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Original Citation

Medlicott, Diana (2004) Narratives of Memory, Identity and Place in Male Prisoners. In: Narrative, Memory & Identity: Theoretical and Methodological Issues. University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, pp. 105-117.

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10 Narratives of Memory, Identity and Place in Male Prisoners

DIANA MEDLICOTT

Introduction

This paper looks at some aspects of memory and identity in relation to male prisoners and their sense of place. Prison is, for those entering it, an exemplary life event, in terms of the jolt it gives to memory and self-image. In prison, there is all the time in the world to sit and think, and remember. Memory is a source of joy and of torment.

I begin by offering a brief illustration of this. James (L6), a prisoner in his late thirties, told me about the house he lived in for the first nine years of his life. He could remember every detail of every room, even down to the roses around the small garden shed in the garden, and he talked me through each detail. He dreamed of going back to this house in south-west London, and one day buying it out of his burglary earnings. Then he became embarrassed and berated himself for sounding 'daft'. He had never voiced this desire before.

What he was disclosing was an aspect of his identity - a profound attachment to place, and to the person he used to be in that place. It lodged in his memory and became woven into his personal identity and his sense of place.

When he was nine, his parents split up, and the house was sold. That was the end of his life in that place, but not the end of that place in his life.

Place Identity

Places are indeed a fundamental aspect of most existence in the world ... they are sources of security and identity for individuals and groups of people.

(Relph, 1976:42)

The development of self-identity happens in the physical world of objects and things, and the very spaces and places in which they are found (Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff, 1983). Place is part of the socialisation process. Being rooted and having a sense of place have both conscious and unconscious dimensions in the development of self-identity. The internalised boundaries of places are part of how we experience being an individual in a world full of places: "to be human is to live in a world that is filled with

significant places: to be human is to have and to know *your* (sic) place” (Relph, 1976:1).

Entry into prison, however, tends to make explicit for prisoners many aspects of place that have hitherto remained unconscious processes. When they first see the size of the cell in which they must spend up to 23 hours a day, they experience a range of reactions from shock to panic to outright claustrophobia (see Medlicott, 1999; Medlicott, 2001: 96-97). When they register that it contains a toilet, and that this small space is shared with a stranger, they begin to realise how great an adaptation they are being forced to make (Medlicott, 2001:97). They have entered a pared-down environment characterised by paradoxical extremes. Of course there are extremes of deprivation and social isolation, but at different times there are opposite extremes of noise and silence, savage humour and grief, enforced community and lack of privacy. Their entry into this special place is marked by mortification and humiliation (Goffmann, 1961). They become aware that they are in a place seemingly designed to break down individual identity. They are allotted a number which will have more significance than their name. The internal and external architecture, the uniforms, regimes, timetables, rules, punishments, impersonal bureaucratic procedures, bars, locks and deprivations all serve as assaults on self-identity, self-esteem, dignity, and autonomy. Prisoners experience a range of emotional reactions related to this place. Some become mentally ill. Some commit suicide. Some become violent, others passive and institutionalised. It is an assumption of this paper that because of the extremes of the prison as a place, and the wide range of reactions, the *maintenance* of self-identity is problematised.

In this problematic territory for the self, it is not surprising that place identity, encompassing both the places left behind as well as responses to prison, becomes an important feature of adaptation.

The places left behind comprise an environmental past, “a past that consists of places, spaces and their properties which have served instrumentally in the satisfaction of the person’s biological, psychological, social and cultural needs” (Proshansky et al., 1983). This past becomes embedded in the self, as “a sub structure of the self-identity consisting of cognitions about the physical world” (Proshansky et al., 1983). This sub-structure, or ‘place-identity’ is unique and individual, since each person records and retains memories in different ways. Each has needs and desires that are different, and that are gratified to varying extents in different settings. So the acquisition of a place-identity is not a uniform process, more a “potpourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas and related feelings about specific physical settings as well as types of settings” (Proshansky et al., 1983).

Methodology

This paper draws on two pieces of research in which narratives were gathered from male prisoners, both remand and convicted, in two prisons, one in London and one in the Midlands. Both prisons were old, Victorian and overcrowded. Many prisoners were doubled up in cells designed for one. Out of a total of sixty narratives, I have chosen to focus on only a few.

