

‘TACTICS’, AGENCY AND POWER IN WOMEN’S PRISONS

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Abstract

Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, sociological research into women’s experiences of imprisonment has remained relatively sparse and under-developed, focusing primarily on women prisoners’ peer relationships, with relatively little attention given to their interaction with penal regimes. This paper draws on ethnographic data from two women’s prisons in England to explore the agency and creativity represented by the ‘tactics’ brought to bear by prisoners—and sometimes staff—on the everyday challenges of managing prison life. It is suggested that exploring how individuals sought to ‘achieve outcomes’ in their face-to-face encounters and personal relationships offers a way of mapping the feel and flow of power in prisons at the level of lived experience.

Keywords: women’s prisons, ethnography, power, agency, Certeau

Introduction

Recent analyses of imprisonment in a number of jurisdictions have painted an increasingly complex picture of penal power. In contrast with the qualified domination described by Sykes (1958) in mid 20th-century America or Scraton *et al.* (1991) in UK prisons into the 1990s, power in contemporary prisons in the United Kingdom and some north American jurisdictions (Chantraine 2008; Cox 2011) has been argued by a number of researchers to have shifted in recent decades, and can be seen to operate through complex multiple modes. What Chantraine (2008) terms the ‘post-disciplinary’ prison is characterized by technologies of governmentality, actuarialism and responsabilization (Chantraine 2008; Crewe 2011*b*; Drake 2012), which overlie the prison’s fundamentally coercive capacity. Crewe (2007; 2009; 2011*a,b*) in particular has explored the impact of this governmental shift on the experience of imprisonment in the United Kingdom, suggesting the term ‘tightness’ to describe prisoners’ experience of the particular constraints imposed by the ‘soft power’ that characterizes contemporary UK prisons. This article will add to these analyses of the operation of penal power an exploration of how power was negotiated and enacted in face-to-face encounters in two women’s prisons, as prisoners sought to manage their everyday lives in custody.

In considering the nature and distribution of power in prisons, sociologists of imprisonment have tended to focus on ideas of domination and resistance. In studies of women's imprisonment in particular, prisoners' capacity to act has tended to be treated primarily as resistance (*inter alia*, Bosworth 1999; Ferraro and Moe 2003). In contrast, this article will explore examples of agency as problem solving. Following Goffman's (1971) suggestion that the purpose of ethnography is to 'derive the proper- ties of individuals from observable situated activity', it is suggested that the nature of both the *problems* prisoners—and sometimes staff—encountered in their daily lives and the *solutions* they found to them can offer insights into the workings of power in prisons at the micro-level, as articulated in face-to-face encounters described by research participants.

'Tactics' and 'strategies'

Power and agency are connected in Giddens' (1984) simple proposition that power is 'the ability to achieve desired and intended outcomes'. Taking this as its starting point, the analysis draws on Certeau's (1984) conception of 'tactics' and 'strategies' to explore the practices and 'operations' (*ibid.*) through which individuals were able to manage their social environments.

Certeau is interested in the ways in which 'everyday life invents itself by *poaching* in countless ways on the property of others' (1984: xii). His argument is in part a response to Foucault's (1977) *Discipline and Punish*, insisting that there is 'creativity, invention, generativity' in the ways in which individuals with little power live within the apparently disciplining structures that Foucault describes. Certeau suggests that, while the dominant social order can never be fully escaped by those it subordinates, it can nevertheless be evaded. His concern is to describe how 'individuals already caught within the disciplinary net' are able to exist within the 'grid' of disciplining structures without becoming reduced to it. The 'procedures and ruses' by which this is achieved together comprise a counterposing network of 'antidiscipline'. Certeau characterizes these 'ruses' as 'tactics'. In contrast to strategies, which Certeau describes as 'having place' in which the acquired advantages of the powerful are entrenched and from which forms of institutional power are deployed with relative immunity from changing circumstances, a tactic 'depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing"'. Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into "opportunities"'. In the broad context of a mass consumer society, Certeau's everyday examples of this agency-within-constraint include the ways in which consumers apparently marginalized from production create and innovate with the cultural products available to them, so that consumption—far from being passive—itself *becomes production*. In the sociology of imprisonment, similar processes of creative 'making do' (Certeau 1984: 29) are reflected in the various typologies that researchers have employed to describe prisoners' approaches to 'doing time' (*inter alia* Sykes 1958; Irwin and Cressey 1962; Giallombardo 1966; Heffernan 1972; Crewe 2009). These analyses describe in relatively broad terms prisoners' general approaches to

managing a sentence. Although similarly concerned with the problem of finding an agentic path within relations of constraint, Certeau, in contrast, borrows from the language of rhetoric to enumerate individual ‘tropes of antidiscipline’ (1984: x). This article will suggest that these ideas lend themselves to a more micro-level examination of how specific emergent tactical ‘operations’ were employed by prisoners and prison officers in order to *get things done*. It will further argue that this can shed light on how they experienced and negotiated power relations in their face-to-face encounters, and what the different kinds of resources on which they drew can tell us about the nature of the power involved.

The Study

This article draws on data from a wider, mixed-methods study of two women’s prisons in England: HMP New Hall (NH), a closed prison, and HMP Askham Grange (AG), an open prison. HMP New Hall functioned as a local¹ and a training² prison and was a centre for life-sentenced prisoners in the first stage of their sentence. The prison had a detoxification wing and first-night centre, a semi-open wing,³ a Mother and Baby Unit, which was not in use at the time of the research, and a Young Offender wing, holding 18- 21-year olds. The accommodation comprised a mixture of dormitories, shared and single cells and rooms.⁴ During the fieldwork period, the prison held approximately 400 remand and sentenced, short- and long-term and life-sentenced prisoners. A separate unit, run by the Youth Justice Board, held juvenile prisoners (15- 17-year olds) and was not included in the study.

