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# Privacy in Penal Space: Women's Imprisonment in Russia

Dominique Moran, Judith Pallot & Laura Piacentini

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## Abstract

This paper deploys a theoretical engagement with the concepts of 'public' and 'private' to explore the experience of surveilled penal space by incarcerated individuals, and in so doing further advances the new field of carceral geography. Foucault's description of self-surveillance as the mechanism through which disciplinary power or biopower operates to produce 'docile' bodies has been challenged by those who argue for the significance of prisoner agency and the importance of penal space; that socialisation mitigates the effect of biopower, and that prisoners 'perform' docility rather than interiorising it. Drawing on extensive empirical evidence gathered during interviews with women prisoners and prison staff in Russia, the paper discusses the ways in which prisoners negotiate and engage with penal spaces. It finds that even though prisoners describe penal space as 'public', they find ways of deploying agency to utilise and subvert public space to construct the 'private', and argues that a consideration of the contested binary of public/private may be a useful way of investigating prisoners' agency amidst Foucauldian disciplinary power.

## Keywords

Prison; biopower; privacy; space; agency; Russia; carceral geography.

## 1. Introduction

The work of Michel Foucault, and in particular *Discipline and Punish*, has left an indelible mark on prison scholarship, heavily influencing the work of geographers engaging with carceral space. However, his description of self-surveillance as the mechanism through which disciplinary power or biopower operates to produce 'docile' bodies has been challenged by those who argue for the significance of prisoner agency; that socialisation mitigates the effect of biopower, that prisoners 'perform' docility rather than interiorising it, and who identify the mediating importance of penal space in the operation of biopower (Dirsuweit, 1999, Vaz & Bruno 2003, Baer 2005, Simon 2005, Sibley & Van Hoven 2009). Based on their study of dormitory confinement in a New Mexico prison, Sibley and Van Hoven (2009) in particular call for more detailed empirical analysis of the experience of penal space by inmates, to further explore the ways in which prisoners respond to constant surveillance in the penal setting. Understandings of carceral space are key to the current development of 'carceral geography' (Moran et al forthcoming a, Moran forthcoming), amongst the most vibrant areas of advancement of geographies pertaining to security and the punitive state.

This paper deploys theoretical engagement with the concepts of 'public' and 'private' to further probe the experience of penal space by incarcerated individuals. As Staeheli and Mitchell (2007, 792) point out, the meaning of 'public space' has become increasingly complex in recent years; the once unproblematic equating of 'public' with 'open or accessible' space has been problematised, with new debates opening up around the meaning of 'public' complicating discourses across normative political theory and critical geography. In parallel, although less prominently, a similar process has surrounded the

conceptualisation of the 'private', the assumed binary partner of the 'public', but a term no less contested or contestatory. This paper suggests that a consideration of prisoners' conceptualisation of the 'private' may provide a useful and illuminating means of exploring their experience of penal space.

Drawing on empirical evidence gathered during interviews with prisoners and prison personnel in contemporary Russia, we discuss the ways in which prisoners negotiate and engage with penal spaces. As Hubbard (2001, 51) notes, space "is not just a passive backdrop to human behaviour and social action, but is constantly produced and remade within complex relations of culture, power and difference". Engaging with this critical constructionist notion of space, we examine carceral spaces at the micro scale, exploring the assumed public/private spatial binary and the ways in which this binary is challenged and destabilised in carceral space, as prisoners seek solitude as a penal corollary for privacy.

The paper opens with a consideration of contemporary theorisation of public and private, and privacy in penal space, before introducing the Russian research context and exploring the empirical material generated through interviews with current and former prisoners and prison personnel, using this to illustrate prisoners' perceptions of public space and the tactics and practices deployed to create privacy within it. It concludes by suggesting that consideration of the private in penal space may be a useful means by which to explore prisoner agency within spaces commonly understood to be characterised by Foucauldian disciplinary power.

## **2. Conceptualising Private and Public**

The 'public/private distinction' is one of the 'grand dichotomies' of Western thought, in the sense of a binary opposition that is 'used to subsume a wide range of other important distinctions and that attempts... to dichotomise the social universe in a comprehensive and sharply demarcated way' (Weintraub 1997, 1). The vocabulary of public and private causes as much confusion as it does clarification, though, as the terms means different things in different contexts, and can also mean several things at once. Bailey (2000, 381) holds that 'the public/private distinction has been an important, generative but relatively unexplicated and unstable background assumption in sociological thinking'. The distinction between public and private has also been a central organising theme of feminist scholarship, and the demarcation between the 'private' realm of 'personal life' and the 'public' realm, is one of the epitomes of modern life. The sharpness of the split between the 'personal', the emotionally intense, intimate domain of family and friendship, and the 'impersonal', instrumental domain of formal institutions is a defining characteristic of modernity (Weintraub 1997, 20-21). Broadly defined, the 'private' is 'that which is hidden and withdrawn, versus the 'public' which is open, revealed or accessible; what is individual, or pertains only to an individual, versus what is collective, or affects the interests of a collectivity of individuals' (Weintraub 1997, 5). However the terms can be applied to a vast array of circumstances and contexts, as Weintraub indicates with his typology of four main uses; a liberal version, which contrasts the market with the state; a citizenship version, which uses the public to refer to political community, distinct from state centralisation; a historically-based version, which identifies the emergence of the private sphere in Western society and the associated loss of public sociability; and a feminist version, which contrasts 'the family' with civil society. As feminist legal scholars have pointed out, the public/private

binary as it pertains to the reach of the law, is also highly problematic (Fineman 1991, MacKinnon 1991, West 1994).