The narrative gathering was based on a 'philosophy of listening' (Corradi di Fiumara, 1990) within a strategy of disciplined empathy. This recognised that prisoners were partly agents, insofar as their autonomy and conduct comprised a continuous flow through the time and space of their lives, and partly constrained, by social and economic forces and life events, such as entry into prison.

The capacity of the human scientist to empathise with other human minds is a distinctive and indispensable capacity (Dilthey, 1977), particularly useful in social research in difficult environments. Empathy was achieved by being frank with prisoners about the purpose of the research, respecting them as knowledgeable sources about the matters under scrutiny, being non-judgemental about their offences and statuses as prisoners, and protecting their confidentiality. One aspect of this respect concerns my characterisation of the prisoners as 'tellers', rather than interviewees. Interviewees are the object of the interviewer who is the pro-active subject. 'Tellers', however, are subjects, authors of their own narratives. They do the telling. The researcher becomes a complicit listener, who prompts the teller from time to time.

A narrative is a life-plot which the individual produces to make sense of events and experiences. Narrating, or 'telling', is one way in which people tell what they know about who they are. "The fact that people believe they possess identities fundamentally depends on their capacity to relate fragmentary occurrences across temporal boundaries" (Gergen and Gergen, 1993). So narrating is the activity of telling about identity. The narrative told is the time-based story of the self, emerging like an unravelled thread from past experience, existing in the here and now, and capable of looking forward into the future. Identity is thus constituted by practice in life, reflection on experience, and telling this story to self, and possibly to others. Through experience and activity, each self has its own unique pattern, much of which is privately organised by memories upon "the string of our self" (Mead, 1934:136).

Place identity is acquired both cognitively and as a form of attachment, with significant meanings which far outstrip the functions and attributes of places. Exchanges with tellers who had highly abusive backgrounds made clear the complexity and ambiguity of affective-evaluative dimensions which connect individuals to specific settings (Proshansky et al., 1983), and at the same time point up the sheer elusiveness of these dimensions. Hal¹ (B7)

¹ All names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

claimed that his home life was perfect, with a loving mum and dad. After a long silence, his voice dropped and he spoke of appalling maltreatment interwoven with the homely details of a washing machine, the fireside and toys at Christmas time. Out of the 'potpourri' of his remembered past, the place setting was elusively impregnated with the flavour of specific parental abuse.

Hal's responses demonstrate a central tension to do with place identity, between *expectations grounded in common knowledge*, and *affective-evaluation of experience*. Hal, like other inmates, has a sentimental attachment to home as a loving place, even though it was the place where he, like many other tellers, was beaten and abused. There remains this tension in his place-identity, between what is expected, and even idealistically imagined, of a home setting, and the painful memory of how it actually was.

Prisons contain people who have disproportionately suffered abusive family environments (Livingston, 1997), maternal deficits (Rieger, 1971), childhoods in care, familial physical and/or sexual abuse (Lester, 1991; Wilkins and Coid, 1991; Coid et al., 1992; Liebling, 1992). Such abuse in this sense is conceptualised in the literature as an abstract causal variable, presaging a troubled life. But Hal reminds us that it is also a set of live memories, *indelibly attached to the places and settings in which it occurred.*, and saturated with conflicting emotions.

In what follows, I have singled out some extracts from narratives² which relate only to one dimension of place identity - the attachment for place. Does the attachment for former places last, despite incarceration? Or do prisoners cut themselves off from attachment to places which, for the time being, they can no longer be part of? Do attachments for the prison place form, and if so, how are they expressed?

It is an important principle, in what follows, that the narrative material is not over-shaped into an artificial typology, which would simultaneously disrespect identity, and drain the material of its expressive significance.

Places Where They Know Who You Are

Lee (L2) has absolutely no interest in the town and area to which the prison belongs. Despite residing in its prison for some years to come, he says he has never been there. And in a sense, he has not. Transported by van from another prison, and several others before that, he could well be anywhere in England.

