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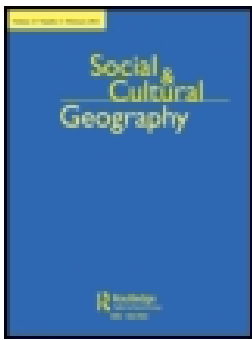
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'It's a horrible, horrible feeling': ghosting and the layered geographies of absent–presence in the prison visiting room

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ABSTRACT

This paper advances geographies of absence by considering the multiscalar, overlapping, ambiguous and reciprocal absences inherent in incarceration, and the compound nature of the experiential and embodied absences characteristic of prison visiting. It progresses extant literatures by considering as absent a group which differs from those previously thus conceptualised, and by postulating absence even when whereabouts are known and co-presence is possible. Drawing on a major RCUK-funded study of the socio-spatial context of prison visitation in the U.K., it brings carceral geographies and geographies of absence into productive dialogue, demonstrating that attention to the felt presence of absence in the context of prison visiting is highly revealing of the poignant and bittersweet nature of family contact during incarceration.

'C'est un sentiment vraiment affreux': le *ghosting* et les géographies à plusieurs niveaux de la présence absente dans la salle de visite en prison

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article fait avancer les géographies de l'absence en étudiant les absences inhérentes à l'incarcération, à plusieurs échelles, qui se chevauchent, qui sont ambiguës et réciproques ainsi que la nature composée de ces absences expérientielles et incarnées caractéristiques de la visite de prison. Il fait avancer les recherches existantes en considérant absent un groupe qui diffère de ceux qui ont été ainsi conceptualisés auparavant et en partant du principe qu'il y a absence même quand on sait où se trouve la personne et que la coprésence est possible. En s'appuyant sur une étude considérable financée par les Conseils de Recherche du Royaume-Uni (RCUK) du contexte socio-spatial de la visite en prison au Royaume-Uni, il amène les géographies carcérales et les géographies de l'absence vers un dialogue productif, en démontrant que l'attention accordée au ressenti de la présence de l'absence dans le contexte de la visite de prison est extrêmement révélatrice de la nature poignante et douce-amère du contact de la famille pendant l'incarcération.

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'Es un sentimiento horrible, horrible': *Ghosting* y las geografías superpuestas de la presencia-ausente en la sala de visita de la prisión

RESUMEN

Este trabajo potencia las geografías de la ausencia considerando las ausencias multi-escalares, solapadas, ambiguas y recíprocas inherentes al encarcelamiento, y la naturaleza compuesta de las ausencias experienciales y corporales características de la visita a la prisión. Avanza las literaturas existentes al considerar como ausente a un grupo que difiere de los previamente así conceptualizados, y postulando la ausencia incluso cuando se conoce el paradero y la co-presencia es posible. Basándose en un importante estudio financiado por el RCUK sobre el contexto socio-espacial de las visitas a las prisiones en el Reino Unido, lleva a las geografías carcelarias y geografías de ausencia a un diálogo productivo, demostrando que la atención a la presencia de la ausencia en el contexto de la visita a las prisiones revela de una manera considerable la naturaleza conmovedora y agri dulce del contacto familiar durante el encarcelamiento.

Introduction

On any given day, there are around 85,000 prisoners in the U.K. (Ministry of Justice, 2017), each of whom is absent from someone or somewhere. Amongst those who miss them are around 240,000 children, who share with other family members and friends the stress and anxiety of separation (Barnardos, 2014). Absented from the outside world by incarceration, prisoners' carceral presence is overt and documented. However, in reality (and apart from the uncommon event of escape), prisoners experience multiple forms of absence, not least their own from the world they have left behind, as a form of presence. Similarly, prisoners' loved ones negotiate as a presence the painful absence of the prisoner as a loved one, from everyday routines and experiences. Prisoners and their loved ones are therefore both present in and absent from each other's lives.

Whilst previous research into the material geographies of absence has tended to focus on the experiences of the absent, but returned (such as missing people, e.g. Parr, Stevenson, Fyfe, & Woolnough, 2015), or those coping with permanent absence, such as bereavement (e.g. Maddrell, 2013), in this paper we study absence from the perspective both of the parties experiencing it, and those whose role is to manage aspects of this absence. We argue that embodied and experiential absence is relative rather than absolute, that it can be felt at a heightened level in certain situations, and that the forms that it takes can be complex, unexpected, ambiguous, compound and multi-layered.

We advance the growing literature on geographies of absence (Frers, 2013; Ginn, 2014; Hetherington, 2004; Maddrell, 2013; Meier, Frers, & Sigvardsdotter, 2013; Parr et al., 2015; Sigvardsdotter, 2013) through exploration of prison visitation, conceptualising as absent a group not yet considered in this way within geography, and differing in significant ways from the deceased and the missing. We also contribute to scholarship of prison visitation, which while exploring the challenges faced by prisoners' families (see Codd, 2008; Comfort, 2008) has tended to neglect the visitation experience of the incarcerated (Moran, 2013a), and has remained somewhat aspatial (although see Moran, Hutton, Dixon, & Disney, 2017). Prison visits are widely understood to facilitate family contact and with it, supportive family

relationships which in turn better enable prisoners to desist from offending after release (e.g. Bales & Mears, 2008; Moran, 2013a). In this framing, the presence of visitors is taken to be indicative of the presence of family support in a much broader sense. Whilst much attention has been paid to these positive effects of visitation, contra challenges faced when prisoners have no family contact at all, far less consideration has been given to the micro-scale conduct of visitation (although see Foster, 2016 and 2017). Although visits which do not happen are mentioned almost in passing in criminological literature (as a source of distress (e.g. Grant, 2008), and as potentially a contributory factor in prisoners attempting self-harm or suicide (e.g. de Motte, Bailey, & Ward, 2012; Liebling, 1995, 1999, 2001; Mackenzie, Oram, & Borrill, 2003), thus far the wealth of research on prison visits and family contact has not trained attention onto the conduct and experience of intended or wanted visits *which do not happen*. We focus on the visiting room, both as the place in which certain types of multiple and overlapping experiences of embodied absence are most keenly felt, and as a spatial lens through which to conceptualise absences experienced elsewhere, both within, and far beyond, the physical space of the prison (Moran, 2013b). We consider here the ways in which the ensuing absences are variously enforced, negotiated and engineered.

