

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

May 2012 No 201



Cleanliness, Spaces and Masculine Identity in an Adult Male Prison

Jennifer Sloan is based at the University of Sheffield.

This paper is based upon a wider piece of research looking at the adult male prison experience from a gendered perspective, based in a category C prison. The research involved a period of semi-ethnographic research when the researcher was immersed in the prison setting, observing interactions between prisoners and undertaking 31 semi-structured interviews into men's day-to-day experiences of imprisonment. When analysing this data, the theme of cleanliness emerged unexpectedly yet frequently within interviews. Three sub-themes of cleanliness were drawn from the data — cleanliness of the self, cleanliness of space, and the cleanliness of others — and are discussed in terms of their combined implications in another paper.¹ This paper builds upon that piece and focuses directly upon the notion of cleanliness of space, a factor that tended to pervade the majority of prisoners' lives in one way or another, having direct implications for their identities as men. The literature pertaining to cleanliness in prisons is extremely limited, although it is mentioned by John Howard² as far back as the 1700s when the reports of the state of prisons observed regularly referred to cleanliness (and its implications for prisoner health and well-being). Baer³ writes about the relationships between control, space and cleanliness within young offenders' institutions, recognising the importance of the display of items such as cleaning products for individuals' public displays of ownership, wealth and status. Crawley⁴ too, gives some consideration to the issue, albeit from the perspective of prison staff, recognising the 'quasi-domestic sphere'⁵ of the prison and the often domestic nature of prison staff regimes, consisting of functions that can be seen as forms of 'housekeeping'⁶ and maintenance of space. Within other institutions (many of which tend to be single-sexed in nature or organisation), the notions have also been recognised to some extent. Goffman⁷ notes the

implications for individuals' identities of the contaminative effects of living in institutions in close proximity with others, thereby recognising the implications of spaces and the locations of others for individuals' identities; and Hockey⁸ has recognised the clash within the military between domesticity and routines of cleanliness, and the masculine 'action image' of soldiering⁹. Rarely, however, do these accounts give a great deal of attention to the importance of the intersection of cleanliness and gender identity, despite Butler's¹⁰ contention that acts and gestures (such as processes of cleaning):

... produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.¹¹

Arguably, therefore, processes of cleaning spaces can have meanings and implications beyond simply hygiene and spatial management — they can be wider demonstrations of one's gendered identity. Within the prison, mechanisms for demonstrating masculinity are, by the very nature of imprisonment, limited in their scope and social legitimacy. Indeed, through the commission of the crimes that placed individuals within the prison, men are often demonstrating their limited access to mechanisms of socially legitimate masculine performance — as Messerschmidt¹² notes:

For many men, crime may serve as a suitable resource for 'doing gender' — for separating them from all that is feminine. Because types of criminality are possible only when particular social

1. Sloan, J. (Forthcoming) 'You can see your face in my floor': Examining the Function of Cleanliness in an Adult Male Prison' *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*.
2. Howard, J. (1777) *The Present State of the Prisons in England and Wales with Preliminary Observations, and an Account of Some Foreign Prisons*, Warrington: William Eyres.
3. Baer, L. D. (2005) 'Visual Imprints on the Prison Landscape: A Study on the Decorations in Prison Cells' *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, Vol. 96(2), 209-217.
4. Crawley, E. (2004) *Doing Prison Work: The public and private lives of prison officers*, Cullompton: Willan Publishing.
5. *Ibid.* p.130.
6. *Ibid.* p.129.
7. Goffman, E. (1961) *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
8. Hockey, J. (1986) *Squaddies: Portrait of a Subculture*, Exeter: Exeter University Publications.
9. *Ibid.* p.50.
10. Butler, J. (1999) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London and New York: Routledge.
11. *Ibid.* p.173.
12. Messerschmidt, J. W. (1993) *Masculinities and Crime*, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

*conditions present themselves, when other masculine resources are unavailable, particular types of crime can provide an alternative resource for accomplishing gender and, therefore, affirming a particular type of masculinity.*¹³

Within the prison itself, men's masculinities are curtailed in various ways — described by Sykes¹⁴ as the 'pains of imprisonment', including the deprivations of liberty, autonomy, heterosexual relations, security and goods and services. As such, the means by which individual men within the prison are able to demonstrate their masculinities are limited, with those resources available to them taking on even greater levels of importance. This piece directly engages with the importance of cleaning to men in prison, and the ways in which such management of spaces by prisoners allows them to express and perform their masculine identities in quite distinctive ways, a subject that lacks attention in academic discourse yet has wide implications for interpreting and understanding the adult male prison experience. In particular, processes of cleaning and tidying spaces can be seen to allow individuals to differentiate themselves from the prisoner 'other', thereby negotiating the lack of individuality experienced in the prison and mitigating the contaminative effects that prison can have upon an individual's identity:

Participant: I mean I always wear prison clothes, and it's just because I feel, I feel prison's dirty.

