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'You're all so close you might as well sit in a circle ...' Carceral geographies of intimacy and comfort in the prison visiting room

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the intimate exchanges taking place in a space whose public/private designation is indistinct; the prison visiting room. Drawing on extensive research with serving prisoners, their visitors, and prison staff in the UK, and using as an interpretive lens recent geographical conceptualizations of comfort as affective complex, it seeks to better understand how the spaces provided for prison visitation affect the 'doing' of intimacy in ways that arguably detract from the potential benefits of prison visitation in supporting the well-being of both prisoners and visitors. The paper suggests that the bodily practices involved in achieving comfort-as-condition-of-possibility may simultaneously undermine the propensity for the resultant corporeal comfort to deliver this effect.

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Introduction

In recent decades, scholarly work on sexuality, care, children, and family has proliferated, in what Valentine (2008, 2009) called scholarship of 'intimate relations'. Geographies of sexuality have challenged 'the asexual nature of geographical enquiry and the implicit heteronormativity of the discipline' (Valentine 2008, 2009), and geographies of family have attended to the organization of care, emotional ties, and the meaning and quality of personal relationships. Although geography had previously been 'virtually silent on the negotiation of personal relationships in contemporary life' (Walsh 2007, 510), it has begun to address what Valentine called the 'doing' of intimacy – the 'whole affective register' of connections and practices (2008, 2101).

However, geography has been relatively limited in the *contexts* in which it has explored intimacy; it has focused largely upon sexual and family relationships, in the domestic sphere, thus somewhat overlooking 'the complex web of intimate relationships that span different spaces and scales' (Valentine 2008, 2105). Despite subsequent scholarly attention paid to intimate relations sustained, for example, via the internet (e.g. Longhurst 2013), Massaro (2015) still notes a 'slippage' in conceptions of the intimate that equate intimate spaces with private spaces and homes. She argues persuasively for new empirical explorations of the intimate that reach beyond the domestic home and the romantic partnership.

In this paper we address this 'slippage', considering the 'doing' of intimacy in a space which occupies a position of indistinction between public and private – the prison visiting room. Using

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as an interpretive lens recent geographical conceptualizations of comfort as affective complex (Bissell 2008), we seek to better understand how the spaces provided for prison visitation affect the doing of intimacy in ways that arguably detract from the potential benefits of visitation in supporting the well-being of both prisoners and visitors.

Spaces of intimacy and comfort

Geographical research into intimacy has abounded in the past two decades, exploring intimate attachment and relocation (Gorman-Murray 2009); family detention (Martin 2012); sex work (Hubbard 2001; Kitiarsa 2008); love and sex amongst expatriates (Walsh 2007, 2009); family, (grand)children and caring (Evans 2010; Harker 2011; Tarrant 2010); relationship breakdown (Brickell 2014); intimate nationalism (Cowen 2004); touch (Dixon and Straughan 2010); aspects of domestic intimacy (Valentine and Hughes 2012; Valentine, Jayne, and Gould 2012; Waitt and Gorman-Murray 2007; Wilkinson 2014); intimacy in the research field (Smith 2016); and intimacy online (Longhurst 2013; Valentine 2006). However, where geographers have probed the *spatiality* of intimacy, work has tended to focus on sexual intimacy; spaces of sexual expression/citizenship, and (the concealment of) homosexual or dissident heterosexual sexuality (Hubbard 2001), spaces of sexual assault (e.g. Bhat-tacharyya 2015), and of sex work (e.g. Crotty and Bouché 2018) as well as liminal, carnivalesque spaces in which transgressive sexualities are expressed (Walsh 2007). Most recently, Pain has developed a notion of intimacy-geopolitics which sees the intimate articulated with wider political structures in that 'domestic violence and international warfare are both multiply-scaled and sited' (2015, 66). Despite exploring spaces for the doing of intimacy, such as home-making by mature-age gay men (Waitt and Gorman-Murray 2007), coming-out for young gay men (Schroeder 2015), or the meaning of home for singles (Wilkinson 2014), studies have seldom focused on intimacy which takes place in spaces outwith the domestic, and on the ways in which it is both contingent on, and generative of, these spaces.

Theorization of the spatiality of intimacy has echoed Mountz and Hyndman's understanding of intimacy as embodied social relations entangled both with the everyday and with other places and times (2006, 447). Pain and Staeheli defined intimacy as simultaneously 'a set of spatial relations, stretching from proximate to distant' and 'a mode of interaction that may also stretch from personal to distant/global', and argued that it 'may involve a set of practices, again applying to but also connecting the body and that which is distant' (2014, 345). This definitional triad resonates with some sociological scholarship (e.g. Marston et al. 1998; Patrick and Beckenbach 2009; Register and Henley 1992; Stulhofer, Ferreira, and Landripet 2014), in which definitions of intimacy are descriptive, multidimensional, and operational (Moss and Schwebel 1993; see also Warwick 2017). Descriptive definitions address what it is that adults find to be intimate about their relationships; multidimensional definitions identify relationship qualities that enable them to be considered intimate; and operational definitions observe behaviours linked to factors that make relationships intimate.

Definitions therefore encompass what *kind* of relationships are intimate; (who is intimate with whom), and what *constitutes* intimacy (the behaviours, or doings, of intimacy). Mountz and Hyndman's (2006) embodied social relations, and Pain and Staeheli's (2014) set of practices are thus unpacked, in these definitions, into behaviours such as self-disclosure, emotional expression, support, trust, physical expression, feelings of closeness, and mutual experience of intimacy (Patrick and Beckenbach 2009, 48). If we seek to explore behaviours of intimacy, then these relations and practices are our objects of study.

