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Chamberlen, Anastasia (2016) Embodying prison pain: women's experiences of self-injury in prison and the emotions of punishment. *Theoretical Criminology* 20 (2), pp. 205-219. ISSN 1362-4806.

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Embodying Prison Pain: Women's experiences of self-injury in prison and the emotions of punishment

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Abstract

This paper explores the meanings and motivations of self-injury practices as disclosed in interviews with a small group of female former prisoners in England. In considering their testimonies through a feminist perspective, I seek to illuminate aspects of their experiences of imprisonment that go beyond the 'pains of imprisonment' literature. Specifically, I examine their accounts of self-injury with a focus on the embodied aspects of their experiences. In so doing, I highlight the materiality of the emotional harms of their prison experiences. I suggest that the pains of imprisonment are still very much inscribed on and expressed through the prisoner's body. This paper advances a more theoretically situated, interdisciplinary critique of punishment drawn from medical-sociological, phenomenological and feminist scholarship.

Key words: women prisoners; embodiment; bodies; emotions; imprisonment; punishment

In a recent essay on the relevance of feminist theory to studies of punishment, Mary Bosworth and Emma Kaufman (2013) advocate a more diverse investigation of prisons and punishment. They suggest that gender theory can ‘offer radical and far-reaching alternatives to our understanding of punishment and the practice of sociological criminology’ (Bosworth and Kaufman 2013: 199). Bosworth and Kaufman explore the criminological potential of ‘three of the most significant theoretical contributions to emerge from feminist writing’ (Bosworth and Kaufman 2013: 191): intersectionality, performativity and embodiment. These theoretical concepts, they say, can advance criminological research by foregrounding the relationship between identity, disciplinary power, and the lived experiences of punishment.

Taking up Bosworth and Kaufman’s challenge, this article employs a feminist perspective on embodiment to explore women’s self-injury practices in English prisons. I argue that an embodied perspective on imprisonment not only elucidates women’s self-injury practices, but also advances our understanding of the link between the ‘pains of imprisonment’ and prisoners’ identities (Sykes 1958). The embodied aspects of prisoners’ experiences shows that the ‘pains of imprisonment’ are still very much inscribed on and expressed through the prisoner’s body. Drawing on a qualitative study conducted in 2011-12, I show how these particular women came to perceive and understand their incarceration and other life experiences *through* their bodies. This process had a significant effect on their sense of their own identity. Their testimonies reveal how the physical experience of imprisonment severely restricted their potential to be considered and consider themselves adequate women.

While scholars have long recognised that the experience of imprisonment is difficult and has detrimental effects on prisoners and their families (e.g. Clemmer 1940; Sykes 1958; Goffman 1961; Gibbs 1991; Carlen 1983; 1998; Liebling 1999; Liebling and Maruna 2005), criminologists have paid less attention to the connections between identity and practices like self-injury. This oversight springs from the theoretical underpinning of the literature, much of which considers the experience of imprisonment in a Cartesian, disembodied perspective, and prioritises its psychological effects. A Cartesian approach overlooks prisoners’ bodies as a means of understanding the nature and experience of penal power, thereby neglecting important elements of the expression and repression of emotions in the prison context.

This paper draws on a notion of embodiment informed by the phenomenological work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.¹ Focusing in particular on ‘the bodily aspects of human subjectivity’ (Audi 1999: 120) and the capacity of the body to be both an ‘objective’ or a physiological entity, I start from the premise that bodies form the foundation of our ability to perceive and give meaning to the world (Merleau-Ponty 1969). According to phenomenologists, the biological and the social cannot be

¹ Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between the objective body (the physiological body) and the phenomenal body, which is the subjective body as it is experienced. This distinction between the body as object and body as subject forms the basis of the phenomenological analysis of embodiment.