We begin by discussing geographies of absence, in particular the paradoxical nature of 'present absence' (Bille, Hastrup, & Sorenson, 2010). We trace the ways in which absences are understood to have both material presence, and affective, emotional and corporeal implications for those who experience them. We then give an overview of methodology and context, before tracing various forms of absence in the prison context, presenting layered forms of absent-presence.

Geographies of (present) absence

Geographical interest in absence is a fairly recent phenomenon, but from the outset scholarship has noted the non-binary, co-constituted and co-existing nature of absence and presence. Shields (1992) described the collapse of the presence/absence dialectic as one of the distinguishing features between modernity and postmodernity, and this complex relationship has coloured subsequent work. DeLyser (2014, p. 41) identified four ways in which absence has featured in geographical scholarship; first 'elusive and evocative absences' described with the vocabulary of haunting and spectrality (e.g. Maddern & Adey, 2008); next embodied, experiential absences (Frers, 2013) for example of the deceased (Ginn, 2014; Maddrell, 2013; Stevenson, Kenten, & Maddrell, 2016; Vanolo, 2016), and the missing (Parr & Fyfe, 2012; Parr, Stevenson, & Woolnough, 2016; Parr et al., 2015). Third, absences of things (Hetherington, 2004), and last, absences in landscapes, in part through their decay and ruin (Edensor, 2005), their articulations with death and the deceased (Ginn, 2014; Wylie, 2009), and the possibilities of imaginatively reconstructing past landscapes (DeLyser, 2001). To these categorisations, DeLyser added the analytical and methodological possibilities of the absent, both in researching the origins of something that no longer exists, and indeed in finding expected information itself to be absent (DeLyser, 2014).

Much scholarship recognises that persons and things may be present in some senses, but absent in others (Jones, 2012), and rationalises the apparently oxymoronic nature of absent-presence as derived from Sartre's exploration of nothingness, experienced through a missed meeting in a café with 'Pierre'. When Pierre fails to arrive, his absence shapes the atmosphere of the café; the people, furniture and activity are felt and experienced in relation to his absence:

In fact Pierre is absent from the whole café; his absence fixes the café in its evanescence; it slips into the background; it pursues its nihilation ... It serves as a foundation for the judgement 'Pierre is not here.' It is in fact the intuitive apprehension of a double nihilation ... to be exact, I myself, expected to see Pierre, and my expectation has caused this absence of Pierre to happen as a real event concerning this café. (Sartre, 1956, p. 9, 10)

The ways in which the spaces of the café are thus experienced resonates with geographical work on the 'hauntological'. The negation of presence is experienced almost as a haunting, in that an 'absent presence reflects the apparently contradictory binding together of things absent with the present; whatever or whomever is absent is so strongly missed, their very absence is *tangible* (i.e. it becomes presence)' (Maddrell, 2013, p. 504, 505; original emphasis). Absence thus becomes palpable through the disruption of expectations; it is, as Frers notes, made real through the experience of the person missing something (2013, see also Meier et al., 2013).

In this paper we are concerned primarily with the first and second of DeLyser's (2014) categories: absence both as hauntological and spectral, and as embodied and experiential. The spectral and hauntological are recalled with use of the term 'ghosting', which is prison slang for the failed visits that form our core empirical focus. We concur with Maddern and Adey (2008) that the figure of the ghost is often used to apprehend the inexplicable or unexpected, but our focus is also on absence as 'a corporeal, emotional and sensuous phenomenon articulated in distinctly concrete, political and cultural registers' (Bille et al., 2010, p. 13). As Parr et al. (2016) noted, experiencing and negotiating absence can have debilitating impacts on those left behind, with routines reshaped by hyper-vigilance, unable to leave home in case a missed person should return. Bille et al. argued that phenomena may have a powerful presence in people's lives precisely *because* of their absence; a paradox that they refer to as 'the presence of absence' (2010, p. 4).

Like Parr et al. (2015, 2016), we seek to give voice both to those who are absent (including their own lived experience of absence), and those who have been left behind (and their experience of the absence of a loved one). Although in their research, the identification of the 'missing' rendered these categories relatively distinct, in the prison context we emphasise the nature of absence as mutual and reciprocal, and somewhat agentic. Parr et al. (2015, 2016) noted that for some who 'went missing' of their own volition, absence was a means of taking back control from a difficult situation: 'trapped within a social situation and physical location, ... the need to leave is expressed as a response to a time, place, or situation that can no longer be tolerated' (2015, p. 196). Unable to deal with situations *in situ*, absence created time and space to resolve traumatic feelings. In other words, becoming absent can be read as a form of agency.

At the heart of our study is the enforced (rather than elective) absence of prisoners from loved ones outside, experienced either as the result of the imposition of a custodial sentence in response to conviction for offending behaviour, or whilst on remand awaiting trial for the same. But we also find that absence can be deployed agentially, on both sides of the prison wall. Nested within this overall enforced absence, there are layered absences in which categories of 'absent' and 'left behind' are inconsistent, and in which absences are modulated by the agency of both parties, in bringing absence into being.