HMP Askham Grange ran a three-stage resettlement regime for Young Offenders⁵ and adults over the age of 21 where sentenced prisoners progressed towards volunteering, studying or paid work in the local community. The site was not secure, with the buildings’ external doors locked only at night. The only locked internal doors were those to staff offices. Most prisoners shared double rooms or dormitories, with those in paid employment housed wherever possible in single rooms in a separate annexe. At the time of the research, the prison held about 100 prisoners.

¹ Local prisons hold unsentenced (remand) prisoners awaiting trial and newly sentenced prisoners who have not yet been given a security classification.

² Training prisons hold sentenced prisoners classified as ‘long-term’. The term does not imply any special provision of educational or vocational opportunities.

³ Like the other wings at the prison, the semi-open wing had a locked external gate, but prisoners could move freely around the wing. Prisoners held here were usually on the ‘Enhanced’ level of the Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) scheme.

⁴ It should be noted that in England and Wales, shared cells were usually designed for one person. I use the terms ‘cells’ and ‘rooms’ here to denote accommodation in which prisoners are either locked in or not locked in respectively. Prison staff, however, and indeed some prisoners, generally used the term ‘room’ for all accommodation.

⁵ It was relatively rare for Young Offenders to be sent to Askham Grange. During the research period, there was just one prisoner aged under 21 at the prison.

Although the regime was primarily designed for prisoners nearing the end of long sentences, a substantial (but varying) proportion of the population was made up of prisoners serving short-term sentences.

Fieldwork was conducted at the two prisons in succession over an eight-month period during 2007–08. The design of the study was ethnographically orientated but made use of a mixture of methods, including observations, semi-structured qualitative interviews and a structured survey. This analysis presented here is based on observations and qualitative interviews.

Observations were made during regular (3–7 days per week) visits to the prison, including at evenings and weekends. I had full unaccompanied access at both prisons, carrying keys at New Hall to allow this. Few parts of the prisons were off-limits (with the exception of Security), and care was taken to spend time throughout the prisons. Inevitably, however, some spaces (e.g. prison Receptions, workshops, wing offices, classrooms and hairdressing salons) facilitated observation more readily, or more fruitfully, so observations were conducted somewhat unevenly across the establishments. Detailed fieldnotes were kept throughout.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 59 prisoners (30 at New Hall and 29 at Askham Grange) and 32 uniformed officers of all grades (17 at New Hall and 15 at Askham Grange). Participants were identified through informal initial contact during observation periods, or ‘snowballed’ through existing contacts. In recruiting participants, efforts were made to include a range of staff and prisoner perspectives. These included prioritizing the inclusion of participants with varying experiences of the criminal justice system and as diverse a range of socio-economic and demographic characteristics as possible. Interviews covered the same core questions, but employed a ‘reflexive interviewing’ technique (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 152), in which the content of discussions was largely shaped by interviewees’ responses. The result of this was that interviews often covered very different subject matter, from prisoners’ relationships, to the drugs economy of the prison, to the subjective meanings of punishment and power in prisons. Interviews were conducted in private, recorded and fully transcribed and lasted between 45 minutes and three and-a-half hours. Drawing on grounded theory, the transcripts were subjected to a process of ‘open’ and ‘axial’ coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998) to identify concepts and relationships in the data.

Managing Constraint: Tactics, Power and Environmental Resources

It is evident that, in managing their relationships and everyday lives, prisoners operate under a set of particular constraints arising from the nature of the environment of the prison, and their position within it. For the purposes of the current analysis, this discussion will explore a number of specific constraints: surveillance (or visibility), discipline, functional dependency and

hierarchy. It was evident from prisoners' accounts of their everyday lives in prison that these conditions gave rise to, and made difficult to solve, a range of problems. To illustrate the ideas and principles under discussion, these constraints will be explored here as pairs of conditions that intersected to generate problems to which prisoners were motivated to find solutions: visibility and discipline; dependency and hierarchy.

Visibility and discipline

The very public nature of prison living meant that prisoners' everyday lives and personal relationships—friendships, romances, enmities—were conducted under the gaze of others, both inmates and staff. For example, prisoners often remarked that *staff* had commented on the formation or dissolution of a romantic involvement with another inmate, demonstrating that even very private encounters and relations were very quickly known to all. As would be expected, the confined conditions and 'total' institutional setting made the prisons *socially intensive* environments (see, e.g., Greer 2002; Crawley 2004a). This introduced additional complexity into relationships with staff and prisoners and increased the degree of care with which they needed to be managed, because any negativity in relationships generally had to be lived with. However, the disciplinary environment meant that it could be difficult for prisoners to manage relationships and encounters as they wished. For example, prisoners at both research sites commented that any disagreement between prisoners was likely to be regarded by staff as bullying, the response to which was sufficiently severe to have a tangible impact on prisoners' material comfort.

When you're put on Basic or on bully watch it's for a whole month. A whole month with no Association, no work, you're in your cell twenty-four hours. No nothing, you have to eat in your room. The only contact you might get with any other human being is the staff.

Riahna, prisoner, NH

One prisoner living in the relatively independent conditions of the annexe at Askham Grange suggested that it was difficult even to negotiate around the mundane domestic disagreements that arose from communal living without attracting negative staff intervention. In this context, then, the visibility of prisoners' relationships and interactions mattered for two reasons. First, because even transactions that would normatively be considered private—from erotic encounters through private conversations to stand-up rows—were likely to be observed, carrying the potential for consequences that might disrupt the all-important equilibrium of prisoners' social relationships. Second, because in managing relationships in ways that might be negatively construed by staff, prisoners risked incurring disciplinary sanctions. For prisoners serving indeterminate and parole sentences, this kind of regime pressure was particularly significant because the les on prisoners' conduct to which officers contributed day to day were considered by parole boards and were likely to impact on their prospects for release.