disentangled (Merleau-Ponty 1969). Influenced by both Simone de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, contemporary feminist theorists (Bartky 1990; Young 2005; Alcoff 2001; Weiss 2002) have built upon this post-Cartesian account of identity to explore how experiences of the body affect women's subjectivity and social relations and inform their sense of oppression. Beyond this feminist-phenomenological tradition, theoretical explorations on the embodied aspects of subjectivity and power relations are now also present in a diverse range of social research which has seen a resurgence of interest in the interaction of minds, bodies and societies (see, *inter alia*, Burkitt 1997; Shilling 2008; Sarbin 2001; Hemmings 2005; Jewkes 2012; Gadd and Jefferson 2007; Crewe and Bennett 2012; Maruna and Matravers 2007; Gelsthorpe 2007; de Haan and Loader 2002; Katz 2002; Ferrell et al 2004). This article takes a similar approach.

In the following sections, I sketch the scale and nature of women's self-harm in prison and describe my methodological approach. I then explore the research participants' conceptualisation and experiences of self-injury. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for theoretical reflection on punishment and argues that by attending to prisoner bodies, researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of lived experiences in prison which, in turn, can illustrate issues of agency and power relations in custody and can highlight the collective dimension of the pains of imprisonment. More generally, I show how an embodied account on imprisonment can advance a post-Cartesian exploration that goes beyond psychological interpretations of the prison experience and simultaneously challenges the prison's rehabilitative potential.

Theories of Self-Injury

Self-injury is common in prison and women are more likely than men to self-harm. In 2011, the year in which the interviews presented in this paper were conducted, there were 8,811 recorded incidents of self-injury in women's prisons (Ministry of Justice 2012). Self-harm by women accounted for the majority of all self-injury practices in English and Welsh prisons (*ibid.*). Although that figure dropped to roughly 6,000 incidents last year, recorded levels of self-injury remain high in both men and women's prisons (Ministry of Justice 2014). Approximately 1 in 5 female prisoners harms herself during her incarceration. This figure is about 30 times higher than rates of self-harm outside prison, where incident ratios stand at about 0.6% (Epstein 2014).

Psychologists and sociologists have proposed a number of explanations for self-harm in custody. Research indicates that factors that elicit self-injuring behaviour include past experiences of self-injury, histories of drug and alcohol addictions, mental and physical health, and past experiences of sexual or physical abuse (Mackenzie et al. 2003; Roe-Sepowitz 2007). These characteristics apply to a disproportionately large portion of the women's prison population, which suggests that women in prison are *particularly* vulnerable to self-injury (see Liebling 1994). More than half of all women in prison report experiences of domestic violence, and one third have histories of sexual abuse (Women

in Prison 2012). Women's past experiences of abuse and trauma have been an important focus of many writers and activists in the field (e.g. see Carlen 1998; Howard League 2004; Prison Reform Trust 2012).

Some clinical psychologists view self-injury as an 'individual pathology.' (Thomas et al. 2006: 193). Research in psychology often links self-harm to factors such as 'intellectual development difficulties, emotional dysfunctions and physical and behavioural maladaptation' (Thomas et al. 2006: 193).² In contrast, sociologists tend to link self-injury to a range of socio-cultural contexts (Adler and Adler 2011; Adler and Adler 2007). In the mainstream sociological account, self-harm is explained as a 'coping mechanism' for dealing with a harmful or stressful environment (Kilty 2006; Liebling 1995). Such explanations tend to fluctuate between the conceptualisation of self-injury and an account of the underpinning circumstances associated with it.

My work adopts the sociological approach. Following Arlie Hochschild I conceptualise self-injury as '*emotion work*' (Hochschild 1983 [2003]). According to Hochschild (1983: 7), the 'management of feelings' is displayed and observed on the body, performed in a 'private context' and has 'use value' as a form of coping. Hochschild labels the intersection between body and mind, nature and culture as a form of 'emotion work'. She argues that emotions are essential for survival and protection from danger (Hochschild 1983 [2003]: 17).

As I will demonstrate in more detail below, understanding the emotions that elicit self-injury in prison from this perspective draws our attention to the interconnections between mental, physical and expressive work. It also highlights the manner in which emotional activity is often directed at the body. Emotions, in this view, may be conceptualised as embodied sensations that are collectively experienced, communicated and constructed under pressure, always in negotiation with the lived environment.

