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‘Daddy is a difficult word for me to hear’: carceral geographies of parenting and the prison visiting room as a contested space of situated fathering

Dominique Moran^{a*}, Marie A. Hutton^b, Louise Dixon^c and Tom Disney^a

^a*School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK;*

^b*School of Law, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK;* ^c*School of Psychology, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand*

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Advocating greater engagement between children’s and carceral geographies, this paper explores the spaces of parenting as they exist within a UK male prison, building upon criminological research on the effects of imprisonment on prisoners’ families and children. Focusing primarily on the visiting room, it extends discussion of the specificities of everyday material spaces and practices of parenting currently under scrutiny within children’s geographies and geographies of parenting, and brings these subdisciplines into dialogue with carceral geography. Concerned specifically with the intimate, embodied and sometimes banal practices of parenting in this constrained and highly surveilled context, it draws attention to previously overlooked spaces and identities of situated fathering.

Keywords: Situated fathering; carceral geography; prison; prison visiting; visiting rooms; parenting

Introduction

Until fairly recently, scholars of family interaction had seldom seriously considered the ways in which spaces and the social/symbolic processes associated with them matter (Marsiglio, Roy, and Fox 2005a). Burgeoning geographies of family and parenting are increasingly addressing this lack (e.g. Foy-Phillips and Lloyd-Evans 2011; Holloway and Pilmott-Wilson 2014; Talbot 2013). Although ‘parenting’ is a uniquely personal, intimate and embodied practice, as Jupp and Gallagher (2013, 155) pointed out, parent–child relationships and parenting practices are imbricated in wider social, cultural, political and economic dynamics, including the ways in which state policy, interventions and services frame and intersect with everyday spaces and practices of ‘being’ a parent. Building on previous scholarship demonstrating the ways in which geographies of parenting are shaped by class and labour market position (e.g. Dyck 1990; Holloway 1998; McDowell et al. 2005), they espoused a focus on parenting and policy to respond to a series of shifting dynamics reshaping expectations around the values and practices of parenting and the spaces in which it might happen; and a newly developed academic capacity to uncover the intersections of policy with the ‘intimate, embodied and banal practices of parenting across different contexts and landscapes’ (Jupp and Gallagher 2013, 155).

*Corresponding author. Email: d.moran@bham.ac.uk

In this paper, we accordingly take as a starting point Marsiglio, Roy, and Fox's (2005a) notion of 'situated fathering', based on an understanding that various contingencies of physical space, in conjunction with social/symbolic issues, affect men's identities as fathers and their involvement with children. We explore specific spaces of parenting which might be construed as highly unusual, but which are uncomfortably designated as 'everyday' for those experiencing them *as* fathers, reflecting the anthropological perspective that parenting varies across time and space, and that 'family' is performed in multiple ways and in various locations (e.g. Stryker 2014). We consider the visiting room as one of the spaces of fatherhood within a UK prison for men, in which imprisoned fathers and their children can encounter each other in person. Although the spaces of prison visitation have previously been the subject of enquiry within carceral geography (Moran 2013a, 2013b), they have so far escaped the attention of children's geographers, or geographers of parenting. Although our primary focus is on the visiting room itself, we also reflect on prisoners' experience of parenting in ways which resonate with discussion of transnational parenting by Skype and by phone (e.g. Boccagni 2012; Madianou and Miller 2011), or after divorce or separation (e.g. Longhurst 2013), or of non-resident children (Manning, Stewart, and Smock 2003), and consider the ways in which cells and landings also become spaces of parenting through embodied practices of speaking and listening on the telephone, writing and reading letters and cards and treasuring artefacts of communication such as children's drawings.

We consider all of these spaces in the context of what Luzia (2010, 361) has called 'geographies of family'; 'the relationships between people who are part of a familial or kinship network, and the spaces and places that they construct and negotiate as a direct or indirect result of belonging to that network'. As Valentine (2008) has argued, geographies of family incorporate any space where the connections that support familial relations and intimacy are enabled or facilitated (see also Hallman and Benbow 2007). Luzia (2010, 365) notes that 'the places of family are the places of the everyday', in that parents describe spaces of parenting as open, 'child-friendly' and accessible during daylight hours. Their own homes, friends' homes, the street, shops, parks and 'transit' spaces such as buses and cars – basically anywhere they happened to be – were spaces in which parenting happened. She also noted, though, that participants engaged in spatial and temporal negotiation in order to construct these spaces, producing 'parenting places' through 'specific negotiations of existing everyday spaces' (Luzia 2010, 365), which involved engaging differently with places they already knew, visiting at different times of day or changing their spatial and temporal routine in order to accommodate their child's requirements in terms of feeding, sleeping, playing and so on. In our study, whilst concurring that any space constructed and negotiated as a result of familial connections can be a geography of family, or a space of parenting, we turn our attention to a far narrower range of spaces, in which the capacity for parents to negotiate the construction of these as 'parenting places' is more closely constrained.