Prisoners described a number of practices and 'operations'—traceable back to this kind of

pressure—that sought a particular outcome while evading the direct attention of others. These operations were similar to the ‘mind games’ that McDermott and King (1988) suggest characterize ‘life on the landings’. For example, Joanne, a prisoner at New Hall, suggested that she been moved from the prison’s privileged semi-open wing when other prisoners who wanted to get her transferred to another part of the prison had falsely reported to staff that she had broken wing regulations. It is evident, then, that even though prisoners are ostensibly unable to choose who they live with (effectively one of Sykes’ (1958) ‘pains of imprisonment’), they *may* be able to exert some limited influence over their immediate circumstances; understanding how the disciplinary environment functions confers the capacity for agency even in the absence of direct power. Tactics of this kind could be used in order to achieve a practical goal, as in this instance, or for what we might think of as ‘expressive’ reasons: to make the object of dislike or envy uncomfortable, or to deprive her of a begrudged privilege. They were an effective way of taking action against another inmate because they operated anonymously through confidential reporting systems, and the ‘reprisal’ was delivered by someone else in the form of an official, not an individual, act. In this way, prisoners could ward off both accusations of bullying from staff and possible reprisals from the target of the action or her friends. As one lifer at Askham Grange commented,

Say sometimes if things aren’t going so well in their sentence – some people are jealous when people are going through their parole ready for getting it – and they’ll just put statements in. You get quite [a lot of] nastiness like that but all the way through prison you’ll see it, and it’s a confidential thing so you never know really who’s done it.

Cara, prisoner, AG

This was also described by other prisoners and acknowledged by prison staff:

They have to investigate quite a lot of things that are said. Or inmates can put in statements on inmates. I don’t get on with a few of the girls and if they want to they can make a statement amongst themselves, put it in a private box, which gets read and they have to investigate it. ... I’ve seen a girl go on a visit down at [another prison] and her children came to visit her. Now one of her enemies were in that visit hall and her little girl had a few bruises on her legs. Kids get bruises. She went back to the unit and said she thought that child had been beaten up. And they had to investigate it. Now how bad is that?

Louise, prisoner, AG

...anybody can put a security report in about anybody; and it has to be investigated. ...

[T]hey do random room spins⁶ anyway, come and search your room and that, and you have to sign a piece of paper. Well, on this occasion they came and ... on the piece of paper I noticed a bit that was highlighted and it said “security information”. So when I was signing it I said to the officer, I said, “Why does it say that on it?” and it’s like they were trying to sort of ... skip past it and say, “Oh no, no, no it’s all right – just sign it”. ... So I went along to the S.O.⁷ because I really was upset about it; because like I said, I’m a parolee – I don’t know if something that is going to go against my parole or whatever ... But he said to me, he said, “You know, if someone’s got a grudge against you, or somebody had been gossiping or anything, it could be anything, literally anything, that someone has put that in for”.

Chris, prisoner, AG

Systems that ensured prisoners’ anonymity were, in effect, points of invisibility—known spaces created and protected by the regime in which prisoners could operate without the nature of their action ever being fully public. They offered prisoners opportunities to circumvent constraint and take action to manage relationships. These tactics both evade and harness the disciplinary function of the prison, making use of privileged invisibility to make another prisoner *hypervisible* to the regime, and perhaps—as in Louise’s example—to other state authorities. Crucially for the purposes of this discussion, the action taken is *indirect*. The resources on which it draws belong not to the individual—one woman’s capacity to coerce or persuade another—but to the *institution*. This subversion of a system to fulfil a private goal is characteristic of the operations that Certeau terms tactics, which he likens to *poaching*. As he expresses it, they operate in gaps in ‘the grid of “discipline”’ (Certeau 1984: xiv). Interestingly, it is worth noting that the kind of ‘gap’ highlighted here—which partly arises from the regime’s need for information from prisoners to maintain order (as well as to ensure their well-being)—is one of Sykes’ (1958) ‘defects of total power’. This ties in closely with Certeau’s (1984: xx) suggestion that tactics are at once in tension with, inextricable from, and indeed sustained by, institutional power.

Other such ‘gaps’ in the disciplinary grid that could be exploited by prisoners similarly arose from compromises in the prison’s coercive capacity. Spaces with a non-disciplinary function, such as the prison chapel, can be viewed in this light. In addition to attending services and receiving counselling from members of the chaplaincy team, prisoners at New Hall were able to request to visit the chapel to light candles or sit quietly. The commitment of the chaplaincy to

⁶ Cell searches.

⁷ Senior Officer. A middle-ranking uniformed officer with some responsibility for management and supervision. Because Askham Grange had a very small staff, S.O.s tended to hold more responsibility than in larger establishments.

this as an accessible ‘therapeutic space’⁸ meant that it operated with reduced security measures in place. As a consequence, prisoners were able to use the chapel both as a meeting place for friends or girlfriends living on other wings and to facilitate the trade in drugs and other contraband. The chaplaincy was aware of both uses of the space. The former was comfortably tolerated by the chaplaincy as being in keeping with its pastoral function, while negotiations were underway with prison managers as to how the latter could be addressed without undermining the chaplaincy’s work.

The tensions between visibility and invisibility that brought both constraint and possibility were clearly in play in other tactical solutions to problems that arose at the intersection of visibility and discipline. Naomi was a lifer at New Hall who had become romantically involved with Josie, who was serving a fixed-term sentence and had a history

of involvement in *sub rosa* activities in prison. Naomi described an incident in which Josie needed to resolve tensions between her relationship with Naomi, her friendships with other prisoners on the wing and the expectations and impressions of prison officers:

Naomi: She was always ... well-known for being in trouble and she’s really, really tried since – because when we got together, ... [I said] to her that there was a lot I couldn’t put up with because of my sentence – drugs, and if she’s in trouble and all that – I couldn’t be seen to be with her because you’re guilty by association in prison.