Embodied Pain in Prisons

In 2011, I interviewed 24 female former prisoners about their experiences of imprisonment. Participation in the study was voluntary and the project was advertised through posters placed at several charitable organizations working with ex-prisoners in urban centres mainly in the North and the South East of England. During semi-structured interviews, the women described how their bodies changed during their incarceration. They also spoke of the crucial role their bodies played in mediating their subjectivities and shaping their coping strategies behind bars.

² The clinical literature on self-injury has considered various reasons and triggering characteristics which point to the significant relation between the practice of self-injury and experiences of trauma (Connors 1996; Gladstone et al. 2004). While in self-report studies it has been taken to be 'affect regulation' (Klonsky 2007; Laye-Gindhu and Schonert-Reichl 2005), there is no clinical consensus on the aetiology of this practice, and the conceptualisation of self-injury often involves several clinical biases (Chandler 2012; see also Nock 2010; Klonsky 2007). Although the argument in this paper intersects in many respects with this literature, its focus on the context of the sociology of imprisonment prevents it from pursuing these intersections further.

Of the 24 participants, 14 admitted practising self-injury. The other women in this study discussed witnessing self-injury and thus experiencing it indirectly during their imprisonment. The women, whose real names are not used in this paper at their request, came from a range of backgrounds. Aged between 19 and 42, eight of them identified with an ethnic minority group. All had served a prison sentence in closed conditions and some had also spent time in open prisons. Each woman had been released for six months or less at the time of the interview. The women also shared other characteristics, from socio-economically impoverished backgrounds to a history of physical and mental health issues, including experiences of abuse. Many participants had long histories of drug misuse and dependency.

The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. From early on in the study, I was conscious that the interviewer-interviewee relationship is never equal (see also Bosworth et al 2005; Phillips and Earle 2010). I considered issues of researcher ‘positionality’ and power dynamics during the interviews and when I analysed the interview transcripts. I also tried to pursue information with ‘nondirective probes’ (Bachman and Schutt 2007: 283) by asking open-ended questions like ‘can you tell me more about this?’ or ‘what makes you feel/think that?’ I tried to be sensitive to the participants’ views and confessions, and I treated all information confidentially, negotiating consent throughout the interview process.³ Since data collection from interviews is inevitably interwoven with observations of non-discursive articulations, including gestures, dress, and bodily presentation (Bachman and Schutt 2007: 281), I also observed and recorded thoughts about how women presented themselves when we spoke.

It is not possible to conduct this kind of research without awareness of its limitations. Phillips and Earle (2010) highlight some of the potential dangers of conducting such observations and acknowledge the latent confines of a reflexive approach in prisons research. To start off, the practice of reflexive observations on bodily movement, and particularly on presentation, is difficult to operationalize during interviews. More generally, doing so runs the risk of creating interpretations that are ‘solely inward focused’ (Phillips and Earle 2010: 362), thus potentially privileging a more auto-biographical, researcher-focused account that loses sight of the participants’ own perspectives. Notwithstanding the ethnographic landmines involved in conducting such reflexive observations alongside the interviews, I found this to be an important layer of the study as it allowed a closer consideration of how my own identity positioned my research interests and focus, interfered with the conversations I had with the women, and affected my interpretations of their stories and self-presentations. Thus, while such observations alone could not provide concrete conclusions (as doing so would entail several ethical dilemmas), they allowed a more reflexive account of how lived experiences, identities and power relations are understood and interpreted in research interactions.

³ Ethical approval was obtained from my affiliated institution at the time.

All of the women evoked emotions to discuss painful experiences in prison. Themes in interviews included isolation and loneliness, fear, anxiety, depression and emptiness. Many women found it difficult to reconcile themselves with the experience of “doing time”. For some, like Natasha, the difficulties lay in her lack of agency. “It’s [imprisonment] not a way of life is it?” she asked.