For him, prison has no significance as a place: "It's just somewhere where time stops until the sentence finishes." He puts no particular effort into making his cell an imitation home: he does not personalise it in any way. His cell-mate has photos up, but the only thing on display on Lee's side of the tiny cell are

² I am grateful to Cathy Morris for sharing the interview and transcription work for some of the narratives referred to in this paper.

toiletries. "I am not too happy with people coming in my cell and saying 'oh who's this', coz they don't know them, my family and friends. It seems an invasion of privacy, you know what I mean?"

So he keeps his photos in a box and ritually gets them out once a week to look at. "It's just that I see them as different sections - my outside life is that half, and my prison life is this half, it's just the way I have done it for years".

He is robust about the torments of memory. "It sounds mad but when I am running (on the treadmill in the gym) I can remember running down country lanes out there, and that's how much my mind wanders." But he does not mind at all being reminded of what he is missing back home: "I mean every time I am on the phone I am hearing something that has gone on there. And letters - a lot of it is telling me what people are doing, and I don't mind being reminded. I like to still know what is going on".

Lee minds the lack of control over his life in prison, but he has learned to conform:

I wanted to be category C, so I started playing their game - following their silly little rules, being civil, working. You can't say no to anything, you can't win like that. They tell us what we have got to wear, what time to get up, what time to be behind the doors. I am used to it now though and there is nothing I can do to change it so I just go along with it.

Back in his home town, he has never personalised where he lives. "I only really have places where I sleep. I see it as somewhere to go back to at the end of the day. TVs, cookers, pots, utensils, all of that, I wouldn't say it's home, no it's just somewhere to sleep, that's it, that's all home is to me."

Nevertheless, when asked where in the whole world he would like to be released to, his face lights up and he instantly names the small town where he previously lived for 14 years. He grieves for it, in that "I feel lost and missing out of things, but that's why I get the local papers so I know who's doing what". So the loss is only temporary, as he visualises himself there in his past life, and imagines returning there at the end of his sentence. This sense of belonging is not particularly tied to the fact that his family are also there. He has children, parents and a brother, as well as extended family. But they are not the attraction of this place. He very rarely sees any of them and "our lives are on different lines". Despite feeling no strong ties to family or a place called home, he feels a strong attachment to the community itself:

I suppose it's all about knowing people, little things like walking down the shop and them knowing what papers you want, and they know who you are, and your name. I like familiarity.

Later, he describes the town as “community based: I mean it’s a pretty fair size, and I know almost everyone and almost everyone knows me. I walk down town and people say hello. All the way down. I like that”.

He does not envisage any trouble in going back, because he has done it after previous sentences: “I’ll just go back and slot back into life”.

Lee’s place identity expresses itself in an attachment to neighbourhood and community. Cells, rooms, and houses are not home to him: home is the feeling of slotting into a community. This attachment is strong enough to enable him to get through his sentence, outwardly conforming for strategic reasons, but feeling no attachment or even involvement in this section of his existence. “Prison life is a different life, you know what I mean? I don’t choose to be in here and I don’t choose to mix. Out there you pick and choose, don’t you? It’s like two separate departments”.

Prison is just the department where time has stopped for him; he still projects himself into the community he is missing, feeling involved in its goings-on and missing being a part of it.

Setting Aside Where I Used To Be

This contrasts strongly with Daniel, facing the same length of sentence as Lee. Daniel misses his home town, dreams of his girlfriend and children, but says determinedly that the prison is home now because “this is where I’m gonna be for the next few years”. He says that he feels safe and comfortable and he settled in quickly. In his previous prison, this was not the case; it felt strange and he could not settle, until he got some work. Work is the thing that makes him feel settled: “Any work I do, I get into. Even if I don’t like it, even if I wanna move on, I know I’ll stick to the job”. He has a long sentence ahead of him, and in relation to his home outside that he has to “set it aside for a bit”. Even if he was moved to another prison, he says that would become home within a few weeks, because that would be the place where he was employed.