The public/private distinction is complex, therefore – it does not represent a single paired opposition, but a complex arrangement of binaries, specific to particular contexts and subject to different interpretations and understandings. Further, although the ‘public’ and ‘private’ realms map onto and correspond to spaces in which life is lived, there is no intrinsic set of characteristics for either of these types of space. Drummond (2000, 2379) discusses the conceptualisation of public and private space, summarising the Western academic debate around these terms in which ‘private space is considered to be a domestic space where social reproduction occurs more or less free from outright control by outside forces such as the state,... and public space is ‘out there’, belonging to the whole community, although regulated by prevailing social and legal norms’. This inside/outside dichotomy has been analysed and critiqued, with feminist scholars pointing out the patriarchal character of the association between masculinity and the public, and femininity and the private/domestic, in the light of the fact that the domestic can be the locus of oppression rather than freedom. Feminist legal theorists in particular have critiqued the public/private distinction, arguing that dividing the world into public and private spheres ultimately oppresses women. Within the ‘private’ sphere of the home and family, patriarchal power is accentuated through women’s exclusion from the ‘public’ sphere, and women’s own agency is diminished by their resulting dependence on men; both of which circumstances can lead to domestic abuse becoming normalised. For example, Robin West (1994) and Catharine MacKinnon (1991) have suggested that women can be dominated in the domestic realm of home life, and that consideration of this space as ‘private’ obscures that domination from

legal redress; and Martha Fineman (1991) has argued that viewing the family as 'private' misdescribes the modern family in ways that disempower women. These theorists argue that 'privacy' thus functions as a 'vener that obscures the sexual oppression of women by protecting and simultaneously disempowering them in an isolated sphere' (Miller 2001, 8)

Women's engagement with public spaces is also argued to be much more complicated than binaries would suggest, with the public being for some a realm of fear and danger (Valentine 1990, Pain 1991). With this in mind, scholarship of public spaces has begun to explore their position in mediation between public and private, masculine and feminine. For example, Jackson's (1998, 188) work on the shopping mall as a domesticated public space challenges the public/private binary and suggests that engagement with the public and the private must be 'sensitive to the socially differentiated nature of these highly contested spaces'. Geographers in particular (see for example Fenton (2005) on citizenship in private space, Blomley (2005) on fluid categorisations of public and private space, Allen (2006) on 'privatised public spaces', Tyndall (2010) on assumed 'publicness' of shopping malls, Kumar and Makarova (2008) on the 'domestication' of public space, and Drummond (2000) on transgressed boundaries between public and private) have disrupted the boundaries between public and private space, suggesting ways of destabilising the assumed binary between them;;.

This paper builds upon these critiques to examine the nature of private space in a context in which privacy is severely limited, namely within the carceral estate, using a specific example from the Russian prison system. It would seem that all space within the prison is 'public' (Benn and Gaus 1983). However, there remains scope to destabilise the assumed binary

between public and private, and to consider the meaning of these concepts by exploring prisoners' interpretations and experiences of 'private' and 'public' life and the spaces in which these lives are lived out. Essentially, the paper asks can there *be* privacy or private space in prison?

### **3. Privacy and Penal Space**

Deprivation of privacy has been described as a 'functional prerequisite' of imprisonment (Schwartz 1972, 229), and is considered one of the 'pains of imprisonment' (Sykes 1958). It is argued that prisoners are almost always in one another's presence, or in the sight of penal authorities, in the constantly surveilled 'panopticon' described by Foucault (1979). Lack of privacy in the penal context is 'caused' both by the technique of regimentation and the imperative of custody, and at an everyday level can include forced exposure, (strip searches, communal showers); forced spectatorship (essentially exposure to others' lack of privacy); and violation of collective privacy (imposed and exposed intimacies) Schwartz (1972). Prisoners vary in the extent to which they accommodate themselves to lack of privacy. As time passes, they may 'get used to it', or it may become the most difficult aspect of their prison life, with a continuing desire for privacy constituting one of the most important facets of the prison experience. Lack of privacy for prisoners stands in tension with their entitlement to some form of autonomy and dignity (Singer 1971), but recent discussion within criminology and prison sociology does not theorise prisoner privacy *per se*. It does emerge, however, as an issue within two prominent debates. Firstly, the tension between the employment rights of prison personnel to work with prisoners regardless of their gender, and the privacy rights of prisoners not to be physically examined by an officer of the opposite sex; a tension which has been instrumental in limiting the implementation of



complete cross-gender or gender-neutral employment policies (Jurado 1998, Miller 1999, Ingram 2000). Secondly, in relation to prison overcrowding, single-cell or small unit accommodation is seen as a way to reduce the noise, constant activity and violations of personal space which can increase the likelihood of disorder and violence (Schaeffer et al 1988, Grant & Memmott 2007, Sharkey 2010).