They are telling you what to do and you do it, they control what time you get up and what you do, they control what time you have outside and how much money, they control what you drink and how much you eat. Just the control of it all can drive you crazy. The main feeling for me was a constant *sense of restraint*, so much that you feel like running through the walls, breaking everything... it’s that inside prison you are *controlled all the time, it’s like there’s no time to breathe*. [...] Eventually you *don’t feel you anymore*, you turn your life into that routine, and you just do as you are told.
(Natasha)

For Natasha, the monitoring and regulation inherent to custody was made corporeal through daily bodily controls and timetabled arrangements. While she initially longed to transcend the boundaries of prison space, eventually and perhaps inevitably she accepted her prisoner identity.

According to a number of the participants, the “real” punishment of incarceration was one they inflicted on themselves through careful reflection and time spent thinking about their past. Women described deliberating about their crimes and experiencing guilt, disgust, low self-esteem and a fundamental mistrust of their own sense of self. This internal exchange, Iris made clear, was embodied:

I would spend hours in my cell alone, I had to think, I wanted to and at the same time I resented having to think, so that’s how the self-cutting started, you know, trying to avoid the thinking. It meant accepting what happened, what harm I caused and how I had to pay for it, it meant re-evaluating my life. I couldn’t sleep or eat because of all the thinking, I barely left my cell, and I really just couldn’t bring myself to get out of bed most days. I was really that low ... and there’s nobody who can really help you, it’s just a painful time you have to be with yourself, your worst enemy. (Iris)

In order to cope with her painful experiences Iris felt compelled to disengage with the world around her. Only in this way could she manage a deeper connection with her own sense of being. Her need to self-injure captures how difficult this process can be and how the body may act as both a source of relief and a reminder of inner turmoil.

According to Drew Leder (1990), an individual who is in pain becomes uniquely “conscious” of her materiality. Experiencing pain, in this view, may entail acting *against* the body (Leder 1990: 70-74; Bendelow and Williams 1995) as the body begins to feel alien to the self (Leder 1990: 29). Leder explains that such bodily awareness occurs not just during the experience of physiological pain, but also during emotional turmoil. Following Descartes’ conceptualisation of “passions”, Leder asserts that emotions are central to the making of lived experience (1990: 134). When under our control, such feelings are typically absent from our awareness. Emotions emerge in our sensory perception only when they are a ‘disruptive force, hindering our projects’ (1990: 137). This painful emotional awareness, or ‘dys-appearance’ as Leder calls it, is actualised in an embodied process:

Just as the body is remembered when pain or sickness interferes with our intentions, so too, when powerful passions rebel. At such times, the body dys-appears, surfacing as an alien or threatening thing ... It is not only the visceral dimension of passion but the complexity of human appetition in general that gives rise to dys-appearance ... As such, the desiring body can begin to crumble and self-diverge, as does the organic body in illness. We thematise the body at such problematic times in a way we need not do when we are unified. (Leder 1990: 137)

At times of emotional or physical pain, we reconceptualise our sense of being in deeply corporeal ways, feeling and living the world *through* our bodies.

This hyper-awareness of pain is related to the construction of agency. While a desire to survive usually leads people to avoid harm or pain, self-injurers may seek and achieve self-preservation precisely through the infliction of harm and pain on their bodies. Medical sociologist Amy Chandler (2012) suggests that self-injury should be considered embodied emotion work that aims to simultaneously give meaning to and express the self via the body (2012: 446). Self-injury, in this view, could be understood as a therapeutic practice of self-healing and self-construction, insofar as it is an effort to alleviate pain and preserve a sense of self.