A further contribution of this paper is in addressing the limited engagement between carceral and children's geographies, new subdisciplines which remain largely distinct from one another. The lack of direct dialogue is curious, given that both are interested in populations variously considered to constitute 'a risk' or to be 'at risk', and subject to diverse forms of surveillance and control. Similarly, both often evidence the capacity of these populations to display agency and resistance to structures of power. Whilst few explicit links have been made, children's geographers' explorations of institutional spaces such as schools have revealed processes of isolation and confinement; for instance, Barker et al.'s (2010, 380) examination of Seclusion Units revealed the use of spatial and temporal forms of control for the regulation of pupil behaviour, resembling the routines and spaces critical to maintaining control within prison environments (Foucault 1991). Very recently, Disney (2015) called for a more critical engagement with childhood spaces beyond the school, employing a Foucauldian approach to explore how orphanages can be conceptualised as carceral spaces of both care and control (see also Disney 2016); and Schliehe

(2014, 2015) drew together carceral and children's geographies to examine the experiences of young women in secure settings in Scotland. She noted that these 'conceptual areas of human-geographical enquiry have important aspects to add to a qualitative and ethnographic study that focuses on the experiences of children and young people regarding their containment and separation from society' (Schliehe 2015, 16). So although these two geographical subdisciplines have remained largely discrete, the nascent engagement between them suggests that the 'everyday' for many young people may include carceral settings of various types, and that there is a need to consider how these spaces shape youth identity, resistance, agency and well-being.

The paper is structured as follows. We first outline the extensive research engagement with parenting in prison and the effect of imprisonment on prisoners' families within criminology and prison sociology. It is necessary to survey this literature for two reasons: to acknowledge the scholarship which informs the paper, and to demonstrate that this work has not yet engaged as fully as it might with the *spatiality* of prison parenting, the ways in which parenting spaces are experienced by imprisoned fathers, and their impact on parent-child relationships. We next provide some context to our study, giving a very brief overview of family contact in our host prison, before describing the methodology deployed. In the main body of the paper, we explore the ways in which incarcerated fathering becomes a spatial project involving constant negotiation and renegotiation of the spaces of situated fathering; and the ways in which commonly observed tropes of parenting, such as the perception of risk and the urge to protect children from it, characterise parenting practices in this highly regulated and institutionalised context.

Parenting in prison

Criminological research has confirmed the negative effects of incarceration on prisoners' families and children (e.g. Arditti 2005; Hairston 1998, 2003; Murray 2013), in terms of the acute increases in stress, higher rates of divorce and family break-up during sentences, and longer-term issues of educational achievement and intergenerational offending (Murray and Farrington 2005). Children of incarcerated parents find the situation upsetting and disruptive, have been regarded as being punished alongside their imprisoned parent and have been termed 'hidden victims' of crime (see also Glover 2009; Miller 2006, 473). Whilst significant attention has rightly been paid to the 'secondary' or 'collateral' effects of imprisonment on prisoners' families and children (e.g. Codd 2008; Comfort 2008; Geller, Garfinkel, and Western 2011; Kruttschnitt 2011), the visitation needs of the incarcerated remain under-researched. Although visitation is recognised as a legal right critical to the maintenance of family contact, to the lower recidivism rates which have characterised visited prisoners (Moran 2013a), and potentially to the benefit of children's emotional well-being (Dyer 2005), studies which focus explicitly on the *spaces* set aside for contact remain scarce.

The importance of such spaces is, however, recognised. In their study of imprisoned fathers, Clarke et al. noted that the 'unusual and hostile environment', the inhibiting 'prison atmosphere' and the constraints on physical contact during prison visits made some men perceive the prison environment as inherently inimical to fathering (Clarke et al. 2005, 234–235). Although they recommended that future research explore 'particular features of the local prison environment' (Clarke et al. 2005 235), as Pierce (2015) has argued, there remains a dearth of research into the experience of visitation on the part of male prisoners. Although previous research has explored their parenting aspirations (e.g. Meek 2007), their complex family roles and relationships (e.g. Hairston 2002; La Vigne et al. 2005) and the relationship between attachment to their children and their reoffending behaviour (e.g. Visher 2013), very little research has probed the visit itself, and the micro-level interactions which take place between fathers and children (see Dyer, Pleck, and McBride 2012). Following Roy's (2005, 181) call for a more intensive study of the contours and constraints of men's parenting in prison, we address this research gap.