This apparent causal link between lack of privacy and prison disorder emphasises the importance of understanding the prisoner experience. Geographer Teresa Dirsuweit (1999) initiated the exploration of the creation of 'private' penal space, or more accurately the suggestion that a space should be perceived as 'private' by onlookers, through the hanging of sheets and curtains around beds by women in communal dormitories in South African prisons, as well as the disruption of the public/private binary through the public visibility of 'domestic' violence between women prisoners engaged in same-sex relationships. Baer (2005) identified the 'personalisation' of prison space by prisoners collecting and displaying toiletries and air fresheners as a spatial tactic which made them feel more 'at home' in prison. He interpreted this opportunity for individual expression and identity as a demarcation of personal territory, where personalisation of space stood in tension with an institutional denial of personal space. Van Hoven and Sibley (2008, 1001) described ways in which prisoners 'cope' during incarceration by carving out 'spaces for themselves' within the prison. Similarly, Sibley and Van Hoven (2009) commented on the agency of prisoners constructing material and imaginary spaces, and call for more detailed empirical analysis to illuminate the production of space in the carceral setting. Following these authors, we utilise the theoretical extensions offered by Bailey (2000, 382), and Goffman (1959) to explore what privacy might mean in the penal context.

Bailey (2000) suggests that the 'private' is under-theorised in sociological thought, with current interest focussing on the familial and the domestic – two contexts which are problematic as markers of 'privacy' in carceral space, where prisoners are by definition detached from home and family. (Intimate relationships certainly develop within prisons, but these are very difficult to research, particularly in the context relevant for this paper.) Instead, he suggests that a more inclusive and fruitful approach would be to see the private as composed of three interrelated dimensions – intimacy, the self, and the unconscious.

Taking the three interrelated dimensions in turn, firstly 'intimacy' is defined (ibid, 391) as a location of the private in emotional closeness between a small number of people, and recent work on intimacy has shown that this relies in some way upon disclosure and trust (Giddens, 1992). Most frequently these intimate relationships occur in marriage and the family, but also between close friends; seen as 'the essential developmental basis for a functioning social self' (Bailey 2000, 392). Secondly 'the self' itself is the conscious, reflective and reflexive self, which can be objectified, and which is reflected in the modern sense of self-identity (ibid 392-3), compared to the unconscious, which is not consciously experienced at all and not easily accessible. In this paper we do not seek to engage with psychoanalytical literatures in exploring the complex and nuanced relationship between intimacy, self, unconscious and identity; rather we focus on prisoners' discussions of their spatialised tactics which destabilise the public/private binary.

These descriptors of the 'private' are particularly useful in that they are not explicitly connected to any particular type or demarcation of space, suggesting both a blurring of the

distinction between public and private, and the possibility of a range of spatialised practices on the part of individuals.. Bailey's theorisation of privacy bears some resemblance to Goffman (1959) and Giddens' (1984) notions of 'frontstage' and 'backstage'; frontstage being the public aspect of identity presented in social engagement with others, and backstage being the restoration of the interior sense of self where 'frontstage' performance is no longer demanded (Jewkes 2005). 'Frontstage' and 'backstage' are very familiar concepts within criminology, with scholars widely observing that inmates adopt façades while inside, that this 'front' is impossible to sustain indefinitely, and that the facility to 'be oneself' at some point is essential for prisoner wellbeing. In line with Van Hoven and Sibley (2008) we argue that the very design of the prison and the ways in which space is configured and allocated to inmates affects levels of privacy, and that prisoners deploy various methods to negotiate and subvert 'public' space to construct the 'private'.

#### **4. The Russian prison system**

As discussed elsewhere, 'prisons are not simply institutions which (cor)respond to crime; 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). Penal systems develop in context, and there are striking differences in penal interventions between countries with different historical and cultural traditions (van Hofer 2003, Lacey 2008); Melossi (2001, 407) notes that '(p)unishment is deeply embedded in the national/cultural specificity of the environment which produces it'. With this in mind, and before presentation of empirical material, some discussion of the Russian penal context of this research is required.

In Russia, the legacy of the Soviet era has generated a particular penal geography (Moran 2004; Pallot 2005, 2007 & 2008; Pallot et al 2010; Moran et al 2009 & 2011; Pallot & Piacentini with Moran 2012, Moran forthcoming, Moran et al forthcoming). Although the contemporary penal system is fundamentally different from its Soviet predecessor, there are still high imprisonment rates, and prisoners, particularly women, are still sent to geographically peripheral locations to serve their sentences. There is ongoing comprehensive reform, but Russian prisons remain vastly under-researched, and the Russian penal authorities intensely secretive.