In terms of the 'doing' of intimacy, we consider the notion of comfort as an enabling circumstance. We are informed in this understanding by the work of geographer Bissell (2008), who offered a conceptualization of corporeal comfort as complex bodily sensibility, and extended this conceptualization to consider the chair as the 'nexus of an assemblage comprising body and proximate environment' (1699). Addressing a lack of consensus about what comfort actually is, he advanced three definitions; comfort as objective capacity, as aesthetic sensibility, and as affective

resonance. Considering the latter in greatest detail, he considered comfort as not solely an attribute of an object, but as a complex set of affective resonances that circulate through a variety of tactile, visual and audio media (Bissell 2008, 1701). In relation to comfort as affective relation between body and chair, he noted both that bodies have to ‘*work with chairs*’ (Bissell 2008, 1703, original emphasis) to effect the sensation of comfort, and that the chair ‘*also acts on the body*, thus mediating the nature of affect experienced *through the body*’ (Bissell 2008, 1705, original emphasis). Importantly, Bissell contended that the act of sitting, far from being a subordinate state so banal as to be overlooked, is ‘more often than not, the *condition of possibility* for the conduct and continuation’ of key everyday tasks, such as eating, driving, typing, and so on (Bissell 2008, 1703, our emphasis). Since in our empirical example, the predominant bodily comportment is sitting, we draw in further detail on Bissell’s work in analysing the ways in which corporeal comfort is ‘precisely the background condition’ (Bissell 2008) for intimacy.

Although ‘intimacy’ derives from the Latin *intimu-*, that which is secret and interior, as Valentine (2008) has suggested, intimacy is not limited to private spaces. Recent discussion of the rise of ‘public intimacy’ identified once-private practices and expressions being shared in public, particularly in the (social) media, and repurposed Lacan’s notion of ‘extimacy’ (*extimité*), which characterized the permeability of self, other, internality, and externality (Matviyenko 2009). Scholarship of social media finds intimate thoughts and sentiments, including about relationships, publicly self-disclosed, creating ‘public and sharable’ (Mateus 2010, 64), or ‘transparent’ intimacy (Martinez, Aguado, and Tortajada 2012, 511). This is exemplified in, for example, mobile phone and social media usage (Haddington et al. 2012; Martinez, Aguado, and Tortajada 2012; Tello 2013), and the sexualization of online avatars (Matviyenko 2009). Kingsbury (2007) also deployed extimacy to understand the offline display of slogans in car windows. Whilst extimacy/transparent intimacy implies neither that all intimacy is public, nor that privacy is impossible, it highlights a blurring of public and private that is key to our specific research context – to which we now turn.

Prison visiting

The visiting room is the only space in which prisoners and their loved ones can meet in person. Whilst many prisons enable visitation as a legal requirement, in respect of prisoners’ human rights and to support their general well-being, visits threaten the security of the institution, presenting opportunities for the ingress of drugs, mobile phones, and other contraband, and the potential for escape attempts for those confined. For these reasons, and also to maintain order, visiting rooms are closely surveilled, both by CCTV, and by officers patrolling between tables, earpieces tuned to alerts from distant others.

Although spaces of prison visitation have previously been subject to geographical enquiry, within the subdiscipline of carceral geography (Moran 2013a, 2013b), the spatial contingency of relations within them has so far been overlooked. Within a wider literature on family contact during custody, relatively little attention has been paid to visits’ micro-scale conduct, i.e. to exactly what happens around a visiting table, and critically, the specific ways in which elements of the visits situation impact on interactions. The spatiality of visitation matters, but precious little is known about *how* (Moran 2013a). Accordingly, in this paper we explore the microscalar spaces of visitation, and the comfort possible in relation to them, in order better to understand the conditions of possibility for the closeness considered to be key to successful visitation.

We therefore consider the visiting room as a relational space, inhering between people, and between people and things, and produced in and through performance, creating networks and connections that exceed ‘corporeality in extensive, intensive, temporal and ontogenetic ways’ (McCormack 2003, 489). Bodily movement, be it spatio-temporal, kinaesthetic, affective, collective, political, or imaginative, is potentially generative of different kinds of spaces (McCormack 2008, 1822), and the visiting room is accordingly performed into being through the motions embedded within it. (Although a full discussion of carceral mobility is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting

here that the nature of movement in carceral spaces has been the focus of recent scholarship, e.g. Moran, Piacentini, and Pallot 2012; Peters and Turner 2017).

The prison visiting room is a space in which intimate expression is desired and attempted, but conduct is closely monitored, and strictly regulated. Longstanding empirical evidence suggests that prison visiting, in addition to its observed value in upholding prisoners' rights to a private and family life, and supporting well-being whilst in custody, has a positive influence on likelihood of successful reintegration on release, and reducing rates of recidivism (Bales and Mears 2008; Berg and Huebner 2011; Clark and Duwe 2017; Cochran and Mears 2013; Derkzen et al. 2009; Duwe and Johnson 2016; Liu, Pickett, and Baker 2016; Mears et al. 2012; Mitchell et al. 2016; Rodriguez 2016).