Methodology

Data were generated during a three-year project investigating the relationship between prison visitation and reoffending, exploring the socio-spatial context of visitation to better understand why prisoners who are visited in custody tend to reoffend less on release than those who are not. The wider study involved extensive data generation at a men's prison in England, with brief visits to other UK facilities. Research access was granted by the UK National Offender Management Service (part of the UK Ministry of Justice), and by the highest authority at the prison itself. Research required the active support of prison staff and senior management, both to accommodate researchers on-site for an extended period, and to enable the movement of prisoners to facilitate interviews; a not insignificant addition to usual duties.

Our case study site was a local Category B and C prison located in a city in England.¹ This categorisation indicates that the prison holds neither the most dangerous prisoners (Category A), nor those considered low-risk enough to be held in open prisons (Category D). Intended to serve the local courts, its primary role is the holding of unsentenced and sentenced male prisoners.

Data derive from 32 in-depth semi-structured interviews with prisoners days or weeks from release (to enable the wider project to track subsequent reoffending), conducted in 2015, and of 30–90 minutes' duration. Respondents volunteered for interview having already completed a questionnaire for the wider project. Interviews, which explored personal and family relationships and prisoners' experiences of visitation during both their current, and any previous, sentences, were audio recorded, transcribed and analysed using NVivo software. Given the personal nature of the topic, and the highly controlled prison environment, interviews were carried out off-wing (i.e. away from prisoners' accommodation), in private interview booths within the 'legal visits' area of the prison (in spaces reserved for private consultation with legal representatives). Although for security reasons prison staff were present in the corridor outside the booths, interviews could not be overheard. All data are anonymised – respondents are identified using pseudonyms.

Our focus here is on standard domestic visits. Although the prison offered 'family days' once a month, in which prisoners could spend several hours with their children, outside during good weather, the strict eligibility requirements for participation meant that these were a minority experience for imprisoned fathers, most of whom did not qualify and could not experience this kind of father–child interaction.² Although Family Days are eminently worthy of research, we concentrate here on the majority experience of parent–child contact for imprisoned fathers.

Contact policies in the study prison

Fathers could maintain contact with their children via phone calls, letters and visits. Only phone numbers specified on personal accounts could be used, and they could not receive incoming calls. Calls were made at telephones on accommodation wings, during 'association' periods when unlocked from cells. Call duration could be limited to avoid queues, calls to landlines and mobile phones were charged at higher tariffs than those common outside the prison, and both calls and letters were subject to monitoring. Prisoners funded letters and calls through prison work or from money deposited by family and friends. Visits were provided free to prisoners, although visitors had to resource both their travel to and from the prison, and any refreshments purchased during the visit.

The frequency and duration of visits were determined by prisoners' status as sentenced or unsentenced (i.e. on remand); and regime, referring to the system of Incentives and Earned Privileges operating in UK prisons. 'Standard' regime applies to prisoners who have neither lost privileges and been demoted to 'Basic' due to misconduct, nor earned 'Enhanced' regime status through prolonged good behaviour. [Table 1](#) shows the different visits entitlements corresponding to unsentenced/sentenced and regime status.

Table 1. Visits entitlement at the host prison.

Regime	Basic	Standard	Enhanced
<i>Unsentenced</i>	1× 1-hr visit per week	2× full-session visits per week	3× full-session visits per week
<i>Sentenced</i>	2× 1-hr visits per month	2× full-session visits per month	3× full-session visits per month

Twenty-one separate visiting sessions were timetabled each week, with sessions every day, although some were for sentenced or unsentenced prisoners only. Sessions ran in the mornings and afternoons Monday to Friday; on three weekdays there were also evening sessions. On weekends there were three sessions per day. Duration varied from 1 to 2½ hrs; a 'full session' (Table 1) was any session longer than one hour. Prisoners booked their own visits via kiosks on wings, and then alerted visitors to the time and date of their visit, usually by phone. This level of visits provision is typical for local prisons in England and Wales – as is the fact that, for various reasons, not all prisoners will take up their full-visits entitlement.