On 1 March 2011, 814,200 people were incarcerated in the Russian Federation, of whom 66,000 or 8% were women<sup>1</sup>. 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 only forty-six of Russia's 760 correctional facilities accommodate women, and these facilities are unevenly distributed across space, away from the major centres of population from which most prisoners are drawn<sup>2</sup>. Women are, therefore, more commonly sent 'out of region' to serve their sentences than are men, with concomitant impacts on maintaining connections with home and family (Pallot 2007; Moran et al 2009 & 2011; Piacentini et al 2010, Pallot & Piacentini with Moran 2012).

#### *4.1 Data and Methodology*

The data presented were gathered through extensive fieldwork within penal institutions across four Russian regions, via over 200 interviews with prison personnel and incarcerated

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<sup>1</sup> www.fsin.su

<sup>2</sup> 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.

women and girls, and also outside of these institutions, through interviews with recently released women living in three cities in European Russia; data generated during this project<sup>3</sup> are also presented in Pallot & Piacentini with Moran (2012). Research was carried out between 2006 and 2010, when a team of UK and Russian colleagues were permitted access to women's prisons.

The Russian Federal Prison Service (FSIN) has tended to discourage the gaze of outsiders. Research access is exceptionally difficult to negotiate, the research process is logistically, linguistically, and ethically challenging, subject to the vagaries of institutional and international politics, and strictly controlled by FSIN, which considers practical issues of security and institutional arrangements alongside the perception of the prison system when allowing outsiders in. Any prison research involves complicated ethical issues (see Israel 2004, King and Winup 2007; Roberts and Indermaur 2003); 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 likely that prisoners adjudged suitable for participation in the research by the prison authorities (on the basis of their physical, psychological, and emotional state, and with concern for their health and well-being) were offered the opportunity to volunteer to take part, especially where the visiting western research team conducted the interviews. As with any prison research, this process generates a skewed sample probably including disproportionately well-adjusted, emotionally stable respondents. All of the conversations were with prisoners enjoying 'enhanced privileges' - being rewarded for good behaviour. During the 65 prisoner

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<sup>3</sup> ESRC award RES-062-23-0026.

interviews, certain topics such as lesbian relationships, which are illegal in Russian prisons, were 'off-limits'. It was therefore challenging to explore with current prisoners the creation of 'private spaces' within which such physical intimacy might take place. Keenly aware of the context of this research inside prisons, mitigation of the impact of the presence of conspicuous 'outsiders' was achieved by engaging a local Russian research team to conduct interviews with incarcerated women, and a group of experienced Russian ethnographers to locate and interview 21 women who had recently been released from prison. The latter were interviewed outwith the penal system, in their homes or places of their own choosing; the intention was to enable them to speak more freely about incarceration than women in prison had seemed able to do. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVivo software. Questions about intimate relationships were pursued with former prisoners, albeit outside of the spatial context in which such relationships took place. This paper presents the words of women interviewed both whilst in prison and after release, and their status is noted on each occasion<sup>4</sup>.

## **5. Penal space in Russia**

Despite the critique of the public/private binary in the academic literature, for prisoners interviewed for this paper, the demarcation of space, and particularly the identification of private space, was critically important to their own understandings of privacy. They supported the frequent observation that there is no privacy in prison (Wahidin & Tate 2005), described privacy primarily as spaces in which they could be alone, and told us that in the communal spaces of the prison, these were vanishingly few. However, they also discussed intimacy and practices of self-reflection and contemplation resembling Bailey's

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and Goffman's typologies – which seems to suggest that some kind of privacy *can* exist in prison, in tension with the designation of communal penal space. In order to explore this further, this section of the paper examines first women's descriptions of this public space, and then explores the practices of privacy which take place within it.

### *5.1 The public space of the detachment dormitory*

The '*otryad*' is the militaristic term given in Russia to a 'detachment' of prisoners who live together and work together subdivided into work 'brigades'. Colloquially, this term is also applied to the accommodation in which the *otryad* lives, although this is more correctly called a detachment dormitory, barracks or block. The accommodation of prisoners in communal or shared detachment blocks reflects the history of penal architecture in Russia; as Oleinik (2003, 49) notes, imprisonment in cells has never played a major role. Prior to the 1917 Revolution cells existed only in military prisons, whereas the barracks model applied to the majority of inmates; the forced labour camp becoming the dominant Soviet model. As King (1994) has described, the Soviet system of corrective labour which underpinned non-cellular confinement was legitimated by reference back to Lenin's insistence on the replacement of prisons by educational institutions and to his principle that deprivation of liberty should not involve isolation from society. Cellular accommodation was perceived to restrict the opportunities for work, and since the camps and colonies of the Soviet Gulag were intrinsically linked to the process of organized industrial production through the centralized command economy, this system constituted cheap communal accommodation for the detachments of workers who were moved around the camp system to follow the supply of raw materials or other resources requiring labour.