Like Parr et al. (2015, 2016) and Maddrell (2013), we focus on everyday, embodied absences. Reflecting their and Sigvardsdotter's (2013) approaches, we conceptualise prisoners and visitors as variously present and absent to each other, sometimes (and counter-intuitively), by choice. We note the complex, unexpected and multi-layered ways in which

seemingly mundane absences in the context of visitation are reflective of more significant absences, the ambiguity of absence, and the ways in which absence is used agentially, as a tool to manage relationships under the strain of incarceration.

Previous geographical engagements with incarceration, under the heading of carceral geography (Moran, 2013a, 2013b, 2015) have examined the lived experience of imprisonment, including the interactions between prisoners and visitors during periods of custody (Moran, 2013a, 2013b). However, in these studies, although there is an implicit understanding that prisoners are absent from somewhere and someone else, it is their *presence* in carceral spaces, or their co-presence with their visitors, which has tended to form the focus of research (e.g. Moran et al., 2017). Situating our work in relation to geographies of absence thus begs the question of *how* prisoners might be considered absent in relation to other absent groups, such as the deceased and the missing. Although some prisoners do die in custody, and others feel a sort of 'social death' in prison (Price, 2015), their position is not akin to that of the deceased in the work of Maddrell (2009), Maddrell and Sidaway (2010), and Maddrell (2013). Although 'missing' people (after Parr & Fyfe, 2012) may actually be in prison, and although on release prisoners may become 'missing' if they miss probation appointments, whilst in custody their location is known to the criminal justice system, if not to their loved ones. Neither are the families of prisoners in the same situation as those of the missing or deceased; although in a limbo position of sorts, their anticipation of a prisoner's return distinguishes them from families of the deceased (who know that the absent will not return), and of the missing, who face ambiguous and disabling loss, not knowing whether or not their loved one will return (Parr et al., 2016). The critical difference key to our study is that unlike the deceased and the missing, although absent, prisoners are (relatively) accessible. Although, as Maddrell (2013) has shown, mourners visit with the dead at graves and employ a variety of practices to sustain their relationship with the absent-present dead, prisoners occupy a different position. They can be brought into sight by those who miss them; not just vicariously, through spectral hauntings, keepsakes or memories, but, through the practice of prison visitation, in living flesh and blood. But the visit, despite being a co-presence of missing and missed unavailable to other absent groups, is itself, as we will demonstrate, a complex grouping of absences and presences.

Methodology

Data were generated during a three-year project exploring the socio-spatial context of visitation. Research access was granted by the U.K. National Offender Management Service (part of the Ministry of Justice), and at a local Category B and C prison in an English city,¹ which serves the local courts, and holds male prisoners both sentenced and awaiting trial and/or sentencing.

Data derive from a total of 58 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in 2015–2016, with prisoners, visitors and members of staff at the prison, and from field diaries. We conducted 32 30–90 min interviews with prisoners, exploring personal and family relationships and experiences of visitation during current, and any previous, sentences. Interviews were carried out in private interview booths within the 'legal visits' area of the prison (reserved for private consultation with legal representatives). Although for security reasons staff were present in the corridor outside, interviews could not be overheard. Respondents ranged from 21 to 56 years of age, with a mean age of 34. Most described themselves as White/

British; with a minority Asian/British or Black/African/Caribbean/Black British. The majority were serving at least their second prison sentence; some had already served more than ten. Although most were currently serving sentences of less than two years, the total time they had spent in prison varied, from less than one year up to more than ten years. (For individual respondents, sentences are described in time brackets (1-2 years, 10+ years, etc.)). Some were married or in a relationship; many of these, and others who described themselves as single, had children. Three-quarters felt that they had let their family down by being sent to prison, and almost all indicated that they wanted their family involved in their life. The respondents were, therefore, well-placed to reflect on absence from loved ones, most speaking during the latest of several periods of custody. Prisoners were all interviewed towards the end, rather than at the beginning, of their current sentences.

We conducted 15 interviews with prison visitors. Respondents were approached before visits in the visitors' centre (a booking-in facility outside the prison), and willing interviewees were interviewed off-site, to ensure privacy. Visitors were asked about experiences of visitation at this prison, and any other prisons they had previously visited – again, many were not in this position for the first time. Eleven members of staff were also interviewed. Five worked for a charitable organisation which assists in running the visits centre, while the remaining six worked for the prison in or around the visits room. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using NVivo software. Alongside these interviews, a fieldwork diary recorded events and interactions off-tape. Data are anonymised; all respondents are identified using pseudonyms.

Absences and presences

In what follows, we untangle the interwoven absences and presences that characterise incarceration for prisoners and their visitors, taking as our key locus of investigation the prison visit itself.

Multiple, layered and ambiguous absences

Prisoners and visitors experience and negotiate multiple layers of absence, and a degree of ambiguity seemingly inherent within it. As Boss (2010) and Parr et al. (2016) have argued, ambiguous loss involves physical absence but psychological presence, in a way that is particularly difficult and disabling for those involved. Although prisoners and their loved ones both know the cause of the absence (unlike those who miss missing persons), and are not waiting, for example, for a body to be located, there are particular types of ambiguity characteristic of this type of absence, and the types of absent-presence which are played out in and around the prison visiting room.