In developing a conceptual framework to theorize prison visitation and its potential effects, Cochran and Mears (2013) noted that existing statistical studies, in largely considering visitation as a binary event (i.e. one that either happens or does not), had overlooked the ways in which its inherent heterogeneity may influence whether it is harmful, beneficial, or has no discernible effect. They pointed to the need for further inquiry into key aspects of visitation, including better understandings of its *experience*. In response, and reporting results of a meta-analysis of prior statistical studies, Mitchell et al. (2016) contrasted the effects on recidivism of conjugal visits, furloughs (home visits), and the more standard short in-person 'contact' visits taking place in a conventional visiting room, concluding that the level of intimacy or 'closeness' of visitation – as an important element of its 'experience' – matters in terms of its beneficial effects. This finding is in line with long-standing observations, based on qualitative data, that rather than being characterized by 'closeness', conventional in-prison visitation situations can instead be stressful and intimidating (e.g. Arditti 2003; Austin and Hardyman 2004; Comfort 2008; Moran et al. 2017; Murray and Farrington 2008) or even perceived by visitors as a 'dead time' that is repetitive and devoid of meaningful events or interaction (Oldrup 2017). Such visitation experience can discourage some visitors from coming at all (Clark and Duwe 2017; Sturges 2002).

Although much scholarship of prison visitation implicitly understands the visiting context to be suboptimal – and interactions therein different from those which take place outside – it is important to note that these interactions may not always be 'worse'. As Tasca et al. (2016) note, interactions during custody can be rare moments of sobriety and reflection, and Comfort (2008) has described conjugal visits (not permitted in our research context) as *sometimes* offering an idealized version of interpersonal interaction. Although social interactions during prison visits are acknowledged to be 'different' from those taking place outside the prison, the 'difference' that the standard in-prison visiting situation makes is not as well understood as it might be.

For example, when Tasca et al. (2016) interviewed caregivers of children of incarcerated parents, identifying themes within the conversations reported to occur during visits with them to offer an insight into family dynamics in this context, they explicitly distinguished these interpersonal exchanges from the 'prison environment'. Their focus was on the exchanges themselves, and whilst acknowledging the general constraints of the visiting situation, they did not address the *specific* ways in which they were constrained or enabled by the context in which they took place. Earlier work has also provided glimpses into this experience. For example, Kotarba's (1979) study of interactions between male prisoners and their female romantic partners who were separated during visits by a plexiglass screen, speaking via phone handsets, found that they used direct eye contact, sitting close to the plexiglass, and fingertip-tracing designs on it as surrogate touches. During talk about sex, he observed that body language changed, to '... symbolically convey feelings of affection and commitment to reaffirm the relationship ... [and to] take on the added dimension of indicating the physical and emotional excitation produced by talk of sexual fantasy' (1979, 92–93). Researching women visiting incarcerated men, Comfort et al. (2005) noted that even though some physical contact was allowed in the visiting room, 'decorum' was essential, with correctional officers policing of any hint of sexual suggestion, with acts regarded by visitors as affectionate but non-sexual, such as rubbing backs or resting hands on knees, construed as hypersexualized, and prohibited. In all of these cases, it is clear that the 'closeness' discussed by Mitchell et al. (2016) is key to the nature of the visits

experience, and that the spatiality of the experience itself is critical in determining how closeness is achieved, or not. By contrast, other work has focused on the visits context, highlighting the liminal nature of visiting rooms, sitting somewhere between inside and outside, neither properly a part of the prison nor of the world outside, and governed by a set of rules that corresponds fully to neither context (Foster 2017; Hutton 2016; Moran 2013a, 2013b). But whilst aptly describing the circumstances of visitation, similarly, this work does not detail the ways in which interpersonal exchanges are spatially and corporeally constrained in these contexts.

These omissions are significant, because although we understand quite well in general terms that the visiting situation is stressful and intimidating, especially for visitors, we are poorly equipped to address the questions implicit in the meta-analyses of the effects of visitation detailed above. In other words, if closeness and intimacy in visitation are important in supporting its positive effects, but if conjugal or home visits are not legal or practicable for all prisoners, are we able to identify features of the spatial context which impede feelings of closeness?

Methodology

The research involved speaking with incarcerated men, their visitors (lovers, partners, wives, parents, siblings, children and close friends) and the prison staff who oversaw their visits. Data were generated during a three-year project at an English prison. Access was granted by the (then) UK National Offender Management Service (part of the Ministry of Justice), and the prison director. Thirty-three 30–90-minute in-depth interviews with serving prisoners were conducted during 2015, exploring experiences of visitation during current, and any previous, sentences. Interviews were carried out in closed booths within the legal visits area (usually reserved for private consultation with legal representatives). Although for security reasons officers were present in the corridor outside, interviews could not be overheard. Six 30–60-minute interviews with prison staff, interviewed whilst on duty at the prison, were carried out in early 2016. Twenty-one 30–60-minute interviews with visitors, approached in the visits centre adjacent to the prison prior to visits sessions, were also conducted in 2016, either in the visits centre itself, or in a location chosen by respondents. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using NVivo software. All respondents are identified using pseudonyms.

Intimacy in the prison visiting room

We are concerned here with intimacy that can take place through prison visits, and the ways in which this intimacy is both enabled and constrained by spatial circumstances, within which we include the notion of comfort as embodied contingency forged between body and proximate environment – in this case, the micro-scale geography of the visiting room, and its tables and chairs.