Cellular accommodation does exist in Russia today, but only in the ten strictest regime prisons for men (*tyurmy*), in remand prisons (*SIZO*), and in the disciplinary sections of other types of penitentiaries, including women's colonies, where it is known as *ShIZO* (*Shtrafnoi IZOlator*) a solitary confinement cell colloquially called 'the cooler' (where inmates can be held for no more than 15 days), and PKT (*Pomeshchenie Kamernogo Typa*) (cell-type accommodation within a barracks, in which inmates can be held for up to six months). These types of 'punishment' accommodation tend to be co-located in an area of the prison compound separate from the ordinary barracks.

Individual cells are therefore not widely used; hence the Russian penal system is based on the principle of imprisonment in groups. In discussing post-Soviet imprisonment, Oleinik highlights this as a critical factor in the social organisation of prison life, and although his writing draws on the experience of men, these circumstances of imprisonment are also shared by women. Imprisonment in groups, he argues, makes life in detention 'social'. 'Imprisonment in groups gives a social dimension to each of an inmate's actions. It is under these conditions that we can speak of the penal society' (2003, 49-50). Of course 'penal society' is not limited to communal accommodation, but this type of imprisonment shapes the particular forms of the 'society of prisoners' in Russia. As Sykes has argued 'the prison is a society within a society' (1958, p xii), and Oleinik draws attention to the parallels between imprisonment in groups in Russia and forced labour in barracks and forced labour camps, , and the communal apartments in which millions of Soviet citizens lived. This social life of imprisonment acts as a form of disciplinary power, affecting the ways in which women prisoners conduct themselves in the physically and psychologically 'compressed' and surveilled world of the prison.



Penal space in Russian prisons is therefore essentially 'public', or, as it is described by described by prison authorities, 'communal'. Detachments sleep in dormitories which are essentially large rooms accommodating between 60 and 150 individuals. They have facing rows of neatly made iron beds, some arranged as bunks. The extent to which personal effects are visible varies, depending on local circumstances; but beds are always marked by a small handwritten label attached to the frame at the foot, which gives the occupant's name, the statute under which they were sentenced (effectively a code for the crime for which they are being punished), their date of arrival in the prison, and their prospective date of release. Next to each bed is a small bedside table in which prisoners keep personal items such as letters, books, or cigarettes. Attached to each block is a communal bathroom, a small kitchen with a kettle, and a TV room, a common room, and the private rooms of both the prison officer overseeing the detachment, and the prisoner 'housekeeper'.

Within the institutional context of the prison, Oleinik (2003, 55) noticed that in male colonies in Russia 'people start to watch one another, whether voluntarily or not. Imprisonment... transforms this surveillance, a behaviour..., into a natural strategy for everyday life' in the same way that Alison Liebling (2004, 306, 353) has observed prisoners more generally wearing a frontstage 'mask' that they cannot remove, in the 'compressed' atmosphere of the prison.

It is clear from prisoner testimony that the prison dormitory and its environs, the space in which the everyday functions which would usually be performed in privacy (such as sleeping, washing, dressing and using the toilet) actually take place, does not equate to a

space of domestic privacy. In fact there is no easily definable 'private' space within prison which corresponds to the 'domestic' sphere identified by feminist legal theorists as potentially a locus of oppression and disempowerment. However, the surveillance which extends to the communal showers and the toilet cubicles in the detachment bathrooms (which commonly have half-height dividing walls - typical of Soviet-era public bathrooms- and no doors) suggests that within quotidian prison spaces in which the everyday functions of 'domestic' privacy – such as sleeping, washing, dressing, etc. - take place, there is oppression. Prisoners and personnel alike interviewed in Russia recognised 'compression' in the public space of the detachment block, and described the ways in which the pressure of this communal living changed women's behaviour, in ways that are perceived both positively and negatively by personnel and prisoners. Prison personnel highlighted the benefits of communal living, telling us that Russian society has a specific 'collective sensibility', and that in this cultural context, collective living is not as 'alien' as it would be to prisoners in the West. The Head of Education at one colony, for example, described communal life as a form of preparation for release, pointing out its perceived benefits in preparing women for life outside of the colony, and likening the detachment to society as a whole.

They should get used to living in society. We are preparing them for life in society. They cannot live as if they are on a desert island. They will still be exposed to people, and they should be able to communicate. They must learn to respect those around them. They must learn to understand people, and understand relationships. They must live in the *otryad*. Yes, sometimes it isn't easy, sometimes it's hard, sometimes you want to be alone, because at home you have your own corner, where you can hide and be alone.

Of prime concern for prisoners was the lack of space in which they could be truly alone; they spoke about the 'pressures' of communal living, and describing the way in which living in a large group of people created anonymity within the detachment. Current prisoners described the effect of living amongst large numbers of people;

In essence I am a sociable person, but to talk with people who I just don't find interesting - I don't know, I just don't want to do it. I usually try to hide behind a book, or embroidery... I try to escape to somewhere. There are one hundred and twenty people in the *otryad*. You can't even be alone in the toilet! And sometimes you think – God, will there ever be peace? Isn't there anywhere I can be alone?

The mental atmosphere [is the most difficult thing]. Well, of course, there are a lot of people around, it's too small, and there isn't anywhere to retreat to or anything. For everyone, probably, it's not physically difficult, but it is mentally difficult.