AR: you mean it could actually make a difference to how your sentence pans out for you? *Naomi:* Yes, and she’s really tried. She got herself Enhanced. She’s never been Enhanced the whole time she’s been in jail and I noticed people started trying to get her to do stuff to get in trouble – little comments like, ‘Oh you’re getting really boring since you’ve been with her’. ... She’s spent a lot of time in jail and she is really popular – she doesn’t want to lose that, I don’t think, so she finds it hard to say ‘No’ to people. And I know that people tried to give her hooch⁹ to hide at one point... She’d spoken to me about it and I told her not to do it ... She didn’t want to do it because she didn’t want to get in trouble, but she didn’t want to be seen to be letting these so-called friends down downstairs. So she’s taken it, told the officer to catch her, so she’s kind of got in trouble but not got in trouble because she’s covered up. But then she’s done the ultimate sin to the friends really by grassing on them but they don’t know about it! It’s like, rather than do a simple thing like say ‘No’ in jail, people will do all these things, [find] devious ways around it.

Naomi, prisoner, NH

⁸ This was the term used by the head of the prison’s chaplaincy team.

⁹ Prison-brewed alcohol.

As Naomi described it, Josie's problem was one of multi-directional impression management. Motivated by her desire to sustain her romantic relationship, she needed to satisfy both her friends' demand for a demonstration of continuing loyalty and the regime's demand for compliance, via the vicariously disciplining conditions of Naomi's sentence. To borrow Goffman's (1961) dramaturgical metaphor, she in effect needed to execute multiple simultaneous performances 'in the round' and on a single stage. The solution she found enabled her to do just that. Josie was an example of what Owen (1998) terms a 'prison smart' woman. She drew on a nuanced understanding of staff-prisoner relationships, prison procedure and the ways in which, in the 'total' and very public environment of the prison wing, her actions would be perceived by multiple groups. Although Josie's problem was structured by the 'panoptic' quality of the open, galleried wing on which she lived, she was able to judge and make use of the limitations of what prisoners would know of her encounters with staff to mobilize relationship resources and elicit the collusion of a trusted officer to help her stage-manage her solution. Again, the tactic is both in tension with, and sustained by, the institution. The complex moves through which Josie pursued her intended outcome demonstrate—as Allen's (2003) work also indicates—that power in prisons should not simply be understood as a zero-sum game between staff and prisoners. Josie's series of tactical moves is illustrative both of the power dynamics and normative solidarity among groups of prisoners, and of the complex ways in which the regime was able to discipline its inmates by bringing aspects of their interests into alignment.

Dependency and hierarchy

The second set of constraints that generated tactical evasions appeared at the intersection of *dependency* and *hierarchy*. It is, of course, stating the obvious to describe prisoners as both dependent on others to meet basic needs and as subordinates in an asymmetric power relationship. As the examples discussed above perhaps illustrate, many prisoners—especially those serving long or repeat sentences—described developing high levels of environmental efficacy. As Gemma, a prisoner at New Hall who estimated that she had spent half her adult life in prison on multiple short sentences, commented:

To be honest, there's not a lot I can't do myself when I'm in prison, which is why I don't go near [officers]. If I've got a problem I just speak to my mum and she'll get in touch with my solicitor ... because that way I know that it's getting done properly, without having to waste your breath for days and days on end for nothing.

Gemma, prisoner, NH

In terms of Giddens' (1984) definition of power as the 'ability to achieve desired and intended outcomes', this capacity is not insignificant. Through direct means and tactical evasions,

prisoners *were* able to exercise a degree of power. Nevertheless, prisoners remained dependent on staff to meet a very broad range of very basic needs and functions: from bringing a new toilet roll, through being let in out of the rain, to arranging medical appointments. As previous examples have also implied, staff had discretion to impose various forms of disciplinary sanction, both formally and informally. Where prisoners in closed prisons secured support from staff in smooth and respectful transactions, the extent of their dependency and the very steep power asymmetry were to a degree obscured. However, where they encountered resistance to the granting of requests—for whatever reason—the limitations to their ability to act on their own behalf were very clear.

Despite the sense of independence that Gemma describes, everyday tasks were often complicated by prisoners' functional dependency and the unresponsiveness of institutional practices and systems to individual needs. Kerry, a prisoner at New Hall, provides an example. She was called for a hospital appointment outside the prison on the morning when the women on her wing had to submit their weekly applications for telephone (PIN) credit. For security reasons, prisoners were given as little notice as possible that they would be leaving the prison, meaning that Kerry was unable to plan ahead and submit her application early. Instead, she had to try to ensure that it was done once she returned to prison, or spend the week without access to the telephone. She described the refusal of several officers to take her application for her, and being repeatedly told that it should have been done before she left for the hospital. After asking a number of officers, she identified one who was willing to process the application, telling her—to her surprise—that the final deadline had in fact not yet passed. Here, then, it is evident that the nature of the environment presented obstacles both to self-sufficiency and to securing staff assistance. Furthermore, as Carlen (1983: 109–10) has pointed out, the gatekeeping nature of the prison officer's role leaves prisoners with a lack of 'lateral channels' that they can access if assistance is withheld.