The spaces of situated prison fathering

Some imprisoned fathers chose not see their children. For others, there were several reasons for the lack of visits. Some family members did not wish to visit and, therefore, children could not come (since minors had to be accompanied by an adult); some were no longer on good terms with their children's mother(s), who refused to allow visits; the 'maternal gatekeeping' described by Fagan and Barnett (2003). This lack of direct contact is a familiar finding (e.g. Arditti, Smock, and Parkman 2005), but it should not necessarily be interpreted to mean that these men are not fathering their children, as we will see later. That said, interviewees frequently reflected on 'being there' for their children:

You can be a good father when you're not there, but being a bad father is not being with that son every day, waking up, doing his breakfast, that's a good father. (Colin)

You know, you can do as much as you can. You can write letters and be supportive on the phone and encourage and you know, show your love on the phone, but that's not enough I don't think, kids want more than that don't they? It's about spending time with them, quality time ... I know I can be a good dad, but not from here really, not from here. You know, there's very little you can do from here to be honest. Even it's difficult to get long enough on the phone for a kick-off. (Jason)

In turning our attention to the *spatiality* of prison fathering – spaces of parenting, and the effects of spatial contingencies on imprisoned men's identities as fathers, and involvement with children, we consider spaces important for *both* men visited by their children, *and* those not, and explore how these spaces were differentially experienced. We focus first on the space in which fathering is perhaps most apparent – the visiting room.

The visiting room was a large, functional room with hard flooring, strip lighting and no windows. It contained about fifty sets of tables and chairs aligned in rows, each a low coffee table with one chair on one side (for the prisoner) and three on the other (for visitors). The chairs and table were fixed together, and could not be moved during visits. Prison staff observed the room both from a raised podium, and in an adjoining room with banks of closed circuit television monitors. Although prisoners and visitors were searched ahead of entry, a watchful eye was kept for the 'passing' of contraband (drugs, mobile telephones, and subscriber identification module cards). On one side of the room was a children's play area with colourful murals, and on the other, a small hatch from which visitors could purchase drinks and snacks. Visits staff

made considerable effort to maintain a relaxed and respectful atmosphere, dealing with any issues as unobtrusively as possible. Our interviewees described the visiting room as a pleasant space towards which they were positively disposed.

The visiting room as a space of situated fathering

We identify a number of sub-themes that enable a more nuanced discussion of the visiting room as a space of situated fathering, and which allow us to reflect the views of both fathers who were visited by their children, and those who were not. We begin by considering the experience of the visiting room for fathers whose own children were not present.

Other people's children

For Derek, whose children lived overseas with his former partner, children's presence in the visiting room, and the noise of their play and chatter, made his time there a bittersweet experience. He observed that:

[The visits room was] a happier place because people are meeting with their loved ones and that's quite touching, you know. I wasn't having a loved one to see me, sadly, but I could feed off that and see their ... kids running round and stuff like that. I did find myself thinking, 'oh, how nice', to see and to enjoy that interaction. You could see the love of the other people so that was nice. It was [a nice atmosphere], of course it was, but I find 'daddy' a very hard word to hear ...

Samir, who decided not to have his children visit him, made a similar observation:

It was very tough for me the first time. I saw one prisoner, his wife came with his kids, three girls he's got, it was very tough. I kept on looking over and seeing his little one running over to him and playing with a little pram, it was very tough. I kept on seeing my [own] daughter ...

Others took a more pragmatic approach, complaining that the noise of other people's children hindered their conversations with their own families:

It can be irritating sometimes ... , all the noise in there and especially when you've got screaming kids, you know what some kids can be like. They're right next to your bloody table, it can really piss you off sometimes. (Simon)

For those men who did not see their own children, the visiting room could become an arena of discomfort, of painful reminders of the children they missed, and of practices of fathering in which they could not participate. And if the sound of children playing was not a poignant reminder, it could simply be an annoyance.

Risk and danger

Some prisoners decided not to allow their children to visit them during custody. For Samir, a decision was taken to protect young children from the trauma of seeing, and then being separated from, their father:

My wife said to me, 'Look, its best if they don't come because when they see you, obviously they're very attached to you, when everyone's standing there, they might start to cry. I know you're very close to your children. It will be even harder for you, so it's best if you don't see them. Just keep in touch like phoning and writing.' That's what my wife said to me, and it's true.

Others simply did not want their children to encounter the prison at all, fearing the negative influence that prison could have upon their perceptions of 'normality':

I don't want them growing up as if [prison's] the norm, sort of thing ... [Jason]

My son, [aged 12] knows of prison but I don't want him to see the inside of one. I think as someone who understands, of nine, ten, 11, 12, it's not the right place. It could give them the wrong attitude ... (Colin)

Although for these men, the risk to which visiting would expose their children was slightly intangible, for others the decision was motivated by a specific perceived risk. Parents' fears for their children's safety feature prominently in scholarly work, with 'stranger danger' as well as awareness of risks from known paedophiles and abusers leading to the spatial restrictions and high levels of supervision which characterise children's lives in higher income countries (Pain 2006). Most geographical research into fear for children's safety finds that parents deploy risk-avoidance behaviour informed by arguably inflated risk-anxiety, steering children away from certain environments and individuals. In this literature, a certain degree of agency is assumed on the part of parents: the power to restrict children's movements, to control to a certain degree the environments they encounter, and to determine to an extent the individuals with whom they come into contact. For parents outside of carceral environments, these assumptions might be appropriate, but imprisoned parents' level of control over the environments and perceived risks their children must experience in order to visit them in custody, is relatively low.