Having lots of people around aggravated everyday issues and for some, hindered the expression of emotion. Small personal issues became accentuated in the context of the detachment, and women felt a need to modify their behaviour. Two current prisoners spoke about the ways in which being in the detachment limited their expression of self:

I won't ever lie down and weep. I never cry in the *otryad*, in front of other people.

The regime infuriates me, having people around. What mood I'm in, when I get up, whether I've got out of bed on the wrong side, as they say. I don't like it, getting up at 6am when I haven't slept enough. Sometimes, with all these people around, I just want to be on my own

Many current prisoners contrasted their experiences in the detachment with the way they thought life would be if they lived in smaller units, with smaller groups of people – perhaps hinting at the potential for some space of ‘domestic’ privacy, in which the ‘backstage’ could be experienced amidst a smaller group of more trusted individuals. Although most preferred the idea of smaller units in principle, one pointed out that essentially prison life is communal, and that changing the accommodation would not change this fundamental fact.

Maybe there would be better living conditions [in smaller rooms], but I don’t know about the relationships between people. It wouldn’t be any use around here.... Anyway, you [still] can’t hide in a tiny room. Because there is mass work, a common social life, everything is common to all of us. It would still be the same.

## *5.2 Intimacy*

In the absence of genuinely private spaces where women can ensure their own solitude, Bailey’s (2000) and Goffman’s (1959) typologies are a useful means to explore the ways in which women create privacy in the ‘public’. Bailey named ‘intimacy’ as a form of privacy in which emotional closeness exists between a small group of people, most commonly in sexual relationships and between family members and close friends. Such intimate circumstances could also enable the expression of the ‘backstage’ self, although it is of course also possible that the ‘domestic’ privacy of an intimate relationship could enable the kind of simultaneous protection and disempowerment described by feminist legal theorists (Miller 2001, Fineman 1991). Separated from their friends and family on the outside, some prisoners do form relationships, as described by Dirsuweit (1999) for women in South African prisons, (although their practice of hanging sheets around beds to create privacy is not permitted in

Russia according to FSIN's rules of conduct). Whether these relationships can be considered to constitute or recreate a domestic realm of home life (West 1994, MacKinnon 1991), to be equated to private space, is debatable. There is also a question, over the 'intimacy' of such relationships in Bailey's own terms. Respondents said that most relationships between prisoners were based on mutual advantage, and that trust was rare<sup>5</sup>. Such 'instrumental' relationships sometimes took a form described by one former prisoner;

I made friends with her during those two weeks [in quarantine, before entering the main prison]. When I left the quarantine block... she came to meet me and she took me under her wing. I slept next to her, well in the bunk above, to be exact. I... ate with her, and this kept other people from causing me trouble.

Others described more trusting friendships:

I do have people who are close to me. In the detachment there are three women of my age. We drink tea together and chat about things that interest us all... I am comfortable with these people.

Whether these companionships constitute intimacy of the kind described by Bailey (2000), or provide a context in which prisoners can assume their 'backstage' persona is very difficult to establish, within the low-trust prison environment. More physically and emotionally intimate relationships do exist; although sexual relationships between women are prohibited in Russian colonies, they do take place. Prison personnel dismissed such relationships as temporary, meaningless 'experimentation'; whereas many former prisoners described both long-term relationships based on trust and intimacy;

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<sup>5</sup> Discussed further in Pallot & Piacentini with Moran (2012)

There are couples who are genuinely close and cannot live without one another... the essence is that there are couples who have a deep and spiritual relationship.

and less stable, 'transactional' relationships based purely on sex;

There is a certain group of women, mostly promiscuous, who... don't try to hide it.... They just pick and mix women, if I can put it like that. They just swap partners, drop people when they don't need them anymore. There are lots of women like that.

In these latter instances, creating privacy within the prison in the form of intimate relationships may recreate a sense of the disempowerment of women within domestic situations, at the heart of feminist theorists' critique of the public/private binary which envisages the domestic as private and in some way liberating. Finding privacy in intimacy within a same-sex relationship may, for some, create a space for the sexual oppression of women described by Miller (2001) for a more conventional patriarchal setting. Intimacy, as defined by Bailey (2000) to suggest a form of emotional closeness between individuals, which equates to a form of privacy, is a problematic concept in prison, and given the limitations of carrying out research in this context, it is very difficult to conclude from this evidence the extent to which this kind of intimacy, and indeed any sense of 'domestic' oppression, exists within close and trusting relationships which were described as exceptions to the norm. Interviewees commonly reported having acquaintances, but not 'friends', and this is a common trope within prison sociology; that prison is as a 'low trust' environment in which individuals suspect one another, use contacts instrumentally, and never commit wholeheartedly to relationships (Liebling 2004).