In order to overcome this kind of obstacle, prisoners described a range of indirect, tactical approaches to securing the assistance of more powerful others in order to maximize the chance of securing the desired outcome. Some of these were deployed *before* an approach was made. For example, prisoners described 'sussing out' officers or more-established inmates about the responsiveness of different members of staff. Some tested officers' reliability with a trivial request before asking for something important. Once a reliable officer was found, some prisoners avoided asking other staff altogether. Multiple researchers have observed that the close and prolonged proximity of prisoners and uniformed officers means that it is almost inevitable that emotion and personal dis/liking will enter into staff-prisoner relationships (*inter alia* McDermott and King 1988; Liebling *et al.* 2010; Crawley 2004*b*), and many prisoners consciously sought to maintain goodwill in their relationships with staff for that reason. More than one commented that

they could not afford to argue with staff because they might need their help the next day. A number described making a point of laughing at officers' jokes and engaging in 'banter' even when they would have preferred not to as a kind of insurance for future occasions when they might need help.¹⁰ Others sought to wear down officers' resistance to acting on a request, or ensure it was not forgotten, by means of persistent approaches—a tactic variously termed 'being a pain' (Margaret, New Hall) and 'mithering' (Pam, Askham Grange). Prisoners consistently suggested that the way in which they dealt with officers could make a difference to the outcome of a request. It was common for prisoners to describe learning not only to gauge an officer's mood before making an approach, but also developing different styles of interaction for individual officers. In these approaches, prisoners were, in effect, identifying and disentangling the affective and functional elements of the staff-prisoner relation and mobilizing the one to apply pressure to the other. It is worth noting that some of these approaches fed into staff discourses that constructed prisoners as inherently manipulative. This is an example of the prison's 'interpretive scheme' (Goffman 1961) in operation. This demonstrates further the degree to which staff-prisoner interactions were enmeshed in micro-level institutional power politics.

In line with Mathiesen's (1965) characterization of the nature of prison officers' authority as 'patriarchal', most of the operations described above simply acted on the *willingness* of officers to provide support: honing the most effective ways to approach staff and optimizing the conditions under which requests were made. As Kerry described, it was common for prisoners to make the same request of multiple officers, either because an initial approach was unsuccessful, or pre-emptively, to increase the chances of a positive response. However, this approach was subject to particular censure by officers, either because it seemed to waste their time or because it was seen as an affront to their status and professionalism. One basic grade officer at New Hall, e.g., described feeling 'made a fool of' when a prisoner 'went over her head' by asking a colleague. As in response to other forms of environmental obstacle, prisoners developed evasive tactics in order to avoid being penalized for duplicating requests to officers:

AR: And have you regularly had to ask around to get things done?

Kerry: Oh yes, yes you do. AR: Do you expect that as part of the normal way of asking?

Kerry: Well now, yes. ... Well, different people, but then they get angry because you've

¹⁰ Although researchers have given some attention to the role of humour in interactions between prisoners and prison officers (Crawley 2004b; Liebling *et al.* 2010; Nielsen 2011), the significance of power in apparently humorous exchanges has been neglected. In the present study, participants agreed that humour could function to smooth encounters and lighten the mood, but equally highlighted that officers' use of humour was often intrusive or painful and that prisoners could exert little control over such encounters. A small number of prison officers were also sensitive to the ways in which the power they held could make attempts at humour with prisoners inappropriate.

already asked somebody else.

AR: Okay, so how do you deal with that, then? How do you manage that situation?

Kerry: Well if you're clever you can work out that they're going home so you'll ask the next shift.... I'll ask the question in the morning and that member of staff will say 'No' or I won't get an answer, or whatever. And if that member of staff's not there after dinner I'll ask somebody else.

AR: But if the same member of staff was there after dinner? Kerry: I wouldn't ask.

Kerry, prisoner, NH

Again, this tactic operated successfully where the changeover in staff shift gave rise to a discontinuity in officers' surveillance of prisoners, a further point of invisibility that prisoners were able to exploit.

Obstructions from more powerful others could be difficult to circumvent, however, and where prisoners encountered outright *refusal* from those in authority, they lacked any form of status that would enable them to call them to account (see also Carlen 1983). Here, Hewitt's (2007: 169) symbolic interactionist-influenced definition of power as 'the capacity of one person to achieve purposes without the consent of or against the resistance of others' is pertinent. Lisa, a young lifer at New Hall who lived on a wing where staff-prisoner relationships were often poor, described an incident that demonstrates a prisoner tactic for overturning this kind of blockage in a face-to-face encounter with officers:

...[Officers] make you feel bad for asking them ... Like, there was an incident went on not long ago – a good one to describe it – where me and my mate come back on the wing ... from the gym and every- body else is locked in for that period anyway, so you're waiting, like: 'Can I get into my room please?'; 'Can I get into my room?'. So my mate's come back from the gym and all the doors were locked and that. The officers were all sat down at the bottom on the sofa – there was about three of them all sat down there drinking tea, chatting. She was like, 'Please can I get in my room, Miss?'. [*Adopts hard, aggressive tone*] 'In a minute. You can wait, can't you?' (this is what they're like). So she's waiting. 'Miss, please can you let me in? It's been ten minutes'. 'Can you see we're talking? You can wait'. So she's stood up waiting and they're all sat down drinking tea, just laughing, pissing about, doing nothing. In the end, my mate went to the S.O., knocked on the S.O.'s window to tell her. Then the officers got up straight away because they saw her do that and opened her door. But then they had a go at her and said, 'Why did you knock on the window? We said we were coming in a minute'.