The main visit room in our case study prison was a large, functional room with hard vinyl flooring, fluorescent strip lighting, and no outside windows. It was ventilated mechanically and via small skylights in the ceiling. It contained about 50 sets of tables and chairs, fixed down to the floor and immovable. The sets were aligned in back-to-back rows, and each comprised a coffee table at knee height, with one upholstered wipe-clean chair on one side for the prisoner, and three on the other for visitors. Rather than being of desk- or dining-height, the chairs were of the low, square type often found in waiting rooms. The sets were arranged and lit to enable good visibility for prison officers, particularly via CCTV cameras. The room was painted pale grey, with the columns which supported the ceiling painted in a contrasting red. The walls displayed large colourful photographic canvases depicting ‘positive’ images of prison life (prisoners and staff interacting; prisoners at work). On one side of the room was a children’s play area with colourful but faded murals. Opposite was a small hatch from which visitors could purchase drinks and snacks. In this room, prisoners and visitors could engage in minimal physical contact – in practice, this meant a hug and a kiss at arrival and departure, and hand-holding during the visit. On a third side of the room was a row of booths for non-contact, or ‘closed’ visits.

Entry to (and exit from) the visiting room was strictly controlled, and conduct in it carefully monitored. Ahead of each timetabled visiting session, prisoners would be collected from residential areas, and would wait in a 'holding room' adjacent to the visits room, to be searched and booked-in via a biometric system of fingerprint recognition. They would then don a high-visibility sash, and proceed to a numbered table to await their visitors. Meanwhile, visitors would book-in at the adjacent visits centre (again using biometrics), and once inside the prison entrance hall, would proceed through a parallel airport-style search procedure, passing through a metal detection arch and being 'wanded' and 'rubbed-down' by hand. Beyond the security doors, and inside the prison proper, they would be searched by a sniffer dog trained to detect drugs. If all was well, they would enter the visits room to meet their waiting loved one. If the dog detected drugs, visitors would be asked either to relinquish any contraband they may be carrying, to submit to a more thorough search conducted in private, to have the visit cancelled, or to undertake it under non-contact conditions (intended to prevent a 'pass' of contraband to the prisoner). Such visits would take place in the 'closed visits' booths within, but separated from, the main visits space. Each consisted of a small room divided in two with a table of desk-height, a glass screen above it, and one desk chair on either side. Two doors enabled separate entry to the two sides of the room by prisoner and visitor, and once seated inside they communicated via phone handsets on either side of the glass (much as in Kotarba's 1979 study). Whereas visitors and prisoners in the main visits hall could purchase and share food, refreshments were not available in the booths.

In putting forward the visits room as an example of a space of intimate exchange outwith the private, we acknowledge the indistinct public/private status of this room. Just as geographers have contested the public/private binary, arguing for more fluid categorizations (Allen 2006; Fenton 2005; Kumar and Makarova 2008; Tyndall 2010), so criminologists and carceral geographers have pointed out the complex nature of these distinctions in custodial contexts (e.g. Dirsuweit 1999; Milhaud and Moran 2013; Moran, Piacentini, and Pallot 2012). In prison visiting in particular, although the spatial context invites comparisons with ostensibly similar 'public' contexts such as cafés, and although some prisoners and visitors describe their interactions therein as taking place 'in public', there are critical nuances. For persons separated by incarceration, lacking any other opportunity for in-person contact, and perhaps having grown accustomed to the circumstances of visitation, the visiting room can become something of an *extension* of or substitute for the private, domestic realm, thus complicating a straightforward 'public' designation. Although this complex private/public indistinction cannot be fully resolved here, this understanding of the indeterminate nature of this space informs our interpretation.

In working towards an understanding of the nature of intimacy and closeness in the visiting context, albeit acknowledging the inevitable variation from person to person, and circumstance to circumstance, we next present and consider the views of prisoners, visitors and prison staff about very personal and poignant experiences of contact with loved ones during incarceration. We do so in an attempt to tease apart the relative importance of physical contact and proximity, and the ability to discuss personal or intimate topics, all of which are constrained or enabled, to varying degrees, by spatialities of visitation and the nature of corporeal comfort possible within it.

Intimacy, comfort, and spatiality

Prisoners' descriptions of visits interactions suggest that although they experienced a degree of intimacy, they were frustrated by their powerlessness, in this context, to resolve the issues which underpinned their visitation exchanges. For some, this meant the inability to discuss fully the future of their relationship with their partner, and for others, the lack of physical intimacy that they craved. Some felt that their interactions were severely constrained in the visits context. We next consider the circumstances which lead to these situations, considering first the auditory experience of the visiting room and its relationship to the spatial layout.

Noise and proximity

With its hard shiny surfaces and lack of soft furnishings, when full of people, the visiting room was a noisy place. Prisoners described the noise rising from a hum to a crescendo as visits sessions progressed, making it difficult for people to make themselves heard. The nature of this particular room also meant that there were additional auditory concerns. With minimal natural ventilation from the few opening skylights, in hot weather the room had to be mechanically ventilated, and the noise of the fans was a problem. Such auditory experiences in the visits room reflect how noise and sound have been noted to shape emotional states elsewhere in the prison (see Hemsworth 2016). As prison officer Charlie told us:

Yes it's noisy ... and due to the air conditioning, or the lack of it, we have to use extractor fans to take the heat out of the room, so when the extractor is on I can imagine it would be quite difficult to have a quiet conversation.

Charlie was typical of staff interviewed, in that he was keenly aware of the limitations of the visiting setting for intimate exchange. At the interview, staff often reflected on their *own* position in relation to intimate behaviour; although a full discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, we have written elsewhere about prison staff perceptions of their roles in relation to prisoners' intimate relationships (e.g. Moran and Disney 2017).