Some women described self-harm in these terms. As she showed me scars, Laura said that she had self-injured prior to imprisonment as well as in prison. She described self-harm as a form of expression, shaped by release, self-punishment and catharsis:

I don't know how to explain things. Sometimes *I feel things I can't express*. That's why I know hurting myself helps. What I used to do before prison was take, you know those big syringes? I would take many of those and find all the big veins in my body and I would suck blood from any big vein I could find; as much blood as I could get out, I would try to suck it all out of me, it was like self-punishment, a release. I was trying to get rid of 'bad blood'. To me it was like, I knew I'd done bad things, done drugs, done crime, I hurt people, so I would try to get rid of the bad blood, I wanted all the bad to go away... In that sense, the prison could never punish me as much as I punished myself. They [assume that] ... we can't reflect... we don't know what it means we did. Prison could definitely do nothing to me in comparison to what I did to myself. (Laura)

In her narrative, Laura vividly presented the process of engaging with her body as an intense awareness of her existence in the world. At the same time, however, her emotional turmoil was expressed through self-injury in a process of fracture between her self and her body, in which she inflicted pain on herself to alleviate her psychic pain and pervasive sense of guilt. Only taking 'the bad blood' away could help erase Laura's painful experiences.

Laura was not the only prisoner I interviewed who had self-harmed prior to her incarceration. Four of the fourteen women who spoke with me described self-harm as a coping strategy they had used before prison. Ten of the women self-harmed only during their period of custody, while six continued to self-injure in the community, after their release from prison. The women who had only started to cut themselves in prison explained it mainly by reference to emotions related to the 'pains of imprisonment' (Sykes, 1958). Those who had done it before, however, displayed a motivation to punish themselves intentionally that connected with, but also transcended, the sanctions imposed by

their imprisonment. For these women self-harming was a means of visually and materially expressing their guilt and frustration for disappointing their loved ones and more generally for committing offences. Their 'urge' to punish themselves thus reflected their sense of social marginality.

In contrast, women whose self-injury started during imprisonment explained their actions as a response to prison-specific emotions. They referred to their sense of solitude and separation from loved ones, and their lack of self-determination. "Yeah, it started in prison ..." Tanya recalled,

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)

For this woman, witnessing the bodily outcome of self-scarring and especially seeing the 'blood run' allowed a temporary sense of self-control, relieved tension. It also provided a sense of authenticity which reaffirmed her embodied agency in the highly restrained prison environment (see also Glenn and Klonsky 2010).

The social construction of womanhood has important implications for the relationship some women may have with their bodies as well as the corporeal strategies they employ to cope and resist. Criminologists have suggested that women prisoners are less likely to protest collectively, but they are more likely to express individual distress than male prisoners (Liebling 1994). Their self-injury, in other words, has an expressive function. At the same time, it was clear that the actions many of the women described transcended their individual account as their motivation to harm themselves and the meanings attached to it reflected broader structural constraints associated with the gendered ideas of self-control and agency. Women are socially inscribed as overtly emotional and "naturally" weak (Grosz 1994). Such a view renders their bodies separate from their minds and impoverished in their capacities (Bartky 1990; Bordo 2003).

The embodied nature of life in prison was particularly noticeable among those women whose socialisation had left them with a lack of voice in the public domain. A number of participants referred to their helplessness in verbally expressing their prison experiences, and either offered to show me their scars or chose to express their feelings through drawings. Natasha, for instance, drew a picture at the end of the interview depicting a female figure with an amorphous and asymmetrical body constrained and barred within a box. Others, like Iris, could only express their feelings by making references to songs. Laura used my own physical presence as a comparative tool through which to express her feelings about her own body:

Like you, see you are young and you can wear whatever you want, you can wear red and yellow and be noticeable, you can make yourself, you can be who you want [...] You have no idea how lucky you are. I've spent my whole life hiding my body in and out of prison, the

scars, the injecting, my hair falling, everything. Yeah, I've been hiding myself really, I'd always think, the less noticeable the better. (Laura)

Laura's comparative approach allowed her to both express the uniqueness of her experiences as well as project the remorse and sorrow she felt for the inimitability of her embodied experiences.