For some interviewees, the specific risks they associated with the standard prison practice of combining visits sessions for both 'mainstream' offenders and those being held for sexual offences, led them to refuse to allow their children to visit. Echoing Clarke et al. (2005), responsible parenting meant ensuring that children were kept away from a risky environment. Prisoners sentenced for sexual offences are generally accommodated on separate prison wings for 'vulnerable prisoners' (VPs), and under normal circumstances would not mix with other prisoners. In the visits hall, the VPs, (nicknamed 'nonces'), would sit at tables in a specific row, and this location would identify them as VPs. Interviewees frequently told us that even though the visiting room was closely surveilled, with prisoners not allowed to get up from their chairs during visits, they did not allow their children to visit because of the risk that VPs would be present. Jason told us he did not have his children to visit because of who else might be in the visiting room – both VPs and other potentially distasteful individuals:

You ... have one row of tables where you'd have sex offenders, basically. I wouldn't have my kids up there. [And] them's the ones that they *know* about ... , you've still got the people in the rows that I *don't* know about. The kids like to run around and I'd be constantly on edge.

Another prisoner described his unease more viscerally:

My daughters are [asking to come and see me], but you've got sex offenders on the same visits. I don't want them nonces on the visits. You've got to look out for those dirty bastards If I see them even *look* towards my kids I will get up and start. I will attack them on the visits if my kids are there, you know. People's kids will be walking around in the visits and they'll be getting close to them and we're looking, thinking ... , the kid's dad who's in here is looking and he's calling his kids over. And a lot of the sex offenders will know not to [even] lift their head up because they know what's going to happen. Someone is just going to run along and start beating the shit out of them in a visit. (Mohamed)

For some fathers, the length of their sentence was a significant factor in their decision not to allow their children to visit them in prison. Only if they were serving long sentences would they feel that the benefits of contact would outweigh the risk of exposure to VPs. Jason again:

I think bringing me kids into that environment ... , unless I was doing a long time, I'd have to justify it and I'd find it difficult to justify it over a short period of time.

There were other specific dangers within the visiting room from which some felt the need to protect their children. Rick told us about visits from his two-year-old son Charlie, during which Charlie would play with toys provided in the crèche, sometimes bringing them to the visits table.

My son brings me toys and it's snapped and they're all sharp on the corner, how about if he hurt himself, like? I got a toy the other day and there was a drawing pin hanging out of it. My son said, 'Dad, look' and as I've looked he's gone, 'Look' and he's shown me the pin in the wheel.

There was exasperation in Rick's voice. On the one hand, he expected prison staff to check the condition of the toys they provided, but on the other, he was clearly frustrated in general about the environment his son encountered and his own lack of control over it, as we will see shortly. Although Charlie was not injured by the broken toys, another prisoner told us about a visit during a previous sentence in a different prison, when his son had been hurt:

I was in [prison] one time and my young son, he come to visit me with [his mother] the one time and he tripped in the play area, the carpet was turned up like a curl and he tripped and banged his eye there. I joke you not, I was in the horrors. His eye was split all there, [points to eyebrow] all that part there was wide open. I was like, 'What the bloody hell!' One minute he's playing over there and he's come up to me like this, like it's nothing. I'm absolutely horrified, my poor son, his eye, I swear to god it was split wide open. (Simon)

Later in this conversation, Simon revealed that his son had received compensation from the prison service for this injury, and that his mother had decided to invest the money for their son's future. Whilst approving of the decision, his tone on the whole matter was rueful – not only had he been powerless to prevent his son's injury, and unable to accompany him to hospital, but his absence meant he had also had no say in the subsequent claim and payment.

Treats and tellings-off

The restricted length and number of visits (see [Table 1](#)) meant that fathers often felt under pressure to make a visit 'special' for their children. Rick's discussion of visits was saturated with his own intentions to 'treat' his son, who had been seriously ill as an infant, to make the visit and the occasion memorable for him. Sometimes these efforts were successful:

I bought him a bottle of Coke [from the vending machine in the visits hall]. My sister says, 'Don't give it him' but I said 'I like to give him what he wants'. So, like, I buy a bottle of Coke or something and then I open it and he'll say, 'Dad, I want some'. But he'll have his bottle of juice so I have to drink his juice up.