In this acoustic context, the distribution of tables within the room, and the arrangement of visiting parties around them, influenced the nature of exchanges. In order to maximize the capacity of the visiting room, and enable as many visits to take place as possible, chairs and tables were closely packed. The fixed-down furniture was close enough that conversations could be overheard, a fact which affected their content. As prisoner Tom observed:

... the tables are that close it's unreal. ... you could hear the conversation ... a couple of tables away behind you, forward, everywhere. It's no good.

Mohamed concurred:

Tables are, like, next to each other. You've got, like, that much gap [indicates with hands slightly apart] between the next person and your family. So there is no privacy or anything. You can't all talk freely. You can't even hear each other because you have to speak up because everyone is all cramped together.

Not 'talking freely' was a multi-faceted, compound problem, which although perhaps seeming banal, has potentially serious ramifications. Incarceration places both considerable emotional strain on intimate relationships, and pressure on the practical circumstances of life, such as finances and parenting. A constant tension in visiting interactions is between providing mutual support and encouragement, and discussing the difficult realities of the situation, especially where the imprisoned individual may feel both at fault, and relatively powerless to help. This circumstance often means that difficult conversations (such as those about the future of intimate relationships, or the practicalities of life post-custody), are avoided or postponed until 'later', thus leaving critical issues unresolved, and unintentionally accumulating problems for the difficult period of post-custody readjustment and reintegration. Because of the background noise in the visiting room, and the spacing of the tables, prisoners, and visitors often struggled to make themselves heard to one another without raising their voices. Although some had no reservations about doing so, most felt uncomfortable discussing their intimate business so loudly, and therefore restricted topics of conversations to those appropriate to being overheard. As prisoner Simon reflected:

[Another prisoner's] chair will be more or less touching the back of your chair. [It affects] what you say about, what you actually talk about, yes. You certainly don't want them hearing about it. You might want to talk intimate with [your partner] and it stops all that doesn't it, really? Because you know that guy's got his back to your missus and he will definitely hear what you're saying. So you have to keep your conversations limited, really. It does limit you.

Prisoner Rick found wry humour in the situation, likening the visiting room to a group therapy session:

‘Cos it’s like – you’re sitting *there* – I’m sitting *here*, and then another one will be sitting *there* – so you’re just all close so you might as well just all sit in a circle! [laughs]

A member of staff reflected on the visitor experience of this proximity:

If you’re coming up to speak to your relative about something serious or important and you’ve got somebody sitting two centimetres away from you it probably just makes visitors feel uncomfortable talking about certain things that need to be spoken about.

Leaning and perching

Not talking about ‘things that need to be spoken about’ was the result of both the spacing *between* individual visits and the spacing *within* them; i.e. the arrangement of chairs and tables in relation to each other, and the degree of corporeal comfort that this arrangement afforded prisoners and visitors attempting to engage in intimate exchange.

The fact that the table was at knee height (to prevent contraband being passed underneath it out of view of staff or CCTV) separated visits participants further. If they sat back in their chairs they were much closer to *other* people than to their own companion (as described by prisoner Simon, observed in the visiting room, and depicted diagrammatically by the authors in [Figure 1](#)), and they had to shout across their table to be heard. If they leant forward across the table, they were both uncomfortable, and risked raising the suspicion of prison staff, as prisoner Mohamed implied:

You are too close to the person next to you. I mean you talk low. You can lean it, but it’s ... That’s when you’ve got problems leaning in, and all that.

In discussing the seating arrangements, prisoner Samir, serving his first prison sentence, poignantly described the lack of corporeal comfort, and how this affected his interactions with his wife:

It’s the distance, because of the way they’ve designed it ... , they’ve put like a big square table in the centre and the chairs my wife sits on are further back, so you really have to sit on the edge of your seat ... , you have to reach out to her. It’s a low table. It’s very low, a coffee table. So my wife, obviously, she really wants to hold my hands, so she’s sitting on the edge as well, and it’s very uncomfortable, very awkward. That matters. It’s not nice. It’s always uncomfortable throughout the whole time of the visits. You try to adjust, you try to make yourself comfortable. ... It’s like they want to try to divide you ... Obviously you want that closeness But the chairs are literally screwed down. The same with the table ... So what do you do? You sit right on the edge, and try sitting like that for an hour

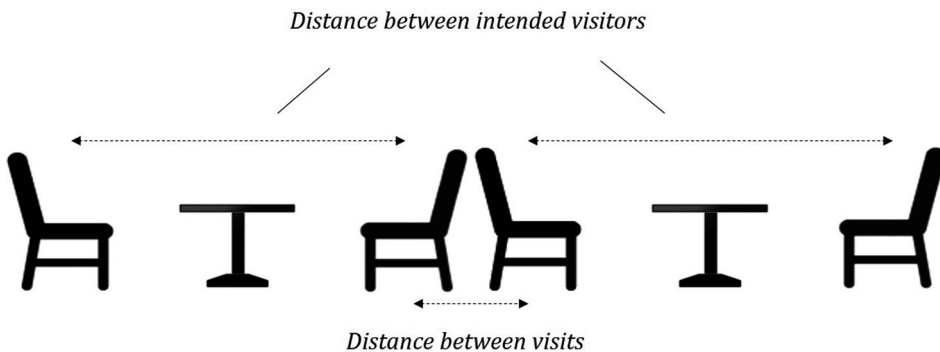


Figure 1. Distance between intended visitors, and between visits.

During his wife's first visit, realizing how uncomfortable the seating arrangement was, Samir had tried to sit next to her, but this was not permitted:

It's a shame she can't sit next to me. I found it very hard the first time ... I asked the officer, 'Look, can she sit ... ?' 'No, you can't.' 'Please?' 'No, you can't, otherwise they'll remove you. You'll have to go back to your cell ...'