Together, the women's testimonies highlight the complexity of agency in relation to self-harm. They resonate with feminist scholarship that explores the ways in which women experience their bodies as objects and subjects. Drawing on the work of Merleau-Ponty, for example, who suggests that during intentional activity we cannot perceive our bodies as mere physical objects, Iris Marion Young (2005) argued that girls and women expose inhibited movements during purposeful activity (such as throwing) because they partly experience their bodies as objects.

At the same time, however, self-harm can also be understood as a practice of liberation and agency. Thus, Gemma explained, that while self-harm was an obvious coping strategy, expressing women's relative lack of self-control, freedom and choice in prison, it was also used by some women as a means of presenting their individuality, resistance to gender norms and perseverance to pain. Self-harm, she makes clear, helped her resist her confinement.

When I first went in, I was completely gobsmacked [...] it took a while to sink in really. The first prison I was sent to was proper HMP, old, stuffy, everything was metal. Metal bars, metal doors, keys jangling all night, keeping you up all night... And they put you in this block for people who just got in, and that was quite upsetting... It was like listening to a different story every night with the crying and the cutting [...] and the next morning, some girls wouldn't even try to hide [the scars], the younger ones would kind of show off, you know it was like their survival mark. (Gemma)

As this testimony makes clear, the material, sensory and visual elements of self-injury are not only shared among those prisoners who self-injure, but create the conditions for all prisoners to experience, feel, hear and see the inscription of the body through self-injury. In this respect, self-injury in prison is a means of communicating. Self-harm becomes a *shared* and collective experience of the 'pains of imprisonment', even for women who do not harm themselves. These shared experiences take a number of forms.

For Emily, the outward signs of other women's distress were frightening:

And in the main wing, nearly everyone I met had self-harm marks all over their bodies; they had slashes on their arms, scratches, deep wounds. *That*, that was very disturbing to see, especially when you first walk in, because you think, "god, is it going to be that bad? Is it so bad *we all have to do this* to ourselves?" (Emily)

In her account the scarred body contributed to an iconography of pain inside prison, carrying symbolic and emotional values that are directly associated with the effects of punishment and with life inside prison. For Alicia, in contrast, the dimension of prison pain that had the most impact, was its sound:

Sometimes you would *hear it*. You hear them crying in their cells, screaming, punching and throwing things all over the place, *and we know* [...] [and] then sometimes not hearing

anything is a sign too, *silence is not a good sign in prison* ... it would just be the buzzer and then officers running down and we knew what it's all about. (Alicia)

Despite not cutting herself, Alicia describes the practice as a collective reality, where sensory signs made other prisoners aware of the self-injurer's practice and, in consequence, of her pain. Its temporal (usually at night), and spatial characteristics (in the compromised privacy of the cell or shower), as well as its inscription on the body were social and communicative, marking women's perceptions and sense of self in a much more persistent way.

For those who cut themselves, the scars on their bodies act both as enduring reminders of their painful experiences and as reflections of their sense of self. Such physical signs, moreover, continue to affect women's self-perception and their interactions after they leave prison. Some, like Magda, concealed their marks post release, considering their scars as stigmatising symbols of deviance and imprisonment.

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)

For Magda, the "look" of her body and her presentation of self compromised her gender identity by confronting her ability to enact her role as heterosexual partner and mother. She compared herself to other women, emphasising her sense of otherness in bodily terms. The marks on her body that she had inflicted as means of coping with her pain, now separated her from a gender reality that she considered normal or average. Her feelings about herself were mediated by social expectations about women's representation, demonstrating not only the corporeal nature of her emotions, but also their social resonance.