But sometimes less so. In the account below, Charlie was leaving a visit with Rick's sister (who had brought him to visit because Charlie's mother was no longer Rick's partner), and Rick was keen that he take a memento of the visit home as a present. On the wall of the visits room were three cut-out paper teddy bears which had caught Charlie's eye.

There was a few teddies on the wall and I pulled them off and I said, 'You know what, son, you can take that'. The lady [staff supervisor] said to me, 'He can take it' ... You could tell he really wanted this. Someone had made it, obviously, but it was just left – it was just hanging off the wall by one little drawing pin ... And the lady give him one, and give him the other one. I said, 'Well, you might as well give him that other one and [then] he's got the three'. And she just – this lady was being spiteful, man.

He was crying for this teddy and she just took it off [him], snatched it. I said, 'Don't snatch it, you know what I mean? Just, ask for it, innit?' She snatched it out of his hands, man ...

In his version of events, Rick tried to take control, and make a present to his son of items which were not strictly his to give, and he recalled being thwarted in his efforts by a staff supervisor who refused to allow him to remove the wall decorations and give them to his son, acting in a way that he felt was inappropriate. In the circumstances, and given his status in the interaction, Rick was unable to obtain the outcome for his son that he would have liked. Charlie left the visit without the third teddy, and Rick left with a bruised ego.

Rick also expressed reservations about disciplining his son during visits. Any interpersonal abuse or violence is banned within the visits room, and it is possible that parent-child interactions are also monitored for any indications of issues which may require professional support. However, on a much more mundane level, there was a sense in which Rick did not want to tell his son off during the visit in case this spoils a happy atmosphere – to the extent that he sometimes let him 'get away' with behaviour that might have been curtailed in another context:

Well, this lady was sitting next to us and had a white top on and a white dress and whatever and I gave him this bottle of Coke. And ... he knows that he's doing it; he's gone 'whoosh!' and then pointed it towards the lady and just gone 'whoosh!' I thought, 'no, what has he done?' I said, 'Charlie, naughty!' I was ... And I couldn't – I wouldn't tap him on his hand but I didn't even wanna shout at him either. But I had to say, 'Charlie, that's naughty, that is'.

Staying put

For Marsiglio, Roy, and Fox (2005b), one of the most significant aspects of situated fathering is mobility for the parent and child and the ability of fathers to engage in physical and mobile play with their children, for example, playing sports or going out together. Although this kind of mobility is sometimes permitted in the types of 'family day' activities alluded to earlier, during domestic visits, where prisoners must remain seated on a specific chair throughout, it is not permitted. Fathers described the difficulties this caused:

On a standard visit the inmates aren't allowed to stand up and walk around, so you've got a table and chairs for you and your visitors and then that's it. Kids don't want to sit, after a couple of minutes ... Normal visits are ... suitable for older children, I'd say early teens because they'll sit and they'll stay there whilst you're talking and stuff, and babies just sit on mother's lap or father's lap and do nothing. When you've got from toddlers up to nine/ten year olds they don't want to just sit around, they want to be running around and playing things and that's not possible on an ordinary visit ... Kids get bored ever so quick and they want to be off doing something. So although [my son] could say he'd seen me, I would say that 75 per cent of a standard visit he would play ... in the children's area rather than being with me ... (Chris)

The contrast of the enforced immobility of the fathers, with the children who want to run and play, creates a tension within parent-child interaction which is most easily resolved by allowing the child to play away from the visiting table, and therefore away from the father, who understandably feels frustrated at the lack of contact. The prohibition of prisoner mobility, however, does not stop it occurring completely, with some prisoners breaking the rules in order to manage energetic and active toddlers. Rick again:

If you stand up, [staff] moan at you standing up. My son runs about, I chase him, like; they ain't stopping me, I don't care who it is. If he's running off, I go and play with him or I'll go and chase him and ... They say, 'Well, stop jumping up'. I'll say, 'No, I'm not gonna stop jumping [up]. This is my visit; I do what I wanna do. I'm not causing no bother, so no, I won't sit down', you know what I mean?

Awkwardness

Although in much of this section of the paper we have discussed experiences which are awkward in a number of ways for prisoners, and potentially also for children and prison staff, two further examples are worthy of mention. Mohamed's example of sharing in the collective paternal wariness of prisoners on the VPs row has parallels for some prisoners, in that proximity to other peoples' children meant that they shifted into performance of desirable parenting practices and behaviours even though their *own* children were not present. Steve, a father describing visits from his partner, told us about his discomfort in being seated close to the crèche;

You just can't [be too affectionate]. I wouldn't do it, because of out of respect for my own kids. I wouldn't. But, you know, your partner, you do like to caress and have affection. But you can't do it here. And my last two visits I've been by the crèche for the kids, and it's like ... [sighs].