Sitting opposite, rather than next to each other, a rule applied for security reasons, was described by visits participants as itself an abnormal mode of interaction, preventing them from engaging in intimate exchange. For prisoner Henry, the almost military-style arrangement of rows cast the visiting interaction in an unnatural light:

... it's just like army billet, just a row of chairs on one side, a row of chairs on the other and tables down the middle and you sit there and you face each other and it's very organised. There's nothing natural about it ...

Echoing Henry's sense of the unnatural in the nature of interaction mandated by the visits furniture, visitor Emma commented 'You can't forget it's a prison when you have a table stuck between you!' There were exceptions to this rule. Visitor Fiona described the advantage of proximity she and her partner enjoyed during visits because he sat in his wheelchair rather than in one of the seats provided:

Because he's in a wheelchair he can be closer to me than across the table. He's sort of to my side, if you like, which is a benefit and a bonus really, for us.

In this case, ironically, the fact that all the seats were fixed down meant that there was no option but for him to be positioned next to her, thus enabling a different quality of interaction to take place.

With such exceptions rare, most prisoners and visitors were effectively presented with a choice. One option was to sit back comfortably in their chairs but be unable to hear each other, meaning that they had to speak so loudly that some felt unable to discuss personal business. The other was to perch on the edge of their chairs and lean across the low table, so that they could hold hands, speak more quietly, and achieve a greater sense of privacy and intimacy for their conversation. The second option, although frequently chosen, came with a considerable degree of corporeal discomfort. Echoing prisoner Samir's rueful 'try sitting like that for an hour ...', visitor Cara complained 'I don't see any reason why the chairs can't be slightly closer together so you can hear, because I get a bad back, because you're straining'.

Prisoners and visitors with the experience of other visiting rooms contrasted the arrangements with provision elsewhere. Steve, who had served several prior sentences in a range of custodial establishments, described the advantages of a different table (depicted diagrammatically by the authors in [Figure 2](#)), for enabling both an element of contact with visitors, and the ability to hear what they are saying:

[Prison A]'s tables are like these tables, but smaller. And you can put your feet under them ... You can play footsie under the table, and it's, it's something. And you can hold hands. You're not dead-on, proper leaning right over. [Because if you do that at this prison] they tell you to sit back in your seat, and it's, like, you'd never hear anything.

Corporeal dis/comfort and working with chairs

Faced with the kind of corporeal discomfort described by Cara, and unable to comfortably sustain the perched position on the edge of their seats, visits participants would inevitably move around in their chairs, to relieve their aching backs, before once again leaning over to continue their conversation. But the spacing of chairs was not the only trigger for corporeal discomfort. For ease of cleaning, the visits room chairs were, as staff member Helen put it, 'very plastic-coated chairs that they wipe over'. The wipe-clean fabric upholstery caused its own issues. Officer Charlie told us

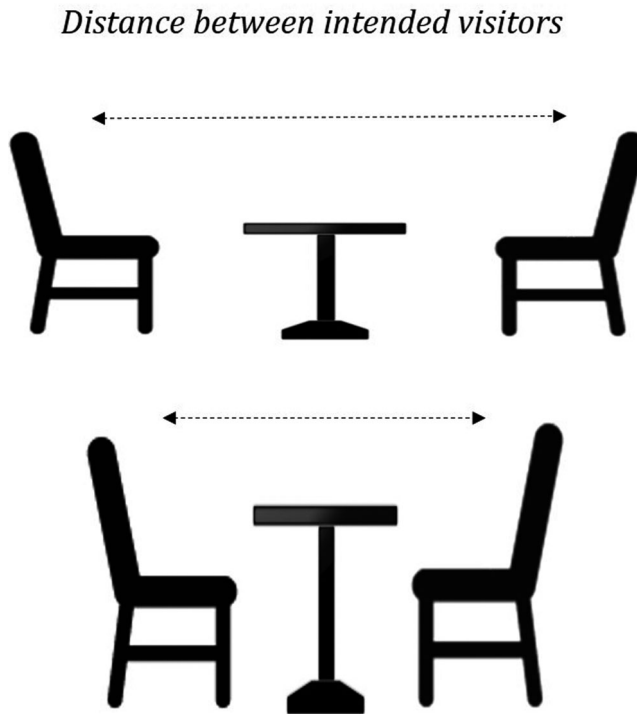


Figure 2. Table type, chair spacing, and visit proximity.

People complain about how sweaty their bums get in the summer on the seats. Especially when you think it's warm and it's shiny, and you'll see them all stand up and – sort themselves out – because it can't be nice when you're sat there for two hours forty-five ...

Although they sat on the same chairs around the same tables, the corporeal discomfort of the visiting room was experienced differently by prisoners and visitors due to the different restrictions they faced in that spatial context. Whereas visitors were allowed to go to the servery to purchase drinks and snacks, and visit the toilets, prisoners had to remain seated. This meant that whereas visitors had ample opportunity to stretch their legs and backs, and, as Charlie put it, to 'sort themselves out', prisoners did not. Visitors in particular felt this distinction, and related it directly to the duration of visits, as Emma noted:

The chairs are really uncomfortable. I know they have to be to a certain degree of safety. They're all nailed to the floor, so you can't move them, but they could, like put a cushion on them or something. ... it doesn't feel comfortable and you're in there for two hours. It's not so bad for the visitors, because you can get up and go to the toilet or go and get a drink for [prisoners] or something like that, but they have to sit there and they aren't meant to move. It's quite uncomfortable; it can be quite uncomfortable after a while. You're okay when you first go in and you're comfortable, you're happy to see them, but after about an hour, you start, like, going [sighs and fidgets] 'Oh, I'm uncomfortable'. I have back issues, so they're really bad for me. I really struggle with them.