### 5.3 Finding solitude in 'the self'

With the challenges both to establishing intimate, trusting relationships, and in finding a place to be alone, prisoners described other means to achieve privacy, which closely reflect Bailey's (2000) privacy through 'the self', or Goffman's (1959) 'backstage'. In order to retreat into their inner selves, women deployed particular spatial tactics; with some seeking out transient and precarious moments of spatial isolation, and others choosing to disengage, mentally as well as physically, from the crowds around them. In this way, it seems that the relationship between the spaces themselves and the emplaced emotions and experiences within them is not straightforward – although prisoners occupy the same spaces, they experience them differently, and respond using different tactics, enabling the creation of privacy in ways which satisfy their personal needs, and their own ability to tolerate the prison environment – essentially the extent to which they can 'get used to' the lack of privacy (Schwartz 1972).

Some current prisoners found quiet spaces beyond the detachment dormitory, to which they retreated in their spare time, after work and at weekends. One described her own tactics, having found a place where, even if she could not guarantee the solitude which approximates to 'backstage', she could at least escape from the crowds of people in the dormitory;

It's difficult, because you can't escape from them [the other women in the *otryad*]. It's a confined space, and each has their own character, each with their own cockroaches in their head. And sometimes I need to close myself off, to leave them, not to see anyone... I go to the psychological relief room that we have.

Another described another such room in her prison colony:

We have a room for relaxation. It's in the sanatorium [the prison clinic]. There are psychologists there and you can use the room for relaxation. You can spend an hour and a half there, and that's all. You have to ask the psychologist about how to get into the relaxation room. They've got music, you can pick up CDs, nature sounds, the noise of waves, a storm, some guitar, that kind of thing. We choose something and just sit there.

These spaces were less busy than the dormitory, perhaps because according to our interviews prisoners had to obtain a certificate from the prison doctor or psychologist in order to gain access to this space, but prisoners' descriptions of them clearly indicate that they were not places of solitude. Other people were always around; sometimes as a background, neutral presence which would not intervene unless invited to do so;

You can sit in the TV room and watch TV – there no one will bother you or ask you questions or anything. You can sit somewhere in a corner with a newspaper.

Or you can even just sit on your own with a book, no one will bother you.

But also as an apparent irritant, whose mere presence seemed to preclude the kind of privacy through the inner self that women sought;

There were people everywhere. When you'd go somewhere, there would already be ten people there, relaxing.

Privacy in these spaces, therefore, depended on the behaviour and choices of others. None of the spaces mentioned as retreats – such as the psychology room, or the relaxation room, can be booked by individual prisoners, closed off to others who might also wish to share the space, or locked against prison personnel.



For some, privacy, and the removal of the frontstage 'mask' could only be achieved through true isolation – by gaining some control over space in a way which delivered genuine solitude, literally being away from everyone else. Such isolation could be achieved in one of two ways, both representing a different form of engagement with the prison regime. Firstly, a prisoner could behave well, work hard, and be rewarded with a position of responsibility within the detachment dormitory or the work room, supervising other prisoners. A position such as 'housekeeper' within the dormitory, or supervisor within the sewing factory, came with certain 'perks'. One former prisoner reported that;

I was a work supervisor, so I had the opportunity to go to the smoking room to smoke during working hours [whereas other prisoners had to go during their breaks from work]. Silence - I'm alone. I enjoyed those five minutes.

Falling into line with prison rules and becoming – or wearing the frontstage 'mask' of – the model 'docile' prisoner, therefore, was rewarded with privileges and opportunities not open to the rank and file. However, the same woman hinted at another tactic, in stark contrast to her own.

[Other] people shut themselves in the 'cooler', to be alone, they were so sick of it all.

The only individual accommodation in women's prison colonies in Russia is the isolation cells – the 'cooler', provided for the punishment of inmates who commit offences while incarcerated. Conditions in the 'cooler' are basic. During the Soviet period, time in these punishment cells meant a 'normal', but reduced, diet one day, and bread and water the next, combined with minimal clothing, little bedding, in unheated cells, with associated adverse effects on prisoner health. Although King (1994, 76) reported by the 1990s that conditions had improved, the use of these cells is still intended to inflict punishment on prisoners for

specific violations. Women prisoners reported that time in the 'cooler' was generally something to be feared. One described sitting alone for several days, naked apart from slippers, in a bare cell with one small window, in which the bed was attached to the wall on brackets and was only lowered for sleeping between the hours of 10pm and 6am. Despite these conditions, some former prisoners reported that they chose to offend; that their desire for solitude could only be satisfied through an instrumental, intentional and strategic violation of prison rules.

[Committing a violation] was all the same to me. I was so mentally tired, I was like a sponge full of water. Any nonsense, and they quickly lock you up, and it's ten days, perfect to have time to relax, just to relax mentally.

Whereas some women appeared to internalise the regime of the institution, therefore, becoming 'docile' bodies rewarded with perks and privacy, others consciously subverted the penal regime, calmly violating the rules when conditions became unbearable.