Unlike Lee, who consciously resists any attachment to anything in prison, he consciously seeks involvement. Within a couple of weeks at a prison, he describes himself as having made friends. In this prison he has started Spanish classes, and IT. He attends church, reads, writes letters and rings his friends and family constantly. He says that he misses home, but on a homesickness scale of one to ten only places himself as “stuck in the middle” and says “To be honest, it’s nice to be here”. He derives comfort from things he took for granted outside:

You just appreciate the trees and stuff (in the exercise yard). I mean, on the outside, you just walked past them and didn’t really see them.

Daniel’s place identity is adaptable; whatever prison he moves to, he quickly makes friends and gets on with the job of building himself a life of

classes and routines. It could be said that he “makes place” wherever he happens to find himself.

Getting Attached to the Space I'm In

Liam (L8) was a shy and withdrawn teller. He is from the area local to the prison, and described himself as very attached to it - “home is really an area, some streets and places I used to go”. He listens constantly to the local radio station and has a highly developed sense of being in his home area even though he is behind bars. He did much of his growing up in prison, and really liked his time in young offender institutions, particularly “the routine, and the education and stuff”. Now 23, he is still pursuing education, in the form of literacy, numeracy and social skills, and because he cannot cope with leaving the landing, the teacher comes to his cell. He is often to be seen on the landing, standing by the door of his cell, watching the bustle but somehow remote and removed from it. He told me “It’s dangerous to be a quiet person in prison. They don’t like it if you never say anything. I’m still quiet but I can talk to people now. Prison has really brought me out of my shell”.

Despite having a partner and two children, it becomes clear that for him home is still the parental home: “I mean it’s always the same, it’s there. It’s not gonna change. Well the house won’t change. I suppose there’ll be changes in the streets, places will have closed down and that, but it would only change for me if one of my parents died”. He always gets attached to his cell, and hates being moved. Even when he was moved from the standard regime to enhanced (an improvement in conditions), he said “I was very upset. Yes I missed it for a while. I get attached to the space I’m in”.

In a previous prison Liam was doubled up with someone he had grown up with; they put up curtains and other frills, and his cell was “like a home from home”. This last phrase was used several times about prison, and his closing remark about prison was “It’s a place of refuge, a home from home. Somewhere safe, somewhere without drugs”. But the most telling remarks came earlier in a discussion about the structure and routine of prison:

It gives me a sense of comfort to be here. I like it ... the way it ... well it wraps me up and makes me feel safe.

Liam is a young man whose life was shattered by repeated drugs offences. He cannot cope on the outside, but likes the feeling of being looked after in prison. He gets free from drugs in prison and feels strong attachment to whatever place he is in. For him, prison is a dependable place that allows him to be a dependent. This attachment to prison is not serving him well; it will ensure that he continues to return again and again.

An Imagined Place, Somewhere Else

Clive (L1) is coming to the end of a life sentence. He has served twenty two years and has two more to go. In these years, he has been moved from prison to prison. When he knows he is staying somewhere for some time, he personalises his cell, and he describes this as “setting up”. “There have been prisons where I’ve gone, and in a funny sort of way - and it kills me to have to admit it - I’ve liked staying there, I suppose it’s always there, there’s a sense of home. You feel welcome there, you feel good there”.

He has been in this prison for six months, and hates it. He has not set up his cell. “I live very sort of like sparsely, very minimalistic at the moment in the sense that if I leave it like that, that shows people that I am not staying. I’m moving on”.

Clive is currently discussing his place identity in letters to his sister:

We are actually talking about this issue, about ‘home’ and my sense of identity. C (name of northern town) is my home, but I don’t feel that I belong to it. Life has moved on out there, but I haven’t because I am still in here. My environment is the same, the only difference is that I have got older, my family out there have got older and have got on with their lives. My two eldest nephews were nine when I first came into prison ... they are now thirty, thirty one, and have their own children. So yeah life has moved on for them, but it hasn’t for me. So I said to my sister, although C is my home and was when I first came into prison, it does give you a sense of identity where I am from, but I don’t feel I belong to it. If someone said where are you from, I would say C, because I can’t turn around and say ‘nowhere’. But “this is a ghost town and there is little more to offer”, to quote that song by the Specials. It’s a lost cause for me. If I went back I would go there because my family is there, but there is nothing there to hold me, except my loyalty to my family.