At a basic level, prisoners are made absent from society as a form of social control (Jones, Robinson, & Turner, 2012) and this absence is compounded by a lack of easy communication with the outside world, and (often) by disenfranchisement (Turner, 2012). Although incarceration removes prisoners from their former lives and routines, that world still exists for them, and its presence pervades the prison through daily reminders of absence. Aidan explained

It's hard, man. Trust me, it's hard. Especially when I look through my window as well and I can see that road so close but so far ... Like where my son is literally only, what, 60, 70 yards away

from the wall; I can see houses and everything and I think to myself, you know what? If I was on the other side of that wall, none of these things would be happening. (Aidan: 40, second time in prison, serving 1–2 years; Asian/British, married with four children aged 3–15)

Prisoners thus experience absence as a presence, a tangible circumstance that they recognise and contemplate. Similarly, families have to cope with the ‘ambiguous loss’ of the prisoner from their daily lives as, on one level, they are physically absent but psychologically present (being incarcerated), on another level they are physically present (in the visits room) but psychologically absent (seeming to be a different person, or to act in an unusual way) (see Arditti, 2005, p. 254, 255). Such experiences reflect the ‘ambiguous grief’ of those left behind by missing people who do not know whether their partner is dead or alive, and the ‘ambiguous loss’ (Parr et al., 2016) of being unsure of their location and their wellbeing. Many visitors describe a hole in their lives; multiple financial, emotional, parenting and childcare difficulties, and uncertainty about the future (see Comfort, 2008). Yet they often talk about the prisoner’s constant presence in their mind. Eddie told us about his son:

He’s on my brain ... all night and all day the next day. He’s on to me all the time and I’m constantly thinking about him. He rings me every day, Thank God. I’m forever sending him a few quid through and he does ring me every day if he can.

Both prisoners and visitors are usually aware of the presence of their absence for the other – just as visitors experience difficulties and loss with the absence of the prisoner, so prisoners know, and often feel badly about, the problems their absence causes.

However, circumstances can be complex, and ambiguous. Some prisoners told us that their absence was apparently no longer felt by those outside, leaving them feeling a new uncertainty and ambiguity about circumstances and relationships; unsure of how things stood and what this would mean for the future. One confided that when he had phoned his girlfriend to tell her his release date, the phone had been answered by her new boyfriend; his absence had apparently enabled the presence of another man. Another reported that his daughter had become exasperated with his frequent periods of custody, and no longer recognised him as her father. Conversely, lack of contact with an absent prisoner, especially one considered emotionally vulnerable, led to concern about the possibility of self-harm, or worse. Prisoners’ families can feel absence resembling that of the bereaved, especially if they already have reason to believe that their loved one’s life may be in danger. Mel described this:

The [other prison] ... was a lot more aggressive compared to this one. My work colleague, her dad committed suicide there, so that was very close to home, really. So when my son goes in there and all these different things are happening, and then he’s tried to commit suicide in the past, it’s traumatic for him. When he’s told he’s going to get 11 years, is he going to do it again? You’ve got all that on your shoulders all the time.

Emma similarly described how her partner was made absent to her through a breakdown in the prison communication systems his absence compounded existing fears about his safety inside the institution:

... it’s simple things like suddenly the other week the phone wouldn’t work; the phones weren’t working so he couldn’t phone me at all, for two days. I was like a nervous wreck the whole two days because I hadn’t heard from him, because you worry; you worry, did he get hurt? And you know what goes on. It’s a matter of pride in that place and it is all about fists and stuff like that, so that’s the worrying part I think.

Where prisoners and their loved ones feel the presence of absence, the absence is nuanced, and can be relative and ambiguous, rather than absolute. In other words, there are circumstances in which prisoners and their loved ones can feel more or less absent from each other, and in different ways, some of which resemble, albeit fleetingly, the absences felt by families of the missing or the deceased. In our study, amplified absence was felt when family members' assumed knowledge about a prisoners' absence was called into question, leading to a certain ambiguity born of uncertainty about his location and wellbeing.

For a prisoners' family, the location of the absent prisoner is relatively known; they are usually (although not always) aware that their loved one is incarcerated and they therefore perceive their presence to be geographically fixed. Although they may not know prisoners' *exact* location from minute to minute, there is some comfort in being able to pinpoint it to a particular institution, particularly for individuals who are prone to wander on the outside. Some visitors told us that they feel better knowing where their loved one is, and that (they think) he is protected from the kind of trouble he may have been involved in on the outside. Such knowledge of presence is, however, unstable and uncertain; although the prison system may seem spatially fixed (Martin & Mitchelson, 2009), it is in fact in constant motion, with prisoners moved between establishments at short notice, in response to specific rehabilitative needs, and pressures of overcrowding (Follis, 2015). As Turner and Peters (2016) have pointed out carceral spaces are underscored by mobilities which detain, immobilise, but also make mobile, incarcerated individuals. Prisoners may thus be moved unexpectedly and suddenly, with family and friends only discovering their absence when they arrive to visit. We spoke with a young mother who had travelled for over two hours with two infant children, arriving at the visitors' centre in time for a visit. Although allowed to book in, she returned from the prison, visibly upset, after only a few minutes: her partner had been moved to another prison, with no advance warning and no information about his destination. It later transpired that his move, to a distant prison, would more than double her journey time and cost. Similarly Tessa relayed the experience of having her partner moved on multiple occasions:

There's only once I actually got told, they rang me up on the morning of the visit, and went, 'Oh are you visiting [prisoner] today?' I said, 'Yeah', they went, 'He's been moved.' 'What?' 'Oh yes, he got moved this morning, so don't come up.' 'So now what?' ... They won't tell you anywhere, you know what I mean? Because obviously if they're en route you might intercept the van or something ...

For Tessa and the young mother, until they eventually learned their loved one's location, the felt absence resembled the 'ambiguous loss' (Parr et al., 2016) experienced by loved ones of the missing, unsure of their location and their wellbeing.

Likewise, a prisoner may be moved within the prison, either in response to illness, (e.g. to the clinic), a misdemeanour (to the segregation unit) or for their own protection (to the vulnerable prisoners' unit), and their availability for visits may be affected, either because of immediate disruption on the day of the move, or because of subsequent changes to visits entitlements. Furthermore, when a breakdown in communications occurs, the prisoner again becomes differently absent to the visitor, and the process often augments existing anxieties, including about safety. In the visits centre we spoke with an elderly woman trying to visit her son. She had been turned away from the prison; something that had happened before. It transpired that her son had been violent before both intended visits; on the first occasion she had been told that he had ripped a door from its hinges. This behaviour meant that a

visit wasn't possible, but his mother had not been told until much later why the visit had been cancelled. On the day, she had left confused, and worried about his welfare.