Reflecting on his preference to feel comfortable in exercising the right allowed to prisoners to have some physical contact with their partners during visits, Steve noted that this felt awkward when seated next to the play area, trying to manage his own behaviour in a way appropriate to the company of children, even though they were not his own.

A feeling of awkwardness in the visits room was by no means limited to fathers seated next to the crèche. During our interviews, it was almost a 'given' that prison visits were understood to be socially awkward situations – perhaps particularly so for visits from children. No matter how accustomed a father and child may have become to the situation, the circumstances of interaction were still perceived as awkward and unnatural. A specific variation of this awkwardness could occur when a father who was not in touch with the mother of his children had to rely on someone else to bring them to visit him. In these circumstances, another family member can bring the children once the mother's assent has been given and documented. However, during these visits, the 'chaperone' must remain present, meaning that father and child(ren) are not 'alone' together; a situation not without its issues. Mark told us about what happened when his brother, his children's uncle, brought them to visit:

There's stuff I wanna talk to my kids about [laughs] but I can't 'cause ma bruvver's there! 'Seriously. Jake, will you just go away a minute so I can talk to ma kids?!' [laughs] ... But what I'll be doin', I'll be whispering [to his son] and he'll go [makes whispering noises] back. I'm just private like that. He doesn't need – he don't need to know what I'm talking to my child. It's my child.

The wing, the cell, and the concealed spaces of situated fathering

The focus of our research was on the visiting room. However, it is clear that for fathers like Derek, Samir, Jason and Craig, who did not see their children in prison, other, less obvious spaces within the prison were *their* spaces of fathering. Their experiences in the visiting room may have piqued longing to see their children, with feelings triggered by hearing the word 'daddy', or seeing children interacting with fellow prisoners. However, it was in spaces other than the visiting room that they actually 'practised' parenting, in ways other than through direct face-to-face contact. As Marsiglio, Roy, and Fox (2005a, 6) note, for many fathers who are physically separated from their children, the fathering mantra of 'being there' can mean very different things, and the lack of a shared physical space for fathering can be defined, negotiated and managed in different ways.

For some prisoners in our study, feelings of failure as fathers preoccupied their thoughts, particularly at night when confined to their cells. As the quotidian space of incarceration associated with the mundane procedures and routines of prison life, the cell is perhaps not an obviously

apparent place of parenting, but it became a space of reflection and of the shaping of intentions for *future* fathering, to be enacted after release from custody.

... every day I'm failing them, innit. Because I'm stuck in prison and I could be doing stuff with 'em on a weekend. Boys like to go for their games, the girls like to go for their bits and their bobs and I should be doing it. So each day in here's a failure to me. And every night [when] I put my head on that pillow, mate, it does hurt ... But then I think, all right then, you look towards the future and when you get out you just try and make things better innit? That's all you can do. (Mark)

For some prisoners, the cell, and also the shared landings around which the cells are arranged, became spaces of active parenting; of practices that brought them closer to their children, through phone calls or letters. Many spoke to their children on the phone every day, and also wrote letters to them. A small minority had phones in their cells, but most had to wait for an opportunity to use telephones on the wing landings, without a closed booth. In either case, opportunities for privacy were scant. Unlike the transient phone call, letters provided a different sort of interaction; one which could be considered, kept and relived at any appropriate moment.

Like some days when I'm feeling really down because it is tough sometimes in prison. So what I do, I get the letters out and just read them again, one by one. (Samir)

I write to the kids ... just ask what they've been doing, draw them little drawings and that. They write back, send me pictures that they've done and that ... (Craig)

For some prisoners, the knowledge that they are fathering from prison was an asymmetrical arrangement, in that rather than disclose their location to their (often younger) children, some invented, or played along with, stories which 'located' them elsewhere, in an alternative space which rendered their absence explicable.

The youngest two, they're not aware of where daddy is. The eldest three, they understand very well where I am, but the youngest two are always looking for me. So their auntie just said to them, like, your dad has gone to Paris, so they think that I'm on the beach and everything, and they write me letters. That's my big sister, bless her; she just tried to divert their attention away. 'Your dad's gone away. He's gone ...' Obviously they ask, 'Where's my daddy?' and it's, 'Oh, he's gone to Paris.' They think Paris has, you know, the beach, the Eiffel Tower and everything else. (Samir)

Others relied on more plausible narratives:

My younger ones, they don't know I'm in jail. They think I'm at work. And I work away quite a bit ... or I have done. (Jason)

Some prisoners' attempts to conceal their location from their children had backfired, but sometimes with unexpectedly positive consequences. Derek, whose children were overseas with his ex-partner, described what he had expected to be a difficult phone call to his 14-year-old daughter:

I said to my middle girl, that – I said I was on a secret mission from the government. She said, 'Come on, Dad, stop all that, you're in prison'. But [chuckles] it was one of those marvellous things of – incredibly expensive on the phone to [overseas country] in the prison – but it was one of those connection moments ... where we both burst out laughing at the same time.