Lisa, prisoner, NH

Here, it is apparent that Lisa and her friend had no direct way of making the officers act to give them the basic assistance they needed, despite it clearly being their job to do so. In terms of Hewitt's (2007) definition, they were without direct power. The officers' refusal to open their doors represented an impasse. Not only does the hierarchical officer-prisoner relationship mean that prisoners are unable to insist on particular forms of treatment, normal social standards of politeness or service do not necessarily apply, so that complaints can be ignored or overridden. In effect, the prisoners' 'spoiled' identities (Goffman 1963) mean that they are not 'legitimate persons' to whom the officers are accountable. An alternative course in the case Lisa describes would have been to wait for the officers, and then make an official complaint through the formal channels provided. However, this could at best only have offered retrospective recognition of the officers' obstructive behaviour. In addition, levels of confidence in complaints systems on this wing were not high. In contrast, the solution that Lisa's friend found offered an *immediate resolution* to the problem, and did so with relatively little reliance on others, although at the potential cost of alienating the officers concerned, jeopardizing future co-operation and perhaps attracting informal sanctions. In interactionist terms, drawing a more senior officer into the encounter disrupted the power relationships between the basic grade officers and the prisoners by *redefining* the officers as subordinates in an occupational hierarchy, rather than as straightforwardly *superordinate* to the prisoners.

As in previous examples, this tactical solution drew on resources latent in the environment to compensate for prisoners' lack of personal power. The rigid staff hierarchy, and the officers' literally crucial position between managers and prisoners, became an effective resource to prisoners who understood the workings of the environment well enough to make use of it. To return to Certeau's ideas of tactics as the 'tropes of antidiscipline', this tactical manoeuvre is an example of what he terms *la perruque*, that is, using a system's power against itself.

Prisoners described other tactical 'repositionings' to circumvent obstruction in encounters with prison staff that operated in the same way. When prisoners felt that they had reached an impasse in a request or complaint, they would often 'get their solicitor involved'. Although this was the most common example, other advocates called on in this way ranged from civilian workers to Members of Parliament. As Carlen (1983) implies, and as prisoners frequently commented, in any dispute between an officer and a prisoner, the officer was *always* right. Bringing in an influence from outside the situation who *was* a 'legitimate person' disrupted the 'sealed system' of prison power relationships and allowed prisoners to hold staff to account. It is important to an understanding of the different kinds of power in operation inside prisons to note that the ability to access such relatively powerful others from outside the prison was not shared equally among prisoners, but was a form of *contextual resource* (Layder 1997), differentially distributed along socio-economic lines, and among 'prison-' and 'organisationally smart' women (Owen 1998),

who brought their general or prison-specific institutional understanding to bear on their face-to-face encounters in prison.

Staff Tactics: 'Lending' and 'Poaching'

Prison officers' accounts of their working lives, and prisoners' observations of the ways in which they were managed by staff, suggested that they too made use of tactic-like operations. An examination of the similarities and differences between the tactics employed respectively by staff and prisoners is useful to developing an understanding of the nature and experience of transactions of power at the micro-level in prisons.

Jo Moore, an officer working in the Reception at New Hall—one of the prison's busiest and most demanding postings—described her approach to managing difficult encounters with new arrivals:

I try to have a sense of humour with them, but some are genuinely horrible, gobby and cocky, and I haven't got time for those. I just leave them, because I always look and think, 'They'll want me before I want them' That's how I deal with it. If they've got a bit of tone on them, I'm hardly going to have a big conversation with them ... It's not necessarily a power thing – I just think, at the end of the day they will want something from me. I'll just remind them and say, 'Remember what you were like when you came in Reception?' ... and they'll turn it round: 'Oh Miss, I was upset ...'. 'There was no need,' and I'll say, 'If you'd come in without your cocky attitude, ... then you'd have got a lot more. So they might get what they're entitled to; sometimes, like, we might chuck them an extra sandwich, we might chuck them extra underwear – little things like that. It might not seem much, but at least they feel, 'Oh at least they're bothering about me'. Whereas before, you know, if they come and say, 'Miss, can I have some clothes?' you might say 'No'.

Jo Moore, Officer, NH

Jo preferred to avoid engaging with aggressive prisoners, withholding personal interest and reassurance, and any provision above minimal entitlements from those who did not comply with her (implicit) behavioural standard.¹¹ She also describes exercising what Liebling *et al.* 2010 term 'positive discretion' to give additional support and care to more compliant prisoners. Mathiesen (1965: 83) suggests this ability to 'distribute benefits and burdens' is a key form of staff power. It is also at the heart of the distinction between Officer Moore's tactic and those in

¹¹ Tait's (2008) study of one men's and one women's prison in England also links access to care with conformity. See also Carlen (1983) and Rowe (2009).

which prisoners take action by *poaching* (Certeau 1984: xii) on resources latent in the environment. This notion of poaching is key to conceptualizing the nature of the power at stake in the encounter. The resources mobilized by the officer in order to achieve her intended outcome—the prisoner’s compliance—were the prisoner’s need and resourcelessness, and—crucially—her own *authority*. John Allen (2003) suggests that authority should be understood as power that is *lent*, rather than taken without consent. This definition again usefully underscores the distinction between this staff tactic and the ‘poached’ power and resources in play in prisoners’ ‘operations’ and ‘ruses’ (Certeau 1984: 29). Officer Moore is *administering* the penal power of the state, and as a result, her action takes on some strategic characteristics: although her position is a contingent one, behind her desk in Reception, she has something like a *place* of her own, and legitimate access to resources that can be deployed in controlled ways to achieve relatively predictable outcomes. We can contrast the confidence of the officer’s *They’ll want me before I want them* with the precarious, improvised and risky solutions constructed by the prisoner-tacticians already discussed.

The officer’s ‘synaptic’ (Willett 1983: 1) organizational position between the regime and prisoners, and the ‘hybrid’ nature of the power that is apparent in the operation described here (at once strategic and tactical), are perhaps useful in understanding other examples of prison officer tactics. Officers appeared to deploy tactic-like manoeuvres in a range of situations in order to manage and provide for prisoners, to manage relationships within the staff group and to ‘make’ an authoritative role.