This fidgeting, the oscillation between edge-perching and sitting back, and the getting up, rearranging clothing and sitting down again, are examples of what Bissell (2008, 1703) called the 'contingency forged between the body and the proximate environment' in the act of sitting. The condition of comfort, he argued, does not reside solely within the chair itself, but rather is an affective sensibility that has to be created, meaning that bodies have to '*work with chairs* to effect this sensation' (Bissell 2008, original emphasis). Although the body may *become* comfortable, through an active state which precedes the state of comfort itself, the comfort achieved is not indefinite – the body instead 'ebbs and

flows in and out of feeling comfortable', through a range of 'gestural strategies and tactics' (Bissell 2008) deployed to achieve such corporeal sensibilities, which requires the body to continually refigure its sedentary nature, through some degree of corporeal movement. Although the chair is therefore not the receptacle of comfort, he argues that the chair does act upon the body, thus 'mediating the nature of affect experienced *through the body*' (Bissell 2008, 1795, original emphasis). Describing situations which are engineered to be more or less comfortable, such as first-class aircraft seats (designed to engender the relaxation for which sitting passengers have paid a premium), and hard benches in waiting rooms (requiring the body-in-waiting to be alert and attentive rather than relaxed), he discussed the ways in which different chairs directly influence the types of affective sensibility felt through the body by mediating the ways in which bodies are used in relation to chairs.

In the perching, fidgeting and getting up and down described as characteristic of the bodily compartment of sitting in the visiting room, we see exactly this process in action. These corporeal agentive strategies are deployed to address the slide between comfort and discomfort, a slide which in many cases has been initiated by an attempt to remain corporeally still in a position (e.g. perching or leaning), an embodied compartment necessary for meaningful social interaction, but one which cannot long be sustained without inducing affective sensations of pain and discomfort. Whilst Bissell is quite right in identifying that the chair mediates interpersonal relations, 'rendering some forms of interaction less comfortable than others' and inducing 'different forms of intersubjective sociality' (2008, 1706), we would extend this argument.

Although given Bissell's focus on corporeal comfort, it is inevitable that the corporeal strategies deployed to achieve comfort will be discussed in this context, it is worth noting that it is not just corporeal (dis)comfort that can elicit them. As Anderson (2004), Smith and Narayan (2008), and Carriere, Seli, and Smilek (2013) contend, there is a well-established perception that such fidgeting indicates boredom, mind-wandering and inattentiveness, which we could argue are forms of emotional or psychological, rather than corporeal discomfort.

Sitting in a seat in the presence of others, Bissell argued (2008, 1704), drawing on Foucault (1991), is an 'occasion for the observation, classification and judgement of bodies'. In his exposition this takes the form of certain types of performative habitus (after Butler 1997) such as sitting with legs wide apart as an expression of heteromascularity ('manspreading') in contrast with a 'feminine' compartment that is 'tidy, restrained and deferential' (Youdell 2005, 255). However, it is also conceivable, as would be significant in our case study, that not only the culturally inflected chosen mode of sitting itself, but the corporeal tactics deployed to become comfortable, could be the subject of observation, classification, and judgement. In other words, the sighing and fidgeting of the visibly uncomfortable body may be read as indicative not only of an immediate corporeal discomfort which distracts from the conversation, but also of a broader discomfort with the interaction itself – i.e. of boredom, inattentiveness, and mind-wandering. Despite a shared acknowledgement of corporeal discomfort, it may be difficult, in this situation, to separate the non-verbal cues of distraction (fidgeting, shifting in one's seat) from other meanings commonly ascribed to them.

We saw some indications of this type of sentiment: when considering the ideal duration of a visit, visitor Naomi clearly expressed the impact of the seating arrangements – their low degree of comfort and their static nature – with a need to curtail the visit itself:

... the fact that you're sat on this really hard chair across from each other for two hours, I think two hours is good, yes. I think any longer it could start – what can you do after two hours? It's not like you can sit on his knee or have a cuddle or go for a walk or anything like that, you're just sat on a chair.

The duration of the visits was an important factor here, and the spatio-temporal experience of prison visitation recalls some elements of the notion of carceral timespace (Moran 2012), in that the experience of carceral time and carceral space are arguably inseparable. However, it is important to note that the inclination of some visitors, such as Naomi, to favour time-limited visitation, was driven primarily by their physical (and associated emotional) discomfort in the situation.

Rather than it being primarily the chair itself, as the nexus of assemblage of body and environment, which mediates interpersonal relationships, we argue that the affective complex of sitting in the visiting room is layered and complex. The chair, we posit, is inevitably located within a microgeography of placing and spacing relative to other chairs and tables. The nature of this microgeography means that in order to achieve a degree of closeness or intimacy, visits participants must arrange their bodies into positions which they know will quickly become uncomfortable, and then must sustain relative corporeal stillness in this uncomfortable position for as long as possible. Whereas in other, less constrained circumstances, the sitting body might shift its weight, continually refiguring itself to achieve comfort in ways which may not always require conscious thought or directed action, when the perching, leaning, sweatily uncomfortable body shifts in the chair in response to now-unbearable discomfort, this is a calculated action. Not only that, but it is in all probability a *calculated* action which has been consciously resisted for as long as possible, in order to prolong meaningful social interaction. And during the period when the uncomfortable body wanted to move, to reconfigure, to rearrange, but was instead held still, the experience of discomfort inevitably served to unhelpfully distract the active consciousness from the task at hand – the social interaction itself. And further still, whilst momentarily delivering comfort as bodily relief from discomfort, these long-resisted agentic corporeal strategies *themselves* mediate interpersonal relations, in that as well as temporarily disrupting meaningful interaction and intimate exchange, they may be ‘read’ as indicative of a sense of boredom of the interaction itself.

