that the visit represents the only opportunity for face engagement between prisoner and visitor means that, although as Crewe et al (2014) have noted, ‘authentic’ emotional displays may be unusual, the visit is inevitably the venue for difficult conversations. Although these types of exchanges are by no means the norm, they arguably occur with greater regularity than they might in other situations-at-large such as cafes, where participants in face engagements would conceivably have the option of alternative, more private, venues, for such exchanges.

The role of prison staff, supported by CCTV, as a peculiar form of bystander – one able to intervene in face engagements - is a compounding factor. Although participants in face engagements could, by the nature of their own conduct during a visit, be able to avoid receiving such interventions, the mere fact that they *could* happen at any time arguably further dissolves the already fragile membrane of conventional engagement closure. Officers themselves, keenly aware of their atypical social status in this context, described the tactics they deployed to manage this unusual position, both in terms of intervening in a visit in a manner they deemed acceptable and appropriate, and defusing the situation if eye-catching events had dispersed mutual inattention previously extended. Although CCTV surveillance arguably removes the bystander, in that the prison officer watching on-screen is not visible to prisoners and visitors, and thus does not exert the same physical presence, the cameras themselves produced a similar, albeit arguably more subtle effect on social interactions around visiting tables.

The implication, and the outcome of considering visitation through the dramaturgical lens, may be that in the visiting room, conventional engagement closure, (with its

associated feeling of closeness and relative privacy despite location within a shared unfocused interaction), is more difficult, and therefore less likely, to be achieved.

With this in mind, we return to the debates with which we opened. Meta-analysis of research into the measurable benefits of prison visitation suggests that conjugal and home visits deliver the most favourable effects. Such visits, by definition, take place outwith the visiting room; conjugal visits in private rooms within the prison, and home visits outside the prison itself. In both cases, face engagement exhausts the situation; or in other words, people can be alone together, without the need to try to achieve engagement closure in very challenging circumstances. Security concerns will always be prominent, but mindful of the beneficial effects of closeness, further attention could be paid to the sensitive management of social interactions during standard in-person visitation of the type studied here. Although our study took place in a UK prison, the widely-replicated context of in-person visitation in large communal rooms means that our findings and recommendations have resonance for prison systems beyond these shores.

We concur with Mitchell et al (2016) that increasing the closeness of visits should be on the policy agenda. Although we would advocate more widespread provision of conjugal and home visits, these may not be legally or practicably available to all. Even so, we would argue that even within the context of the visits room, there is still potential to increase feelings of closeness, or at least, to mitigate feelings of separation, both through the design of spaces themselves, and the ways in which they are managed and surveilled. In practical policy terms, our findings suggest that enhanced ‘closeness’

could be enabled through specialised selection and training of visitation staff, and reconsideration of the balance of surveillance of the visiting room in-person and via CCTV, to further retract the figure of the officer at liberty to intervene in face engagements. We would also suggest enabling conventional engagement closure by spacing visits tables further apart both to give more privacy and to minimise the potential of being overheard, spacing them such that other visiting tables are not directly within participants' eyelines, or using transparent room dividers between visits tables - designed such that they give a sense of separation, but do not impede vision.

Having demonstrated the utility of Goffman's social interactionism for understanding the microscale conduct of visitation interactions, we would suggest that further research could usefully deploy this approach to identify the ways in which different types of visitation context (closed visits, non-contact, video visitation and so on) differ from each other.

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