Although these examples deal with prisoners prevented from attending visits by powers beyond their control (movement decisions, or official responses to circumstances within the prison), some elect not to receive visits. Absence from their families is a painful experience, and some mitigate this by isolating themselves, refusing visits because of the way in which contact heightens their feelings of removal from the world outside, and powerlessness in relation to the concerns of their family. Tom told us

[Visiting] can leave you angry or feeling depressed as well ... Because you've got no control over anything out there, have you? If something is going on, what can you do about it? You can't do anything. You're in limbo. As long as you're in prison, you're in limbo. There is nothing you can actually do about anything. (Tom: 27, in prison 2–5 times before, for 1–3 years in total, now serving 1–6 months; Mixed Race, married with one infant child)

Tom's reasoning highlights the multifaceted emotional impact of absence; although seeing family members in a visiting session might temporarily ease the pain of absence, it heralded another set of issues. Made aware of problems facing his family that he feels powerless to address, Tom's refusal of visits could be understood to be a form of agency, (Parr et al., 2015; Sigvardsson, 2013) with prisoners' refusal of visits intended to protect themselves, and in some cases their visitors, from the visit itself. Ben described his logic:

To be honest with you, I wouldn't want my mum to visit me in prison. I don't want some prison officer to try and search my mum. They haven't done nothing wrong; they shouldn't have to go through that. Visits is very high security and they can strip search people and I don't want my mum to – no. (Ben: 22, second time in prison, serving 1–6 months; White, single, no children).

These examples describe instances in which the prisoner is absent from the visit room – either because he has not arranged a visit at all, or because he is not there when a visitor arrives. These latter instances can be experienced as inconvenient, upsetting, even traumatic for the visitors, having made the effort to visit and prepared themselves emotionally for what can be a difficult experience. However, the same scenario can play out in reverse; visitors do not always attend visits, resulting in a prisoner being 'ghosted'.

Ghosting

Reminiscent of its use in online dating, where an individual unexpectedly withdraws from communication, 'ghosting' is prison slang for a prisoner's visitor failing to arrive for an arranged visit, leaving the prisoner alone in the visits hall while other visits take place. Just as in online dating, where sudden and unexpected rejection can compound feelings of loneliness (Lawson & Leck, 2006), such failure of a visit can have considerable implications beyond its immediate emotional and affective impact. If dating rejection is experienced as mini-bereavement, then the failure of a visit, whether or not it is indicative of the end of a relationship, may compound the feelings of loss inherent in separation through incarceration, and as discussed earlier, may contribute to stress, self-harm and suicidal behaviours (de Motte et al., 2012; Liebling, 1995, 1999, 2011). There are many reasons for ghosting, which we will explain shortly, but it is worth first detailing the technical process through which a visit is arranged in our case study prison.

Responsibility for organising a visit fell to prisoners. During the hours unlocked from a cell, they visit an electronic kiosk (like an Automatic Teller Machine) on a residential wing,

and view the visits slots available. They then reserve one, selecting visitors from a list of pre-approved persons, making a note of the date and time, and contacting them, usually by phone; (either the shared wing telephone, or a prison phone inside a cell, if provided). Given the lack of real-time communication with visitors, any necessary information about work shifts, transport arrangements, school terms, childcare etc. that may affect visitors' ability to visit, would need to be obtained in advance. If an unsuitable slot is initially chosen, it may not be possible to change it if the kiosk is busy, or remaining slots already taken. Prisoners may be unlocked too late in the day to obtain the slot they ideally want. Despite these drawbacks, the intention is that prisoners take responsibility for one of the few things they can influence (when access to property, food and TV are regulated, and personal liberty limited) – family contact.

Even with the best of intentions, visits sometimes fail, and just as visitors unable to visit their incarcerated loved ones experience disappointment and distress, being 'ghosted' as a prisoner can be a challenging experience, especially since most prisoners in our study were entitled to only two visits per month. In this prison, prisoners enter the visits hall first, to await their visitors. There was a 30-min 'grace' period after the visits session had started during which visitors could arrive late, to allow for delays in searching, transport problems, and so on. During that period, prisoners whose visitors had not come could sit alone at a visits table unaware that their visitor was not going to arrive. Tom described that wait:

... you are meant to sit out on a visit for like 30 min and it's shit when you've got other visitors coming round. You've got visitors coming in, people eating and that, and you are just sitting there and having to wait through that timeframe, you know?

Embarrassment is a common emotion. Steve:

... You've got to sit there in front of all the other visitors, and watch it go on. And I'll tell you something, it's the most humiliating thing that I think you'll ever go through ... All them other people's visitors are offering you drinks and – it's embarrassing, you know? (Steve: 23, in prison 2–5 times before, for 1–3 years in total, now serving 1–6 months; White, single, no children).

In an echo of Frers' observation that the 'absence of the father one has only met once can become stronger every time one watches someone else interact with their father' (2013, p. 439), David described the embodied and emotional experience of other visitors exacerbating the present absence of his own visitor:

... my mate was coming up to see me, and I've gone onto the visit, and I've sat there and he, he ain't turned up, so you're all sat there and waiting for a visit, and everybody's got their visitors, and your one ain't turned up ... [It made me feel like] Billy-no-mates, kind of thing. Yeah, it ain't nice, t'ain't nice to be sat there, like. I mean, the guy whose visitors had come to see him offered to buy me a coffee while I was sat there ... You've sat there waiting, thinking 'Come on, bloody hell, I don't want to be sat here on me own' ... It's [a] horrible, horrible feeling. (David: 34, in prison 2–5 times before, for 1–3 years in total, now serving 1–6 months; Asian/British, single, no children.)