Clive has formed an attachment with London, a place he has never lived, and when his life sentence ends, he dreams of going to live there. This attachment has come about in elusive ways. He spent some time in a prison in the South East and met a lot of people from London that he really liked. He has visited London several times, in the town visits that lifers are allowed toward the end of their sentence. He remembers driving around the M25 and listening to Capital Radio, and feeling a significant actual link with London - “I have never had that with anywhere else. That kind of relationship in the sense of being somewhere and thinking that it’s part of you, or you are part of it”.

In a way, Clive (L1) is trying to expand his place identity: he knows he cannot leave his connections behind, but he has an imagined ideal of another place which he will feel part of, and which he already feels a relationship with. This place offers the person he has become, through his life sentence, the chance of a fresh start.

The Cell

The place within prison itself which arouses the most profound feelings of both attachment and terror is the cell. When prisoners first come into prison, they usually go through some form of induction. This is not the cell they will spend months or years in, but it has much to teach them about what lies ahead:

As soon as you come in you start realising how small the cell is, and how long you might be doing in it. That's when it all hits you. If I'd been remanded before, or been in a police cell, I might have been able to handle it, but the first time you come inside ... I cannot even begin to tell you ... (weeps) it's just such a big shock.

You keep on thinking of the years you have to do, in this little space ... you are in it for 23 hours a day ... well, you can imagine for yourself ... (weeps). Trying to survive is a problem ... it's not possible (weeps). (Paulo B11)

Degradation is inevitable:

There's a toilet in the cell, it's very basic ... you've got your cellmate with you ... you tend to feel like an animal ... there isn't even room to have a wash-down of me body if me cell-mate's there. (Tim B20)

But as time passes, prisoners are placed in more or less stable locations, and after some time on a particular wing, some - and I stress that this is not all - begin to find ways to express their moral identity that are integrally bound up with the cell as place:

We don't touch other people's beds, no. If you had a lot of people in the cell, you might sit on them. But apart from that no. We share tapes or books, things like that. But I'd always ask first. You've still got that common ground, where you ask. It's prison, but you have your own property. (Gerry B19)

A lifer explained how the cell offered a space in which to constitute his identity:

Yes, it feels like my space, my home really, and that matters to me. When you start to get a few bits and pieces, and when you get your own radio, a few tapes, some books, and some pictures on the wall, it then develops into your little sanctuary, as it were. (George B17)

As a place of significance and meaning, the cell is not equivalent to the originating home, and yet, for the coping inmate, it can come to provide a foundational grounding in the prison world, from which all other places in the

prison exist relationally. Enclosure is not always a negative experience for the private self (Prost and Vincent, 1991): many prisoners experience the enclosed space of a cell as a form of protection. For one thing, it can seem like a protection from the bullying or violence from other prisoners or prison staff. The cell is a *here* from which the prison becomes known and endured, and a *there* to return to, often in relief from the institutional day. It is a *here* out of which prisoners come at the start of the day, and can carry in their minds as a *there*, to which they *must* return for the long overnight bang-up. Where shared, it comprises a place where the social characteristics of respect for others' property and space remained live and practised, keeping the semblance of social identity going. But, if shared, it can also be a place of terrible confinement with an unpleasant, aggressive, noisy, smelly and incompatible stranger.

As generalised *place*, the cell is a *must* place for the self, enclosing the body. Yet, through boundary and enclosure, and with some luck in relation to cellmates, it offers the minimal conditions to make a symbolic place for the self.

The characteristics of cells, bare and minimal as they are, are synthesised by prisoners in such a way as to provide the grounds for their adjustment. A true home is one to which persons return voluntarily: the cell is an imitative home, because the return to and confinement in it are compulsory. The home-making, then, is a *constitutive* act on the part of the coping inmate, involving emotional and cognitive work. The cell, although cramped and badly designed, offers just enough to enable this constitutive work to be begun. Despite the lack of space, the compelled sharing of it with an unknown and possibly dangerous companion, the lack of privacy, and the enforced humiliations, the cell offers inmates the chance to make a place for themselves. It also provides the opportunity to demonstrate the reality of living in a place where the principle of private property is respected. So the place-making can keep respect for others alive, and thus self-esteem and self-respect are nurtured. The links here between place and identity are profoundly important, because the opportunities to maintain a positive self-identity are so very constrained in prison.