Finally, the marks that self-injury scars leave on the body are time-specific. In describing or showing me their scars, participants usually referred to them in relation to the 'passage of time', attaching a symbolic value to their temporality. 'I got quite a lot of scars,' Natasha noted:

Here, you can see them all over me [shows me her arms]. It really used to affect me; I would be all about hiding them, now I'm getting over it a little because you can tell they are *old scars*, you can tell I don't do it as much anymore. But when they were redder, more prominent, when they were fresh, I was very conscious, I wouldn't wear short-sleeved tops, even in hot weather, I would keep my arms and legs covered, even my neck I had to have covered up. But some of these marks will never go away so I have to deal with it [...] I used to think people would look at me and think I'm a freak, like tell I wasn't normal. Nobody else other than the girls in prison looked like this, so I knew it was something wrong. (Natasha)

Natasha's scars reminded her of her past emotions, and in so doing, extended them into her present. Her body was a source of shame and embarrassment. The marks denoted an 'abnormality' that literally and symbolically marked her as distinct. Such feelings of shame, which were widespread, revealed how the women had internalised a moral standard of femininity and its more broadly

acceptable physical representation (Bordo 2003).⁴ Self-injury scars were, for them as well as for wider society, associated with a sense of gendered deviance and nonconformity to the socially imposed, gendered aesthetics of the body and the skin. Like other stigma inscribed on the body (e.g. see Moran 2012), the women interpreted their scars as signs of aberration, permanent reminders of their punitive past.

The Prison Body in Pain: Embodying the Sociology of Imprisonment

Criminologists and prison sociologists have established the centrality of the ‘pains of imprisonment’ to our understanding of confinement. Gresham Sykes’ (1958) five vital deprivations or “pains” describe the prison’s direct effect on those within: the deprivation of liberty; of goods and services; of opportunities for the development of heterosexual relations; of autonomy and self-control; and finally, the deprivation of personal security (1958: 63-83). According to Sykes, while ‘severe bodily suffering has long since disappeared as a significant aspect of the custodians’ regime’, these modern pains of imprisonment ‘can be just as painful as the physical maltreatment which they have replaced’ (1958: 64).

This view remains central to much prison literature (see for example, Crewe 2011; 2009; Liebling and Maruna 2005; Liebling 1994; Carlen 1983) and resonated with my research. Yet, alone, it did not explain enough. In my fieldwork, the themes discussed by the women I interviewed, and their focus on self-injury, revealed that their bodies were central to the construction, expression and experience of the ‘pains of imprisonment’. So too, their practices of self-injury highlighted a complex process of ‘emotion work’ in which while in prison they articulated and framed their emotions by enacting them upon their bodies (Hochschild 1983).

Feminist theories of embodiment have important epistemological implications for the study of punishment. As Bosworth and Kaufman (2013) illustrate, feminists have acknowledged the body as a foundational site for the gendered construction and performance of women’s oppression and resistance. Scholars like Butler (1993), Bartky (1990), and Grosz (2005) have argued that issues of power and marginality also stem from the materiality of persons, raising important questions for prison sociologists and criminologists about ‘how certain bodies come to be considered socially important, worth reforming, worth punishing, worth paroling, worth researching’ (Bosworth and Kauffman 2013: 194). In this respect, the sociology of punishment and prisons is a sociology, as Bosworth and Kaufman put it, ‘about bodies’ (Bosworth and Kaufman 2013: 194). In this view, significant aspects of how punishment is lived and felt can be examined by engaging with the lived body as a simultaneous subject and object of punishment.

⁴ Although aspects of race and ethnicity were raised by the participants in relation to other issues covered by this project, these did not appear in their discussion of self-injury experiences.

The body is a material entity and a cultural construction. To the extent that bodies reflect social norms, they offer a unique perspective on oppressive structures and environments like the prison. The lived body not only highlights the agency of prisoners, who actively pursue ways to make sense of and cope with their imprisonment, but also opens an important avenue through which criminologists can explore the social meanings attached to punishment beyond the ‘grand narratives’ that currently define much research in the field (Bosworth and Kaufman 2013: 195).

While the women in my study described their bodies in ways that expressed their structural oppression and acknowledged the symbolic and social construction of their bodies, they also recognized that their materiality allowed them to express a unique sense of agency and resistance. Participants who self-injured in prison approached their bodies as empirical objects to be acted upon. At the same time, the embodied nature of their emotions allowed them to become aware of and express their individuality (Leder 1990).