Men in prison tended to apply cleaning processes to two distinct sets of location — their personal cells (the prisoners who took part in this research all occupied single cells), and the wider prison environment experienced in their employment in cleaning jobs.

Personal Spaces

Men in prison often impose their personalities and masculinities upon their cells, be that through the display of photographs and pictures indicating their occupation of positions of masculine significance such as husbands, (heterosexual) partners, fathers, sons, (hetero)sexual men, etc.; or through the display of goods¹⁵ which signify wealth or 'consumer masculinity'.¹⁶ In addition to such overt signifiers of individuals' selves, however, it seemed to matter to men in prison that such items of sentimentality and significance were situated within a specific cell environment, which was almost as important to them in terms of ownership and how their spaces were seen by others in the prison:

Researcher: ... have you made your cell your own, or is it...

Participant: Mmmhmm. Yeah, it's mine, definitely.

Researcher: How have you done that?

Participant: Um...just...I just make it look smart, I clean, tidy.

The control of personal space acted as a means through which men could perform elements of their masculine selves, such as their abilities in caring for themselves, surviving the prison environment, and remaining independent from the institution. It was seen that being able to care for oneself and ones personal environment sent very important signals to other prisoners, particularly with regard to notions of respect:

Participant: ... you know, some of them have zero respect for anything [...] Oh, some of them just, you know, if there's a bin there they'll throw stuff on the floor, if they spill something on the table they won't think twice about cleaning it up, or... at least in my cell, I'm responsible, it's mine, you know.

In addition, an individual's personal space could be an indicator used by other aspects of the institution, such as staff, and would have implications for how an individual was seen on a more formal level with reference to their abilities to cope with imprisonment, or their attitudes towards the institution:

Participant: ... there was another guy on my wing, opposite me and he wouldn't tidy his cell it was an absolute mess, he was like a tramp, so every week I'd go in and help clean it up and get it to a higher standard and the officers liked that...

Such indicators all implied levels of personal control, whether that be control over one's performed identity, or control over one's personal life course. Such control plays an immensely important role in the negotiation of the masculine self, as it indicates how independent an individual is — a key masculine trait — and whether they should be seen as vulnerable or weak, a label that can have quite serious implications for how an individual is perceived and treated by others, and for how they see themselves:

13. Ibid. p84.

14. Sykes, G. (1958) *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*, Princeton University Press (2007 edition).

15. See footnote 3.

16. Crewe, B. (2009) *The Prisoner Society: Power, Adaptation, and Social Life in an English Prison*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press (at page 277).

Participant: I suppose the people I tend not to go too near is those who don't wash. Because if they don't respect themselves I just know they can never respect me in any way d'you know what I mean, and I tend to stay away from them a little bit...

A number of individuals involved in the research had already been granted such labels of weakness and vulnerability by virtue of other experiences within the prison, such as getting into debt, or being the victim of inter-prisoner harms, yet many of these men kept their cells impeccably clean and tidy, to such a degree that it seems to relate to something much more significant. Arguably, the process of maintaining one's cell can be used to mitigate other labels, being an indicator of some form of masculine strength and control where other such identity resources are lacking. Cleaning is, therefore, one of the last resorts available to individuals through which to prove some degree of masculine dignity and self-sufficiency. In addition to personal spaces such as cells, the wider prison sphere was also used as a mechanism through which to display masculine signifiers through cleaning processes.

Communal Spaces

The cleanliness of the wider prison sphere was also seen to be important to individuals:

Researcher: Does that make a big difference whether a wing's clean?

Participant: It does yeah, I think it brings a better atmosphere [...] If it's like obviously these are new wings and it's a lot more cleaner [...] It just makes the environment feel a lot more, more open if you know what I mean

As such, cleanliness played a part in shaping individual men's well-being in general through aspects of their location and environment. Interestingly, however, individuals were often linked to such wider cleanliness though their employment as wing cleaners. Such forms of employment had implications for individual masculinities through their abilities to occupy working identities, seen by Tolson¹⁷ to be a sphere of maleness in that:

Cleaning is, therefore, one of the last resorts available to individuals through which to prove some degree of masculine dignity and self-sufficiency.