Conclusion

Place identity provides a source of moral survival in prison. Many tellers disclosed lives that, prior to imprisonment, were characterised by economic and social disorganisation, particularly in early socialisation. But, prior to prison, they all had private places, favourite places and forbidden places, which were an integral part of how they viewed their own unique identity. In short, they had a sense of place that acted as a resource when their moral identity was put under threat in prison, and this sense of place performed important symbolic service in the subsequent maintenance or erosion of identity.

Being rooted in place, when that place is freely chosen, gives a vantage point from which to experience life, a sense of positioning or 'placement' in the world and a set of spiritual, social and psychological attachments to a particular place. The capacity and expression of rootedness in place is the foundation both of individual identity and of social membership in some real or imagined community. Prison is not freely chosen; it forces exclusion from the places for which there has been deep attachment - favourite pubs, football grounds and whole neighbourhoods. These can only be visited in memory or imagination, and this causes both pain and pleasure. The shock of this exclusion is traumatic for many. Deep place attachment or rootedness may live on in the mind, but it cannot be nourished by being in the place of attachment. Until they learn to cope with the prison place, prisoners struggle to cope with the assaults upon their place identity, as the reality of prison threatens to swamp a previously taken-for-granted aspect of self.

In prison there is all the time in the world to reflect on memories of place, and even to feel place attachment strengthened through absence. Prisoners like Lee fight to maintain this attachment whilst disavowing any sense of belonging in prison. It is after all just somewhere where time stops until the sentence is over and they can go back to the place where they really belong, and "slot back into life".

Some prisoners, however, do consciously develop a rootedness in prison; they adapt to whatever prison they are in, and, like Daniel, pronounce that they "like it here". Acceptance of the prison place, or at least learning to tolerate it, is a significant aspect of the process of adaptation to prison, particularly for those on long sentences. Prison life is relentless; whatever the suffering self experiences, it cannot settle and adjust except by accepting the 'must' nature of the prison place, that drudgery of place (Relph, 1976) where the body is inexorably tied to a particular place, and has to adapt to the restrictions which go with the place. So part of place identity is reaching some kind of relationship with the space that is to be lived in.

However, too extreme a place attachment implies an identity which has succumbed to institutionalisation, and drained out the capacity to maintain a place identity in the outside world. An example of this is Alistair (see Medlicott, 2001:150-152), a prisoner in his late forties, who had been in one institution after another since the age of nine, and who told me that when the officers unlocked his cell for association time on the landing, he never bothered emerging. When I asked why not, in a tone of surprise at the question he said "I don't really see the point".

But for lifers, it is a necessary survival strategy to form a relationship with the prison place in an individual and pro-active way. George and lifers like him describe efforts to make cells significant places for themselves precisely because they want to resist institutionalisation and passivity (Medlicott, 2001). They want to constitute an imitation home and make it individual, and this is

an expression of autonomy, an expression of that “largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as profound centres of human existence” (Relph, 1976:43).

But a relationship also continues with past places, and it does not remain static. Tellers think about these places that are now denied to them, and their internal relationship with those places goes on changing. This relationship affects past images of the self, and future possibilities: like a thread, it runs from *who I was*, to *who I am now*, and *who I will be in the future*. Places are not just things that happen to people: places have a dynamic part to play in self-identity, in learning and growing and responding emotionally and cognitively to experience. You can take a person out of a place, and put them in prison. But the attachment or aversion to that place does not disappear: it remains a dynamic aspect of individual identity, subject to both development and atrophy. Other places get added on: in memory, or in present experience, or in a projected future, the self is always imaginatively and actually in place, comfortably or not, productively or not, but inexorably related to place settings as an aspect of unique identity. Place is one way we define ourselves to ourselves. When prisoners speak of place, they reflect on both boundaries and freedom, and their imaginative aspirations. They are defining themselves to themselves, but more importantly, they are sharing with us who they really are.

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