For those with neither personal privileges nor a positive perception of the 'cooler', other strategies enabled the construction of the private within the public, and the blurring of the boundaries between the two. One public place in which women reported being able to retreat within their inner selves was the prison factory. Russian prisoners work, and for the majority of female prisoners, this is as a machinist in the prison sewing factory. They work for seven hours each working day at the same individually numbered sewing machine on workbenches arranged in rows all facing the same direction, like desks in an examination room, producing uniforms for state employees such as police, military or prison officers, to satisfy production contracts between the penal administration and the commissioning organisation. The sewing factory is noisy – the industrial machines are powerful and the

cumulative din of a hundred or more reverberates off the hard surfaces, softened only the by the piles of fabric and uniforms next to each machine, and of garments ready for quality checking and packing. Although work is undoubtedly hard, for some women it represents a form of solitude, and the insulating noise represents an escape of sorts from the challenges of communal living into a form of privacy within the self. The workplace within the prison, although not a space where they can genuinely be alone, becomes somewhere they can at least be alone with their thoughts, even if still surrounded by other people. Some current prisoners therefore found escape in prison work, describing it as an opportunity for a form of solitude, and perhaps a time for solitary expression of the backstage self.

Work helps in that there is time to be alone, alone with your thoughts. Because the *otryad* is always in a commotion.

A former prisoner remembered her own advice to fellow inmates, making a direct link between work as a place for engagement with the reflexive, reflective, self.

I always said to my girls [in the colony] “Girls, learn to sew while you can.” Why? Because there’s only one place – at the sewing machine – where you can be alone. And when you know how to sew, no one’s pulling at you, you’re just sitting there, doing your work, and thinking. So... the bright ones amongst them, they listened. You see, a person needs to think – how did they end up here? What do they need to change about their life? What can they change and how can they do it? But they need some means of thinking about it.

Others suggested that pensioners and disabled prisoners who don’t have an obligation to undertake prison work, sometimes still choose to do so, because of its therapeutic effects. One current prisoner said;

Sometimes you want to go somewhere, so basically, for most people it's the factory. There you just work, work, work, and somehow you're distracted from it all. ....They [pensioners and disabled prisoners who are not required to work in prison] ask me if they can do things, like sweeping up threads in the factory. They want to work. They help in the *otryad*. They help in the *otryad* and they come into the factory. Of course, it's difficult for them without work. They sit in one room, with the television from morning 'til night. It doesn't allow them to relax mentally.

Listening to the views of current and former prisoners seems to indicate that despite the lack of objectively 'private' space in the prison, there is still privacy of the kind described by Bailey (2000), Goffman (1959) and Giddens (1984), constructed and created by women through a variety of tactics. Women construct 'privacy' in the form of intimate, trusting relationships with other inhabitants of communal dormitories, in flagrant contravention of prison rules regarding same-sex relationships. For those seeking a space for retreat into their inner backstage selves, a high level of compliance with the regime leads to rewards and privileges, and prisoners' testimony suggests that this compliance may, for some, be strategically deployed in order to obtain such 'perks'. Others offend simply in order to be punished, where the solitude of the punishment cell is perceived to be preferable to the conditions of everyday life. This could be an extreme of behaviour exhibited by only a few; the implications of these behaviours within heavily regulated penal space, and therefore difficulty of discussing these with prisoners themselves, means that establishing the prevalence of such tactics is difficult. Away from these more overt instances of prisoner agency, though, it is clear that women routinely and intentionally contest and subvert the

disciplinary power operating through constant surveillance in communal space by retreating into their inner backstage selves in crowded and highly public spaces. They perform frontstage docility by keeping to prison rules; sewing, making their beds, simply behaving well and 'keeping their heads down', but there is plenty going on under the radar and perhaps also under the auspices of disciplinary power; women are constructing privacy in the most public of settings.

## **6 Conclusion**

Public and private in the carceral context are far from a mutually exclusive or exhaustive binary. Private space as it is conventionally understood, as a space associated with the domestic and the family, access to which is controlled by those inside of it, does not exist in any straightforward, literal sense in the penal context – at least not in the context in which most Russian prisoners live. There is no unambiguously private space within prison which corresponds to the 'domestic' sphere identified by feminist legal theorists as potentially a locus of oppression and disempowerment. The absence of conventional private space does not, however, preclude the presence of privacy itself, understood in terms of Bailey's (2000) interrelated dimensions including 'intimacy' and 'the self', and Goffman (1959) and Giddens' (1984) notions of frontstage and backstage, and by using these dimensions to try to explore Russian women prisoners' perceptions and experiences of privacy, it is possible to develop an understanding of the ways in which privacy might map onto public space in unexpected and interesting ways. Specifically, what we see here is an example of prisoners on the one hand describing an unrelentingly 'public' space with communal sleeping, washing, eating and working arrangements, in which solitude is almost impossible, but on the other

reporting that they achieve privacy by deploying agency via a variety of tactics, each of which engage with disciplinary power in different ways.

The public/private binary is challenged and destabilised in carceral space, and there is resonance here with earlier arguments for the significance of prisoner agency in relation to Foucault; mitigation of the effects of biopower, and particularly the suggestion that prisoners might 'perform' docility rather than, or as well as, interiorising it. These conclusions, although based on a very specific and unusual penal context, suggest that consideration of the 'private' and privacy is perhaps a useful means of theorising prisoner agency, by opening a space for the discussion of agency in the context of disciplinary power.

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