For every man, the outcome of his socialization is his entry into work. His first day at work signifies his 'initiation' into the secretive, conspiratorial solidarity of working men. Through working, a boy, supposedly, 'becomes a man': he earns money, power, and personal independence from his family.¹⁸

In addition, there were implications for men having jobs in the prison in terms of their abilities to use such employment as forms of 'escape' from the generic day-to-day prison experience. This escape emphasised male prisoners' self sufficiency and a degree of individuality — men were able to escape from the 'normal' prison routine by being able to leave their cells — and sometimes their wings — during working hours in the day in order to do their cleaning jobs. This immediately differentiated them

from the prisoner majority who were not trusted enough to be given such jobs — even more so for those who could go off the wing into more secure areas of the prison such as the offender management unit or the laundry area. Such acquisition of status and individuality allows individuals to distance themselves from the general prisoner identity and its associations with wasted time and the 'dirtiness' of the prisoner label. In addition, having such employment provides individuals with greater income for the

accumulation of products signifying wealth and self sufficiency.¹⁹

Participant: I do it because it gets me out of my cell [...] Keeps me occupied, gets my time going a bit quicker [...] You know and plus you know, it gives me a bit of money at the end of the week, ent it [...] for things I need.

Cleaning and Masculinities

Such processes of cleaning arguably raise issues regarding notions of gender identity (and its seeming subversion), control, differentiation and masculine performance.²⁰ Although activities of domesticity and processes of cleaning are generally seen to be the realm of women, they are regularly used by men in prison as a means through which they can achieve some of the norms of masculinity that are otherwise curtailed by the process of incarceration. Primarily, they provide men with a means through which to control their surroundings — the cleaning

17. Tolson, A. (1977) *The Limits of Masculinity*, London: Tavistock Publications Limited.

18. Ibid. p47.

19. See footnote 3.

20. Discussed further in Sloan (forthcoming) — see footnote 1.

of one's cell allows individuals to regain a degree of autonomy and responsibility over some aspects of their own prison experience. In addition, individuals are able to control their own senses of self through cleaning processes — by making one's cell distinctively clean, a prisoner can differentiate himself from the incarcerated majority who he views not to take such care over their surroundings, thereby positioning his identity away from other 'dirty' prisoners:

Participant: A lot of people are unhygienic and just messy. Coz now, that's what they're trying to basically do, rehabilitate you for when you get back out, so if you're just lounging around, you're not doing anything, you're sitting in your cell all day smoking fags, that's all you're going to do when you get out, you're not motivated.

Not only does this allow individuals to differentiate themselves from the mass prisoner identity, but it also allows prisoners to see themselves as individuals within the prison by virtue of such differentiation. Such reclaiming of individuality goes some way to allowing men to achieve a sense of self which is separate from their imposed prisoner identities. Such appearances are of great importance to individuals in terms of their internalised senses of self, but also with respect to how they are seen (or feel that they will be seen) by others in prison who exert a masculine gaze. Kimmel²¹ discusses the fact that men in general tend to act for the benefit of the masculine gaze of other men who grant them their individual relative masculine status — processes of cleanliness and clean personal spaces create appearances that imply certain individual traits to others which often correspond to valued masculine qualities such as responsibility, self sufficiency, independence and control:

Participant: ...the guy who had the cell before me, he must, he lived like a pig. The place was a pigsty, it really was a pigsty, I'm not joking [...] So, you know, it would, just to clean it that bit better, if you could paint it and then it would be mine, you know? [...] Not to be proud of, but, you know.

As such, the differentiation of the self from the prisoner majority can be seen particularly clearly through the cleaning of, and imposition of identity upon, the cell, making it look 'new'. This is particularly important in that it goes some way towards mitigating the lack of ownership that can be associated with such constantly inhabited cells. Although cleaning processes could be argued to subvert gendered norms of behaviour, such as the division of labour that one typically sees between the sexes, this is, arguably, too simplistic a view. Cleaning allows a degree of normalisation to occur through individuals exerting ownership and dominance of spaces and thus their perceived identities of masculine control and self sufficiency. In this way, when paired with the respect that men align with cleanliness and the weakness ascribed to those whose spaces do not fulfil their expectations, spatial cleanliness is framed much more as a masculine accomplishment, accruing wealth, status and individuality in a positive — and socially legitimate (i.e. not criminal or harmful) manner.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to highlight the importance of processes of cleanliness of space for prisoners and their performances of masculine identity which tends not to be acknowledged in academic or policy debate. Prisoners' manipulation of their cells through cleaning enables them to acquire a degree of differentiation and individuality through the imposition of their selves upon their cells, in addition to allowing them to feel like they are more individuals than part of an ever changing milieu of prisoners inhabiting the same space. Men in prison can also use cleaning processes to prove their masculinities through taking on working identities which, at the same time as providing recourse to signifiers of 'consumer masculinity'²², distinguishes them from other prisoners whose access to different spaces in the prison are restricted. In this way, cleanliness tends to be situated in a subverted gender position within the prison — actually emphasising masculine traits such as control, individuality, dominance and independence. As such, when one participant proudly stated that 'you can see your face in my floor'²³, that reflection was, for all to see, the face of a man.

21. Kimmel, M. S. (1994) 'Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity' in Brod, H. and Kaufman, M. (Eds.), *Theorizing Masculinities*, Thousand Oaks and London: Sage.

22. See footnote 16.

23. See footnote 1.