Judith Lewis, a basic grade prison officer at New Hall, described an attempt to curb a bid for dominance by a group of prisoners ‘shipped in’ from another prison to the wing on which she worked:

... the new inmates tried to stop me sitting [on the sofas] at the weekend. ... They had been in just a week so they said [to each other], ‘I think she’s coming to sit here so move so she can’t sit down’. ... So I went, ‘It’s okay – I can get myself a chair’ and I plonked myself in the middle of them. Within ten minutes, they had all disappeared and all the inmates that usually sit down there – because they’d tried to sort of take over – all came back.

Judith Lewis, officer, NH

This tactic bears comparison with those of prisoners as an opportunistic incursion into space that had been claimed by others, securing a provisional victory. The incident can fruitfully be understood as a spatialized competition for dominance, first between the established and the newly arrived prisoners, and then between the officer and the new arrivals. The primary resource

mobilized is the symbolic significance of the officer's role, underpinned by her ability to predict the reaction that her intrusion would elicit, which in turn arose from the prisoners' knowledge of the institutional powers at the officer's disposal. It is a complex example of what symbolic interactionism refers to as 'role taking' (cf. Hewitt 2007). Like the situation Officer Moore describes, this 'operation' appears to deploy systemic power (the borrowed authority of the officer role) through tactic-like means.

The officer's intervention to disperse the women from the sofas represents a proactive move to curtail behaviour that fell well short of any disciplinary infraction and contrasts with Jo Moore's more indirect approach to managing difficult behaviour, above. While this officer's course of action was not necessarily typical, it nevertheless illustrates something more generally of the informal mechanisms through which the authority of prison officers is 'made' and performed (see also Crawley 2004a on the performativity of prison officer work) and order on prison wings achieved. In dispersing the prisoners and intervening in their attempt to colonize an area of the wing, Officer Lewis demonstrates to the new arrivals that she is watching and signals to the prisoners that she, and not they, will be dominant on the wing. The move implies a high degree of attentiveness to prisoners' social relationships and an investment by the officer in the social equilibrium of the wing. This recalls Sykes' (1958) emphasis on the significance of informal relations among prisoners to the order and smooth-running of prisons.

Tactics of this kind, intended both to 'make' and assert authority, were not uncommon in accounts of prison officers' management of prisoners. These were generally associated with officers whose attitudes to prisoners were authoritarian or punitive. Prisoners at both Askham Grange and New Hall commented on the selective enforcement of rules by prison staff. Perhaps counter-intuitively, those who did so tended to suggest that it was those whose behaviour was most difficult that seemed to be granted most latitude, or to meet with the promptest response from staff. This resonates with research that suggests that more compliant prison populations, such as women and 'vulnerable prisoners' (*inter alia*, Carlen 1983; Dobash *et al.* 1986; Howe 1994; Drake 2007) tend to be subject to closer discipline than others. Chris described the selective enforcement of rules by relatively authoritarian officers at Askham Grange:

...So apparently, [for health and safety reasons] I've heard that you're not allowed to go to the dining hall to eat in open-toe shoes. Now most of the officers will just let you go because nothing's going to happen, do you know what I mean? We're all grown women ... But I'd say there's a couple of officers in particular that will look and make a point of looking at your feet and single certain people out and make them go and put on a pair of trainers or, you know, something like that. ... But then they'd only do it with particular people as well, do you know what I mean? There's people who they, for whatever reason, I don't know, but they decide maybe that person's too much for them and they can't tell

them to go and do that Or they know they're not intimidating enough to that person, so they will leave them to it, so whereas one person has gone to go and change their shoes there will be another six people sat down with open toe shoes on.

Chris, prisoner, AG

Chris describes a functionally unnecessary show of authority by staff members (assuming that a measure to avoid any serious risk would be more rigorously upheld), deployed where it is least needed, to regulate already relatively compliant individuals. This suggests that performance is important here. The officer who relies on 'coercive power' or the formal ('legitimate') powers conferred by their role (see Hepburn 1985) takes opportunities to *make* a persona that supports this. Opportunistic and made 'on the wing', such moves are clearly tactical. The important distinction here, perhaps, is that a tactic is not just *supported* by institutional power but, as in the other examples of prison officer tactics, employed in order to *sustain* it. Enforcing the rule that open-toed shoes should not be worn in the dining room represents a display of authority that builds and maintains a particular kind of working persona. For that display to be effective, however, it must not be contested. Avoiding more assertive prisoners, as Chris described, minimizes the risk of a challenge that would disrupt the performance of authority [which as Allen (2003) notes, relies on recognition]. Theoretically, officers in this situation *could* have chosen to enforce the rule consistently and impose the sanctions at their disposal in order to do so. That they did not perhaps reflects a consciousness of the inefficiency of coercive strategies in managing prisons, on which much prison research has commented (*inter alia* Liebling *et al.* 2010). Many prison officers recognize the resentment bred by heavy-handed management of prisoners and it is likely that an officer who wanted to enforce a very minor rule to the letter would not just engender the resentment of prisoners, but also encounter resistance from colleagues with different professional orientations.

As suggested above, tactics were used to achieve more than authority. One New Hall officer, e.g., who saw himself as 'a kind of social worker',¹² tactically resolved his discomfort at working with more punitively minded colleagues by physically absenting himself from the wing and working alone as much as possible if he found himself working a shift with officers who did not feel it was their job to care for prisoners. Other, more elaborate tactics for maintaining equilibrium in relationships were also evident. These could be strikingly similar to those of prisoners, sometimes inviting collusion across the staff-prisoner divide:

¹² This officer did not give his consent for his interview to be recorded, so notes were taken during our conversation and written up afterwards. The record of the interview was as close to verbatim as possible, and the written account was checked and formally agreed by the participant afterwards.