Our focus here was primarily on the visiting room; we have presented only glimpses of the situated fathering which takes place in prison cells, wings and landings, and which could potentially occur in other carceral spaces. Such spaces are worthy of further attention, since for fathers who do not see their children, the facilitation of fathering via other forms of contact is critical for the effective maintenance of parent–child relations.

Conclusion

Imprisonment requires of the incarcerated a negotiation of (multiple) identities: as men, as prisoners, and as fathers. Men can feel overwhelmed by prison life and cut off social ties, including those with their children; they may emotionally retreat to manage the pain of separation. Some lose contact through maternal gatekeeping, whilst others actively pursue fathering opportunities. However, prison socialises men to accept a new set of roles; they become subject to schedules, strip searches, and reduced responsibilities for managing day-to-day life (Roy and Dyson 2005), and for some this new role is difficult to reconcile with the fathering identity that they imagine and construct for themselves. In this paper, we have uncovered some of the practices which constitute the negotiation of both spaces and identities of prison fathering.

For imprisoned fathers, the prison visiting room was the space of situated fathering about which they felt most strongly, and which featured most heavily in their discussion of interaction with their children. For some, the perceived risks inherent in the visiting room displaced parenting practice to other spaces, in which phone calls, letter writing and reflection on fathering were situated. Some experienced the visiting room as a space of fathering even when their own children were *not* present, behaving with decorum in front of other people's children. For those who *did* invite their children to visit, the visit room was both a place of happy interaction, and rife with tensions and dangers, requiring negotiations of space no less complex than those performed by parents on the outside choosing playgrounds or restaurants to visit with their children (e.g. Luzia 2010). In this spatially confined context, these negotiations were saturated both with the power relations of the prison and the men's desire to father their children in a particular way, within its confines. In their complex situated negotiations, men tried to express their fathering practice, impose parental authority where appropriate, show affection, and give treats and gifts, whilst staying seated on the right chair, and conceding to prison staff where there was a conflict of authority.

By drawing the attention of geographers of families and parenting to previously unexplored carceral spaces of fathering, we have in this paper considered the ways in which such spaces, and the social/symbolic processes associated with them, matter for imprisoned fathers, entangled within social, cultural, political and economic dynamics, in which everyday spaces and practices of 'being' fathers are governed by policies and attitudes towards prisoners. However, this research also has utility beyond the academy. Since, as criminologists have pointed out, the children of imprisoned fathers suffer greatly during their separation, both in terms of their immediate well-being and their longer term prospects, it seems to us imperative to explore the *everyday* spaces of situated fathering, available to *all* fathers in custody, rather than the spaces provided for select groups of fathers involved in specialist family programmes. Accordingly, our focus on standard domestic visits not only enables us to better understand the contexts in which imprisoned fathers practise parenting, the enabling and constraining factors which they must negotiate and the ways in which these impact on their identities as fathers; but it could also assist in mediating the harmful effects of parental imprisonment, by identifying ways to make the quotidian carceral spaces of fathering less hostile to fathering practices.

Our focus on situated prison fathering reveals the ways in which imprisoned fathers and their children are considered both to constitute 'a risk' and to be 'at risk', and describes the ways in which they are subject to forms of surveillance and control. In advocating for increased synergy between children's and carceral geographies, we suggest that this work, alongside other nascent engagements between these new geographical subdisciplines, could offer much to understandings of the diverse ways in which children and young people are contained and separated from society.

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Notes

1. The Categorisation scheme refers to the classification of prisons in England and Wales, and derives from the categorisation of the prisoners themselves. Category A prisoners are those whose escape would be highly dangerous to the public or national security. Category B prisoners do not require maximum security, but escape still needs to be made very difficult. Category C prisoners cannot be trusted in open conditions, but are deemed unlikely to try to escape. Category D prisoners can be reasonably trusted not to try to escape, and are given the privilege of an open prison. Closed prisons are categorised as A, B or C, and Open prisons as D. Prisoners must be held in a prison appropriate to their status; hence prisons are denoted A, B and so on.
2. At the host prison, earning this status (which was associated with enhanced visits entitlements) could take several months; so many prisoners on short sentences had no opportunity to earn this privilege.

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