The absence of a visitor is also felt even by some prisoners whose visitors *have* arrived, in that it can create a tense atmosphere in the visits room. Jason:

... something would happen and people can't – didn't – don't arrive or whatever ... and that creates a tension within itself. So, until actually everybody's in, and perhaps a couple of people who haven't got a visit for some reason, go out ..., then it calms down. (Jason: 36, in prison 10 + times before, for 10 + years in total, now serving 6–12 months; White, single, four children aged 5–18).

The visiting space becomes 'haunted', non-appearing visitors become 'ghosts – that is, *the sense of the presence of those who are not physically there*' (Bell, 1997, p. 813, emphasis

in the original), whose haunting can be felt and lived through flushes of humiliation, unwanted stares, and offers of hot drinks from other prisoners' visitors which are felt as pitying.

Alongside the embarrassment of sitting alone in a room full of people, the absence of the visitor is tinged with associated worry about their non-arrival, in ways which mirror visitors' own feelings of absence, themselves resonant with the missing and the deceased. Given the lack of real-time communication, prisoners are left wondering what has happened. Jon was confident that his partner would come, but her absence sowed seeds of doubt. Where was she? What was she doing? With whom? Did her absence from the visit signal her absence from their relationship? He described his thoughts at that moment:

Anything could go through your head. 'What? Why wouldn't they turn up? For what reason have they not turned up?' You know? You'd be thinking 'What's going on here?' (Jon: 23, in prison 2–5 times before, for 1–3 years in total, now serving 6–12 months; White, single, no children).

David remembered that he had subsequently been told by his friend that his car had broken down, preventing him attending the visit 'From what he told me, like'; but he had no way of verifying this information, and worried that his friend had simply decided not to come. Similarly, prisoners expecting a visit from their romantic partner read ghosting as a signal of the relationship's instability. Aidan:

The last three visits she's ghosted me. She said, 'I wouldn't be able to look you in the eye'... Just waiting and waiting and I'll just be told, 'Look, you've been ghosted, no-one's come'. It makes you think like 'She didn't even bother to come and see me. I could never do that to someone in prison because it's not like I can pick up the phone and ring her whenever, she can pick up the phone and ring me.

When he was able to speak to his partner on the phone later, Aidan discovered his fears were well-founded, and that his partner's absence from the visits hall had indeed signified her absence from their relationship.

So you get on the phone and it's just excuses. Like one excuse, I don't know, she's come out with loads of excuses but in the end I think it was all just lies. It was all because she'd slept with the guy so couldn't look me in the eye. I don't know. Maybe she had respect for me not to be able to look me in the eye.

Simon described a different set of fears when ghosted:

You think, 'Oh shit, what's happened?' You think 'But hold on a minute, I phoned', but sometimes you probably haven't phoned to see or if you have phoned, [and] she told me she was coming, 'I wonder what happened? I hope she hasn't been in a car crash'. Anything could happen isn't it? It has actually happened to people, someone's gone back to the wing and they've gone back on the phone, 'Your bloody mum's been in a car crash.' (Simon: 41, in prison 6–9 times before, for 10+ years in total, now serving 4–10 years; White, in a relationship, two infant children)

Visitors' absence in the visiting room, felt as a palpable fear for their safety, caused Simon to hurriedly reflect on their last interaction, examining it for information. Although his visitors had been turned away for not having appropriate ID, he had feared the worst. In that moment in the visits room, and until he'd been able to speak to his family later, he had feared that their absence was suggestive of absence of a more fundamental nature, and he fleetingly felt it as a portent of a different type of loss.

Absenting

We first discussed the complex reasons why prisoners may be prevented from having visits, before suggesting that sometimes they may *elect* not to have them. Likewise, visitors' reasons for ghosting prisoners, and prisoners' knowledge about those reasons, are also complex and diverse. Some visitors are obstructed by car breakdowns, traffic jams, illness, lack of childcare. They are critically aware of the impact of ghosting on their imprisoned partner. Karen:

I mean, it's never happened to me but I've seen it happen and it's devastating, especially for them. If you can't get in they have to just sit there and wait in the middle of a room and ... They tell them that they're not coming, or someone's not turned up but they still have to sit in that prison visiting room, wait for at least, I think it's 45 min, and they sit there and just – my partner's always said to me, 'I'd hate that'.

Louise:

How horrendous if you really didn't get there till the cut-off time and they went, 'No, you can't come in, and it weren't even your fault because you've been stuck on the motorway with delays. That would be terrible because they'd be in there thinking, 'Why have they done this?' And you'd be there outside the prison and there's nothing you could do about it and it wouldn't be your fault.

Sometimes absence is not straightforward. Visitors reported instances when they had arrived for a visit, and had been prevented from entering the prison because of ID irregularities, but this information had not been communicated to the prisoner they had come to visit, leaving him thinking that they had not turned up. Karen recollected an occasion when she had forgotten her daughter's birth certificate and could not bring her into the prison. She had asked for her incarcerated partner to be informed, but later found out that this had not happened.

Yes, he was quite embarrassed really because they didn't even tell him that I'd been and gone. They just said I hadn't turned up. I asked them to tell him that obviously I'd turned up and they wouldn't let my daughter in, but obviously at the time they told him that I just hadn't turned up and he had to wait to be escorted back [to the wing].