Self-harm also contributed to the construction of a shared prisoner identity. The material and social elements of embodiment were highlighted by research participants who focused on the communicative aspects of self-cutting in prison. These women discussed how prisoner bodies formed the basis for shared attitudes and feelings among women in prison. These emotions were communicated through the visual writing of the body with scars and wounds, which are easily noticeable among women inmates in their daily exchanges, or through a sensory appreciation of the experience of pain in specific prison spaces.

In short, much can be learned from studies of the bodies behind bars. For the women I interviewed, self-harm was a means to individual identity and resistance. It was also grounds for empathy – for in witnessing shared self-harm, and public acts of injury, women came to understand themselves as prisoners together.

Conclusion

This paper responds to Bosworth and Kaufman’s invitation to consider the relevance of feminist theorists’ work on embodiment to criminological research on punishment. The field of prison studies tends to maintain the mind/body dualism in its emphasis on the pains of imprisonment as a primarily cognitive experience. As a result, scholars have overlooked the body’s potential as a site for analysis of the purpose and effects of punishment. In contrast, theorists in the existentialist and phenomenological tradition (Beauvoir 1949; Merleau-Ponty 1969; Bartky 1990; Moi 1999; Young 2005) insist that bodies are a site of knowledge. These theoretical accounts are fundamental to advancing prison sociologists and criminologists’ efforts to pursue a more affective and sensitive study of incarceration (Liebling 1999), one that acknowledges that the ‘pains of imprisonment’ are still very much written on and expressed through the prisoner’s body.

A more embodied perspective on punishment has a number of conceptual and empirical applications. Focusing on prisoners’ bodies—and asking new questions about the relationship

between embodiment and agency—can provide a more nuanced understanding of lived experiences of imprisonment. By attending to self-harm and embodied resistance, scholars can highlight the ‘missing’ harms and unintended consequences of punishment. An embodiment paradigm could also advance understanding of how the experiences of emotions in prison relate to prisoners’ senses of agency and to mental health problems in the prisoner population.

As the accounts presented in this paper have shown, key coping strategies such as self-injury are enacted, expressed and felt on a corporeal level, causing persistent damaging effects to the lives and actions of women prisoners. Such a view draws into question the rehabilitative potential of imprisonment, as women find that the pains of their incarceration linger far beyond their release from the prison walls. The disproportionate practice of self-injury in women’s prisons, and the association of self-harm with the painful experience of imprisonment, highlights that a sense of wellbeing and restoration, as well as a sense of self more broadly, are difficult to sustain in the prison context – and, given the trauma and stigma of imprisonment, these are equally challenging to maintain post-release. The corrective and normalising function of penal power can be contradictory and counterproductive. As a result, and in stark contrast to most contemporary understandings, the body-as-object remains the target of punishment (Foucault 1979; Frigon 2007; McCorkel 2013) both during and after the conclusion of incarceration. The ‘pains of imprisonment’ are still very much experienced on a subjective level as ‘pains of the body’.

As this article has shown, a more nuanced understanding of lived experiences in prison can be achieved by focusing on the body. Attending to embodied experiences can illustrate the collective dimension and shared character of the pains of imprisonment while highlighting the complexity of agency. It also attests to the limits of psychological accounts of the experience and the effects of punishment. An embodied perspective shows how the prison compromises its potential to achieve its own objectives. Engaging with the literature on embodiment can thus recapture the ‘ethical nature of criminological enquiry’, reconnecting with ‘the normative implications and potential’ (Bosworth and Kaufman, 2013: 195) of research on punishment and prisons. Above all, by acknowledging the materiality and subjectivity of prisoners, criminologists show that those prisoner bodies *matter* (Bosworth and Kaufman 2013; Butler 1993).

Note: I am immensely grateful to Mary Bosworth, Elaine Player and Coretta Phillips for their very helpful comments, encouragement and support. I am also indebted to Henrique Carvalho and the anonymous reviewers for the extensive feedback and criticism they offered. This study is part of a doctoral research project funded by the Graduate School, King’s College London.

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