

Changing Bodies, Ambivalent Subjectivities, and Women's Punishment

Dr. Anastasia Chamberlen

Department of Sociology, University of Warwick

A.Chamberlen@warwick.ac.uk

@a_chamberlen

Background: Embodying Punishment: Emotions, Identities and Lived Experiences in Women's Prisons

- Women's experience of imprisonment and their embodied identities during and after prison
- Health and Wellbeing in custody; coping and survival in prison via the body ; the embodied 'pains of imprisonment'; and the embodied presentation of self during and after prison.
- This paper: The situational construction of bodies and subjectivities, and changes in women's self-perceptions and body-image in and out of prison.

Method

- ▶ 24 qualitative case studies; biographical interviews with former women prisoners in different parts of England
- ▶ RQ1: What is the relationship between bodies & punishment?
- ▶ RQ2: How do women articulate their lived experiences in custody and post release, and what are the bodily effects of imprisonment on their overall identities?



Theoretical framework 1: Feminist critiques of punishment

- ▶ Adrian Howe (1994): we need a feminist critique of penality through an **examination of the ‘punishment – body’ relation.**
- ▶ Mary Bosworth and Emma Kaufman (2013): **scholarship on punishment still has much to derive from feminist and gender-aware perspectives.** Like Howe, they also identify theorisation on bodies and embodiment to be one of the most significant discussions to emerge from feminist writing, and invite scholars to engage with it in order to study punishment in all its complexity and contradictions (Bosworth and Kaufman 2013: 191).



Theoretical Framework 2:

Phenomenology

- ▶ A phenomenological perspective that is attentive to the lived-experiences of women, and illustrates both how women cope with punishment through their bodies as well as how they use their bodies to resist prison-specific and social pressures.
- ▶ A notion of embodiment informed by the phenomenological work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.
- ▶ Embodiment encompasses ‘the bodily aspects of human subjectivity’ (Audi 1999: 120) and attends to the capacity of the body to be both an ‘objective’ entity, and an embodied subject.
- ▶ Bodies form the foundation of our ability to perceive and give meaning to the world and to ourselves (Merleau-Ponty 1962).



The permeability of prison space & time

- ▶ All of the themes discussed in this paper allude to the *permeability* of prison space, time and values and the power of heteronormative, gendered norms (Butler 1990; 1993) and patriarchal commodity aesthetics (Baudrillard 1998) to forge embodied identities for women both during and after their imprisonment.
- ▶ Attention to the embodied dimension of punishment can thus also highlight how oppressive structures from both inside and outside prison walls enmesh to create a sense of double oppression for these women.



Changing Bodies

- ▶ “You are not doing much in there, so you have time to notice what time’s done to you. You get **old in prison before your time**. For me it was the drugs [I used before], but prison [too]. [It] takes life out of you.” (Eve)
 - ▶ “When I came out of prison, I was putting more and more weight on and that was, my *success marker*. Because the drugs had stripped everything away from me, I was so skinny and ill, so when I came out of prison I was proud of my fat; I thought it showed how well I was doing.” (Katherine)
 - ▶ “But then you put on these massive amounts of weight. It was quite bad actually, because my mum couldn’t afford to buy me new clothes so if it wasn’t for my friend [in prison], **I wouldn’t have clothes to wear inside**. Even though you are not supposed to lend your clothes to other girls, but I had to borrow some, there was no other way.” (Erika)
-
- 

Self-Injury as Coping

- ▶ “It started because I was far away from my family, I felt alone and helpless, I didn’t want to be in prison, so I used a razor. When you first go in, they ... ask you if you self-harm and I said ‘no’. And so they gave me a razor to shave when [I] shower, so I used that. But then one night I cut myself too deep, and I was bleeding too much, so I pressed the buzzer. They kept asking me how I did it, I wouldn’t tell them at first, but then ... the nurse told the officers [...] Most of the times I did it, it didn’t even help me to be honest ... **it helped to watch it happen I guess, to see the blood run, to know I could do it, that helped for a bit.**” (Tanya)



Resisting through the body

- ▶ “The first couple of weeks I was getting quite nervous about [the hair] [...] because I didn’t have all the stuff I use at home, it had to stay natural, you know? My hair gets quite big and out of control if you don’t do anything to it. So in [prison] I couldn’t keep it down. They did have straighteners but, with my hair I’d need 2-3 hours to do just that [...] **So I decided to just let it be.** Eventually, and because the other girls would tell me too, I started liking it. It started feeling more like me, you know? I’d associate with it and think it showed more the *real* me.” (Iris)



Managing an ex-prisoner identity

- ▶ “I’ve been trying to change the way I look the past few months just to avoid [looking like an offender]. I’m forty-two now, so I’m a middle-aged woman, but even 5-6 years ago, **I’ve started to dress differently**. Before my first prison sentence, I would always dress as young as possible. When I came out of prison, I made a conscious decision to dress as a middle-aged woman, even before I was. Because I felt that people took me more seriously. I felt I would be less judged, I would have more opportunities, maybe I could even get a job or go places I wouldn’t otherwise go to. I’ve tried to make myself look more like a ‘mum’, less track suits and trainers and **more serious, feminine and pure look**. Even the shops I shop from now are more like Marks & Spencer rather than Topshop. **I tried to dress a bit older, because it makes people automatically think you are a different person**. Before when I dressed like a young girl ... I got more ... well, certain people around here know I shoplift anyway, but even if I went to another town, if I dressed that way, I would get followed in a shop anyway. If I dress the way I do now, even here where people know I used to shoplift, people don’t recognize me anymore, because **after prison I look fatter, I dress more feminine, I look more normal I guess.**”

(Alicia)



Dealing with Stigma

- ▶ “You walk down the street and people look at you, you know, they know you were a waster once, and they go on with their lives, they don’t know what it’s like to be hungry, they don’t know what it’s like to go without, and **because we haven’t got the best of everything, no decent clothes, no opportunities to be tidy and clean [after prison], I feel like everyone is judging you all the time, it’s so hard.**” (Berta)
- ▶ “Definitely, I think about [the **scars**] a lot. Because I have scars from using [drugs], I have scars from cutting and scratching myself, my body is just covered in all sorts of wounds. **So I always have to cover myself.** My daughter hasn’t seen them, I always hide it, I will never wear anything that will let it show, my partner has seen it, which isn’t ... well, I obviously don’t feel very sexy, I mean, look [rolls her jeans up to show me scars on her legs] **that doesn’t look very sexy, does it?...** I know that’s not what most girls look like. **It sets me apart** and not even in a good way.” (Magda)



Conclusion

- ▶ Punishment targets the prisoner's body and often succeeds in inscribing and stigmatising it with painful experiences and scarred identities.
- ▶ The prisoner maintains a sense of subjectivity and self in custody through her body. She relies on it to make sense of her lived experiences, to survive punishment and often to resist its lasting effects, and uses it to reconstruct and manage an ambivalent, embodied identity.
- ▶ The prisoner body is understood as both the object and as the subject of modern punishment.



Conclusion (continued)

- ▶ As an embodied experience, punishment doesn't start or end with a prison sentence.
- ▶ Because it is inscribed on the prisoner's body, punishment is mobile and fluid – sometimes seen as oppressive, sometimes rehabilitative, sometimes punitive.
- ▶ Its experience within prison walls is doubly oppressive, due both to the direct targeting of the prisoner body by penal power, and to the permeability of prison space in terms of its relation with 'outside', neoliberal ideologies.

