

“Me Time”: (Re)Imagining the Carceral Spaces and Violent Geographies of Solitary Confinement

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Introduction

- ▶ Solitary Confinement is known by many names:
- ▶ ‘Administrative Segregation’
- ▶ ‘The Box’
- ▶ ‘The Hole’
- ▶ ‘Therapeutic Quiet’
- ▶ Some of these terms are descriptive and evocative, while others are Orwellian and euphemistic
- ▶ Yet how do we attempt to reconcile the image of solitary confinement with the unexpected outcome that, perhaps, such solitary space can keep inmates relatively safe from the troubling aspects of the prison system?

Introduction Cont'd

- ▶ An issue with much controversy and topicality, one must temper their grammar when engaging with discussions of solitary confinement (DeVertueil, 2012)
 - ▶ By no means does this paper intend to silence arguments for solitary confinement abolition
- ▶ It could exist as a temporary escape from the hypermasculine imperatives and the dominant social orderings existing within the general prison population
- ▶ Such a thought, however, requires inmates to actively reconstruct the image of solitary confinement and reclaim it as a therapeutic quiet for themselves

Violent Geographies: The Case of ‘Accidental Humanity’?

- ▶ A critical geographical imagination argues that violence and peace can take many forms (c.f. Gregory & Pred, 2007)
- ▶ How ‘violence’ is interpreted and understood within violent geographies shows how ‘peace’ can occur
- ▶ Violent and peaceful acts within such spaces depend on certain representations and imaginings of space (c.f. Springer, 2011)
- ▶ Such (re)presentations of space have the potential to constitute or deconstruct understandings of violence and peace as points on a spatial continuum

Violent Geographies Cont'd

- ▶ Actively reconstructed and reimagined, solitary confinement can become a space of 'accidental humanity' (Dolovich, 2012)
- ▶ Dolovich (2011, 2012) examined KG6, a segregated unit in L.A. County Jail
 - ▶ In-depth interviews and surveys with inmates who have visited KG6
- ▶ Argues that such spaces can be free from the hypermasculine imperative witnessed in general population
- ▶ No need for men to suffer from “belligerence, posturing, [or] emotional repression” as seen in the general population culture (2012, p. 971)
- ▶ Instead, one can find in KG6 a “surprising sense of relative ease,” open emotional expression, and “a determined rejection” of any efforts to introduce into the space the gang politics or hypermasculine imperatives in force in the rest of prison (2012, p. 971)

Methodology

- ▶ Semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews with 10 men that have previously been incarcerated in Manitoba, Canada
- ▶ Convenient, snowball sample
- ▶ Received ethics approval from University of Manitoba Social Science Research Ethics Board
- ▶ Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed
- ▶ Narrative Identity Analysis (Somers, 1994)
- ▶ Analyzed for emergent themes

Analysis: Emotional Geography and Hypermasculine Imperatives

- ▶ The “pressures to ‘do’ masculinity” are intense and exaggerated in prison (Comack, 2008, p. 10)
- ▶ Dominant orderings of the prison and forms and codes of masculinity can serve to legitimize violence
- ▶ Inmates who live in this hypermasculine world are routinely subjected to “character contests” with other inmates (Toch, 1998, p. 174)
- ▶ The pressure to not show emotions in front of others weighed on the men’s minds when they minimally engaged in social spaces
 - ▶ ‘staying solid’ proved difficult in most prison spaces

Analysis Cont'd

- ▶ [W]hen you go into prison you can't be a wimp. You can't be weak, *you can't show weak...* (Chris)
- ▶ [S]ome people *feel like they have to*, just so, you know, people won't basically mess, you know, try to, *try to tower you or tower over you*. Uh, people feel like they have to work out more... (Eric)
- ▶ For Chris, the subversion of solitary confinement constructed an emotional geography, one which provided a desire for Chris to grow in strength and spirit:

Analysis Cont'd

- ▶ “[Solitary confinement can] turn your life around when you’re more enclosed. [For some] the smaller the box...the more anger builds up [and] the more tension comes out because you want to be released. For me...
- ▶ [solitary confinement] gave me more motivation, [helped me] be stronger with myself because I was enclosed in a cell by myself. Did I talk to myself and stuff like that in there...no, but I did make myself productive by working out...that was *my life* in the hole.” (Chris; italics emphasized)

Analysis: (Re)Constructing Peace

- ▶ When asked whether there was a fear of spending time in segregation, only three of the men—Adrian, Frank, and Henry—reported that this was the case
 - ▶ Constructed ‘fear’ in terms of its cramped conditions
- ▶ The rest of the men said that they did not have fear of spending time in segregation
- ▶ [B]asically *it’s the safest place you could be* (chuckle). Like, you know, if you have worries about...debts or... certain people that want to get you or fight, whatever. Really that’s the safest place for somebody. (Eric; italics emphasized)
- ▶ You’re in jail already, right? [So] what’s the hole? It would... be better if you’re in the hole, ‘cause then you don’t have to see people you don’t like... I’m not fuckin scared... [If I] want to go to hole I’ll go to the hole. (Brandon)

Analysis Cont'd

- ▶ “Actually, you know what? Some of the guys I met, it was kind of like, the way they explained it was just ‘*me time.*’ It was kind of nice just to get away because you didn’t have to deal with anybody’s crap. You got your [food] given to you three times a day. And, I mean, the only thing is you couldn’t go for a walk outside, that’s the only stressful thing. But most of the time you had a TV there, books...
- ▶ You know, at first it’s kind of bogus ‘cause for the first week they say you’re not allowed your TV, but then after a while they bring you - it takes a week to get your stuff packed out and then brought to you. But otherwise they said “yeah, you still get canteen.”” (Jacob; italics emphasized)

Analysis Cont'd (and TBC)

- ▶ How acts of violence and peace are manifested within localized and embodied experiences of inmates can challenge the dominant orderings of prison regimes and solitary confinement
- ▶ The relations between inmates and solitary confinement are co-constituted by, mediated through, and integrated within the wider experiences of the prison system
- ▶ How we consider space and violence is dependent on the “stories-so-far” which participate in the imaginings of space and its circulation (Springer, 2011, p. 94)
- ▶ The inmates who have experienced solitary confinement thereby (re)produce it, facilitating a shift in meaning and the reformulations of geographical imaginings

Concluding Remarks

- ▶ Spatiality makes a difference for inmates, and the violence and peace found within men's experiences of solitary confinement
- ▶ The success within which the 'doing' of space occurs is always and ever conditional and contingent
- ▶ if inmates find tentative solace in segregation, then we cannot contain pertinent discussions of prison spaces to solitary confinement abolition alone;
- ▶ We must redress the systemic issues existing in correctional facilities, and (re)consider alternatives and progressive changes to the Canadian criminal justice system