Similarly, Rick remembered when his sister had been unable to bring his son to visit because of lack of ID. He had talked to his sister by phone after the event, and found out that when she had realised en route that she didn't have the right documents, she had tried to contact the prison to clarify the situation, to avoid Rick feeling as if he had been ghosted:

'Cause my sister did say 'If they can't let him [the son] in then let me know now and then I'll cancel the visit so he [Rick] don't have to go and sit out there'. And like, you know what I mean, like, I don't know that so I'm getting mad at my sister saying, 'Why the fuck you ain't come?' and that and ... She – it's only when I, like, listened to my sister ... [that I realised] that it weren't even her fault; it's just they never let her in, innit? (Rick: 23, in prison 2–5 times before, for 1–3 years in total, now serving 1–6 months; White, single, one infant child)

Although these testimonies are riven with obvious mutual concern and affection, this is not always the scenario. Visitors may also consciously *choose* to absent themselves from the prisoner's world, perhaps as a form of self-preservation because it is too painful to see an imprisoned family member, or sometimes even as a means of 'punishing' prisoners for their misdeeds by withdrawing their in-person support, as Tessa describes:

We've had arguments [which meant] that I've not come, do you know what I mean? We've had arguments and I'm like, 'You know what, stay where you are. Bye! Later!' or whatever. 'I'll speak to you whenever I'm ready.' And I've just not come on a visit. I think I've done that twice to him.

Many of the absences which characterise prisoners' and their families' status come into sharp focus in the visiting room. Reasons for absences are multifaceted, and while prisoners and their families are often conceptualised as lacking in agency and power, both can absent themselves as form of exercising control, reflective of the ways in which Parr et al. (2015) found that missing people exercised agency by going missing.

Whilst ghosting is clearly indicative or symptomatic of other forms of absence, its experience can actively *compound* absence. Steve:

I've refused to sit in the visiting room until my visitors are there. [Another prison] have come to a point now where if you don't 'sit out' you forfeit your visit, you know, and I've forfeited it twice, because the officers don't understand I cannot sit in them rooms ...

Prisoners like Steve found ghosting so unbearable that they forfeited their visits entitlement in order not to be at risk; the experience of absent presence in the visits room was so intolerable that they preferred to absent themselves completely from in-person family contact.

Steve's issue with ghosting was as much about the management of the process as the actual absence of his visitors – his complaint was about being made to 'sit out' in the visits hall before it was clear that his visitors were actually coming. Management of ghosting is a key issue, and although we have focused thus far on prisoners' and visitors' experiences of absence, there is a third group with a role to play in this process. Staff manage visits; they register and search prisoners and visitors, supervise the visits hall, and importantly, are responsible for passing on information about absences, and indeed for managing the presence of some in the intended absence of others.

When a prisoner has been ghosted, duty staff let the prisoner know that his visitor has not arrived, and arrange his return to the wing. Some prisoners gently resisted the procedure, asking staff to extend the deadline for visitors' arrival, just in case their loved one was running late. An officer told us:

... most of them try and, like, trade you for another 15 min to keep the door open, just in case: [They'll say] 'I'm sure they're on their way. When I spoke to them they said they'd just left the house, and it only takes them 20 min, and they'll be on their way. Can we keep it open for another 15 min?' So most of them will try and barter with you a little bit: 'She said she was outside when I phoned her an hour ago'.

In these situations, staff were caught in a bind. Prisoners had spoken to loved ones ahead of visits and been assured that they were coming, but sometimes staff knew that visitors actually had *not* arrived at the prison, and that the prisoner may have been misled. An officer explained how this scenario sometimes played out:

Then you get into the realms of, 'Why haven't you let them in? She was at the Visit Centre', and there's no way you can say to them, 'But your visitor's lied, because she wants you to think that'. You can't say that. So you have to say, 'Possibly there was a mix-up. Maybe you misunderstood, anything like that, and say, 'Go back and give her a ring'. But a lot of them blame the staff for not letting them in, when they actually haven't come. You can't say, 'She was never here'.

Although there are many potential reasons why visitors may be prevented from attending a visit, these observations suggest that occasionally visitors intentionally allow prisoners to think that they will be coming to visit, when they do not intend to turn up. But there are many potential reasons for this scenario too; visit centre staff observed that sometime visitors who were struggling to manage, perhaps unable to afford to travel, and unwilling to disclose the problem, would not tell prisoners that they were unable to come, in an attempt not to

worry them. Some prisoners explained both that they understood that practical issues could disrupt visits, and that family and friends visited at their own discretion. Simon:

... You do get a bit angry sometimes, yes. [But] when you find out what the reason is, you think 'Fair enough'. [You get angry at] the people that never turned up. [But] not how you want to rip their heads off! I feel let down and stuff, but then you've got to realise at the end of the day, you've put yourself in here, you've put yourself in this situation, they've got their own lives out there and like I say, anything could have happened. Run out of petrol, car crash anything, punctures, whatever. A lot of women can't even change a bloody wheel can they?

Although ghosting is usually described as a difficult experience, for some prisoners it either becomes the norm, in that they cannot rely on their visitors' attendance, and half-expect to be ghosted. In some cases they attend visits knowing, perhaps ruefully, that they will be left alone. Even if they are ghosted, there is arguably some benefit in a change of surroundings and an opportunity to spend some time away from the wing. An officer noted:

The ones who don't turn up are expected. I think some of them come out just for a stroll to get off the wing ... Nine times out of ten, they just say, 'Yes, okay, I'm off. I didn't think they were going to turn up anyway'. They're off, they just go for a walk.

Accidental, inadvertent or intentional visitor no-shows did not exhaust the absences we observed. Although prisoners did not describe this type of behaviour themselves, some officers spoke of occasional scenarios where prisoners with multiple partners managed absence strategically, engineering the absence of one (or more) partner(s) to enable the presence of another. Staff concern was partly about the sensitivity of their own uneasy complicity in managing these visits. One officer discussed better and worse ways to handle a visit when one of a prisoner's multiple partners was present:

You shouldn't really walk over ... and say, 'Oh, you weren't the woman that came in last week!' ... One [visitor] used to say [to me], 'How many visits does he get? Because I'm only seeing him twice [a month] ...' [I'd say] 'He doesn't get that many, unfortunately', whereas he actually gets four a month, but he's splitting it between three of you, but you can't say that!