...We just had a meeting up on the landing about, *were people doing their cleaning jobs up there?* and so on and so on. And I said, 'Maybe some people don't know how to clean' like that, because cleaning jobs weren't being done and it was filthy up there. Miss Clarke said, 'So what you saying, you can't clean, Laura?'. I said, 'I'm saying maybe some people don't know how to clean and maybe someone should offer to come and show some people.' ... She took that as I was being rude against her, and ... Miss Campbell said to me the next day, ... 'Can you come down and see me in the house office [on Saturday morning]? ... Nothing serious, just come down and see me.' She went, "Right". She goes, 'Miss Clarke has said that I need to go through all the cleaning products with you and how to do each cleaning job'. I said, 'What for?'. 'After your sarcastic comment towards her in that meeting'. I said, 'She so took that the wrong way'. She says, 'Well, I know that but she didn't like what you said. She felt like you were trying to get one over on her'. She said, 'So as far as she knows I've gone through it all with you'. ... She didn't want to do it as much as I didn't really want to sit there. ... She's like, 'Laura, just get out of here', like that, "But if she asks you, I've gone through it with you'. ... Next day, [Miss Clarke] walked past with a big smile on her face. 'Did you like what happened yesterday?'. I said, 'Yes, it was great, thank you', like that. I thought, 'What is the point in that?'. I thought, in a way she's the one that's been made a prat of because her colleague's taking the piss out of her.

Laura, prisoner, AG

In the incident Laura describes, Officer Campbell, who was relatively young-in-service, did not want to enforce the informal punishment requested by Officer Clarke, but did not want to risk alienating a longer-established and socially relatively dominant colleague.

As in the example above in which Josie needed to balance the impressions of both staff and prisoners, she gambles on being able to elicit discreet co-operation from Laura to escape the impasse in which she has been placed. With striking symmetry to the situation in which Josie sought the collusion of an officer to convey a desired impression to other prisoners, it is the *prisoner* and not her colleague in whom Officer Campbell con des. This suggests two things. First, that in each case it was perhaps ultimately more important to maintain credibility within one's own grouping, and that this was understood by all. Second, it may indicate that a favourable (and therefore emollient) impression could be created *across* the staff-prisoner divide by appearing to be willing to break ranks.

Conclusions

Ethnographers of women's prisons have consistently demonstrated a concern with the agency of

incarcerated women in finding ways of ‘doing time’ in the interstices of prison regimes and alleviating the ‘pains of imprisonment’ (Sykes 1958) (*inter alia* Ward and Kassebaum 1965; Giallombardo 1966; Heffernan 1972; Mandaraka-Sheppard 1986; Owen 1998; Severance 2005). In general, however, these accounts have focussed on how women cope with and through their relationships with one another, but paid less attention to how they engage with regime structures and manifestations of penal power, or to practices not directly connected to ‘pains’ [Bosworth (1999), Kruttschnitt and Gartner (2005) and Lindberg (2005) are among the rare exceptions to this].

Certeau’s conception of ‘tactics’ offers a useful tool to help us explore more fully the exercise of power in face-to-face encounters in prisons and the different kinds of practices and entities (spaces, regimes, resources etc.) involved. This adds to recent analyses of the complex dynamics of the ‘post-disciplinary’ prison—the governmentality, responsabilization, coercion that characterize contemporary prison regimes in England and Wales and elsewhere (Chantraine 2008; Crewe 2011*b*; Drake 2012)—the possibility of a fuller understanding of the relational, intersubjective dynamics through which penal regimes are delivered and negotiated, which have received less attention in discussions of power in prisons.

Prisoners made use of tactical manoeuvres in order to solve problems generated by the constraints of imprisonment. Highly visible and subject to coercive disciplining structures, prisoners took tactical approaches to achieving a variety of ends, from meeting basic material needs, to acting on grudges and rivalries with other inmates, and resolving complex problems of impression management. The nature of the problems prisoners sought to solve and the ways they found to do so were indicative of the precariousness of their position and the complex and often painful conditions of existence in a punitive environment, in which neither fair treatment, material provision, nor a smooth progression through a prison sentence could be guaranteed.

That prison officers also deployed tactic-like approaches to resolving tensions in their working lives suggests that they shared something of prisoners’ sense of precariousness as they sought to ‘make’ a tenable authoritative role and to ensure that their relationships with colleagues and inmates remained emollient. However, this indication that officers frequently found themselves reacting opportunistically to circumstances to make or repair a role in ways that Certeau suggests are characteristic of relative powerlessness is undercut by the clear distinctions in the respective resources on which staff and prisoner tactics drew, and the seriousness of the stakes involved. Both sets of operations represent direct responses to the ‘dominant order’ (Certeau 1984) of the prison regime, but while prisoners’ tactics relied on subverting structures and diverting institutional power, officers drew on power lent and legitimated by the regime. The gap between their opportunistic manoeuvres and the formal grant of power that they held speaks to the well-documented sense shared by many officers that their interests were subordinated to those of both

managers and inmates, and to the profoundly conflicted nature of the prison officer role (Crawley 2004b; Lindberg 2005; Liebling *et al.* 2010). In order to sustain their ability to ensure the smooth-running of the institution, officers must uphold prison hierarchies, staff solidarity and the asymmetric distribution of power between themselves and prisoners, in addition to safeguarding a certain level of co-operation and perceived legitimacy in relationships with inmates. Drake (2012) has argued that the overriding security imperative that defines penal institutions is fundamentally in tension with its other (formally and informally) professed functions such as rehabilitation and care. Recognizing the tensions, complexities and obstructions that it introduces into relationships and face-to-face encounters at the micro-level through an exploration of the tactical ways in which they were managed begins to offer some insight into why that should be.

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (PTA-030-2005-00058).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Ben Crewe and Dr Jean McAvoy for helpful comments on this work at various stages of its development.

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