Too comfortable?

Although most prisoners and visitors bemoaned the fact that the visiting room was uncomfortable and ill-equipped to facilitate the kinds of interactions they would like, it would be unjust to present this as a unanimously-held opinion. For a few, conditions were not seen as problematic; they told us that they barely noticed the condition of the visiting room or the furniture and furnishings within it – the interaction with their loved one taking such primacy that context barely seemed to matter for them. Prisoner Mark had a strong view:

More than adequate ... what’s wrong with that for an hour or two? Innit? Is that bad for an hour or two? ... So why do you wanna be really relaxed and comfy?

For Mark, the notion of prison becoming at all ‘comfortable’ was negatively associated with institutionalization – the process of becoming so acclimatized and accustomed to the custodial environment that the ability to function on the ‘outside’ is inhibited – echoing Bissell’s (2008) description of comfort being conventionally associated with conservatism and complacency. In the fullness of the conversations we shared, many prisoners stressed that they actively tried not to feel ‘at home’ in the prison; not personalising their cell spaces, and not forming acquaintances with other inmates. So rather than preferring better visiting conditions to enable closeness and comfort, their feeling was that, like the cells themselves, visiting circumstances should not be too corporeally comfortable, so that they did not themselves become too comfortable being visited in prison, and therefore too comfortable being in prison per se. Therefore, the number and duration of visits, and the spaces set aside for them were good enough.

Conclusion

Our purpose in this paper was to advance geographies of intimate relations by considering the intimate exchanges which take place in a space of indistinction between public and private, and in so doing, to deploy recent conceptualizations of comfort as affective complex to understand, at the micro-scale, how intimacy might be ‘done’ in these spaces. By applying these perspectives, (specifically theorizations of the achievement of comfort for the sitting body), to the particular context of the

prison visiting room, we have been able to better understand the ways in which comfort as an embodied contingency forged between body and chair (chair acting on body, and body acting on chair), acts as a condition of possibility for the intimacy and closeness often desired during prison visitation, and thought to contribute to the positive observed effects of visitation.

Whilst this empirical example provides a useful ‘testing ground’ for such theorizations of comfort, it also provides, through the specific circumstances of prison visitation, an opportunity to examine the precise ways in which comfort, or lack thereof, mediates social interaction. Whilst concurring with Bissell (2008) that corporeal comfort does indeed enable effective interaction (and conversely that discomfort does not), we suggest that in circumstances such as this, where bodies are constrained in terms of the bodily movements available to them, the time available for the task at hand, and the social circumstances of the interaction itself, the nature of that corporeal comfort, and the bodily tactics deployed to achieve it, are particularly nuanced. In our example, the nature of chairs and their proximity to other chairs and tables, in a large and noisy room, impedes social closeness in such a way that prisoners and visitors who seek intimate exchange must not only adopt and maintain bodily comportments that cause them discomfort, but when unable to sustain them any longer, must achieve comfort through a series of bodily practices that further disrupt the interaction, both through the act of sitting back, standing up, or otherwise moving apart, and through the unintended communication of feelings of boredom or lack of engagement that can be read into these movements. In drawing out these complexities, we suggest that there is value in considering the diverse ways in which the bodily practices *involved in achieving* comfort-as-condition-of-possibility, when interpreted from a performative perspective, may simultaneously *undermine* the ability of the resultant corporeal comfort to act as such a condition.

We framed this study in relation to the beneficial effects of prison visitation in general, and specifically in terms of the observed propensity for closeness and intimacy within visitation to heighten such beneficial effects. Our purpose in doing so was to better understand the conditions of possibility for engendering such closeness outwith the home visits and conjugal visits which are unavailable to the majority of prisoners and their loved ones, especially in our UK study context. Our findings suggest that far greater attention should be paid to the microspaces of visitation, and that apparently banal and insignificant details such as the height of chairs and tables in relation to each other, the location and spacing of these within visiting rooms, and the materials from which they are fabricated, in fact hold a very great deal of significance. At a very basic level, this means that in large and acoustically challenging visiting rooms, tables and chairs should be arranged such that visits participants are closer to the person they intend to see than to anyone else, and that the relative position and height of tables and chairs should enable them to hold hands without having to perch on the edge of their seats. Whilst designers of visiting spaces necessarily attach importance to security measures, we would argue that, in terms of the intended purpose of visitation, equal attention should be paid to creating microspaces between and around visiting tables that at worst do not actively impede closeness, and at best actively enable it.

Of course, better conditions during prison visits cannot and will not address all of the tragic issues such as prisoners’ loneliness, shame, loss of rights to parenting, precarious familial situations, and economic stress, to which prison researchers rightly draw critical attention. Indeed, it could be argued by abolitionist scholars that advocating for more humane conditions within prison visiting rooms only accommodates carceral logics. However, we take the view that discussion of how societies punish should involve a focus on the design and functionality of humane prison spaces that better enable the types of interactions that prisoners and their loved ones desire. These could, alongside decarceration, constitute a vital component of radical justice reform.

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