Another described handling a similar situation differently, but still with concern for the relationship between the two people present at each visit:

... some lads, they'll have a different girl on every visit, and I'll say [before she arrives], 'It's not the one that came last time is it?' and I say it with a smile on my face and as banter. ... But you've got to be very careful, very, very careful with their relationships because the last thing you want to do is damage their relationships at all.

In these cases, staff concern is for the partners as well as the prisoner, and specifically, for how the partner is coping in the prisoner's absence. An officer related her thoughts:

I was more concerned about her, more than anything, and then not only is she worried about the fact that he's in prison: 'What's he doing, is he all right, is he alive?' [But also worrying that] 'I'm not the only one?' So not only has she got all that, and the fact that she's now paying for a house and whatever else by herself, looking after a kid by herself, so ...

Absence while present

So far we have discussed absences in terms of no-shows and ghosting, and the more fundamental types of absence that could be denoted by these non-appearances. It is important to note, however, that prisoners in particular sometimes felt that even visitors' *presence* in the visiting room could be inflected with absence. In other words, just as an absence can be

felt as a presence, a presence can be felt as an absence. Visitors and prisoners sometimes inadvertently generated absence in each other's company; the unusual social context making conversation stilted and difficult, leaving an awkward silence between them (Frers, 2013). This officer observed that visitors temporarily managed such situations by absenting themselves from the visits table:

Some visitors will actually leave to go to the loo, and say [to me], 'Oh my God, how long have I got left?' [I'll say] 'You can leave whenever you want.' 'I know, but I can't, because I'm here to support him, but I've run out of things to say.'

This experience of uncomfortable silence in each other's company is indicative of the impact of incarceration upon relationships. There to support him, but unable to conceal her feelings in person, she used a toilet break as a means to maintain their relationship by not upsetting him during a visit. Conversely, some visitors seemed to use in-person silence and detachment to intentionally signal an underlying distance from their incarcerated partner, interpreted by some prisoners as indicative of lack of commitment to their relationship. Ashley:

She'll give me like a little fake smile. I'll ask her if she's all right ... I'll tell her I love her and she won't say she loves me. Like normally if I say, 'Oh I love you, you know? She'll be like, 'I love you' back, innit. Like straightaway. But if I say it – if she's not in a good mood and I say, 'I love you' she'll just say, 'Oh, all right, okay'. And that will be it, she'll go quiet, innit. Then I'll know something's wrong with her. She won't give me eye contact or stuff like that, get what I mean? I know something's wrong. (Ashley: 26, in prison 2–5 times before, for 1–3 years in total, now serving 1–6 months; Black/British, single, no children).

Other visitors would vocalise their concerns about the sustainability of the relationship. Jon remembered his partner being explicit about her doubts:

She's on about people who've put it on her whilst I've been in. You know, lads that have tried it on with her ... Like she said before, 'It's getting hard staying faithful to ya' and I'm saying, 'Why?' And she said, 'Cause I'm used to sex and I ain't getting sex with you,' and all this. Horrible. When she said that I was thinking, [lowers voice] 'Fuck it', you know? She says stuff like, 'I'm thinking about do I wanna be with ya? You're a jail-head, you're always gonna be in jail, ain't ya?'

Conclusion

Our purpose in this paper was to demonstrate that, as Meier et al. (2012, p. 6) put it, 'absence is all but a void'. By turning attention to absence in the context of prison visitation, we have been able to demonstrate its lived and material complexity, in terms both of absent presence and present absence, and the layered, ambiguous and compound absences which manifest in this situation.

We opened this paper by noting that prisoners, although manifestly absent from 'society', have not yet been considered as such within geographies of absence. Although their absence shares key similarities with the missing and the deceased, they differ in important ways, perhaps most significantly in that during an enforced absence from which they are expected to return, prisoners can be made visible to their loved ones through visits. We have shown, however, that although visits may be simplistically understood as moments of co-presence of prisoners and visitors, these moments are in fact complex articulations of overlapping and multiple absences and presences which are variously indicative and generative of broader and less tangible, and sometimes ambiguous absence. As these absences and

presences are negotiated, both by prisoners and their loved ones, and the officers who manage visits, feelings of absence shift and change.

As DeLyster (2014) has noted, tracing absences opens up possibilities for the emergence of new stories and new knowledge. Our exploration of visitation suggests that not only is imprisoned absence embodied, experiential, contingent and relational, but that there are parallels between those who miss the incarcerated and are missed by them, and those who miss the missing or the deceased. We make two observations. First, that geographies of absence might productively expand empirical range, to encompass those whose experience might similarly complicate notions of absence and presence. Second, that management of prisoners and their loved ones during periods of custody might draw upon approaches taken to missing persons and bereavement. Although imprisonment of a loved one is often glibly referred to in this manner, seldom is the experience of incarceration and its lived and experiential absence treated seriously in this way.

Aside from these contributions to scholarly endeavour, better understandings of ghosting are critical for a number of practical reasons. It is widely accepted that family contact is crucial to supporting better post-custody outcomes for incarcerated persons, and criminal justice systems and individual prisons, including the U.K. system and our own case study prison, direct resources towards supporting family contact in general and visitation in particular. However, whilst attention is paid to at the strategic level, i.e. at the level of provision of visiting facilities and schemes to assist families with the costs of visiting, relatively little attention is paid to the micro-scale conduct of visits themselves, and, for example, to the ways in which breakdowns in communication, and the implementation of apparently pragmatic policies (relating to prisoner movement between and within institutions, and to 'sitting out' in visit rooms before visitors arrive) impact negatively upon the personal relationships that visitation is precisely intended to support.

Note

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 for whom 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.

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