'Russian prisons: Bringing a riddle out of hiding'

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Russian prisons: Bringing a riddle out of hiding

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Introduction

In this paper I discuss doing research in Russian prisons, which remained hidden from the international research community for nearly 100 years.[1] Over the last 13 years, I have visited and conducted research in more than 20 prison establishments in Russia and interviewed over 300 prison personnel and prisoners.[2] Whether I

[1] I wish to thank the two Reviewers of the paper for their highly constructive comments. I wish also to extend a big thank you to the Hidden Communities team for their input and advice on the paper.

[2] See Piacentini (2004) and (2007) for a fuller account of the range and types of establishments visited. All of the research I carry out can be loosely described as a socio-political analysis of post-Soviet imprisonment. For ten years, I carried out research in men's prison establishments. I have also carried out empirical work in different regime categories (for example, long-term establishments, open prisons, young offenders' institutions). Since 1997, I have conducted 6 periods of fieldwork most of which I have conducted on my own without interpreters. Over the years, fieldwork methodologies have ranged from intense ethnography in the earlier periods where I lived inside prison regimes, to more traditional/classic quantitative and qualitative techniques, such as in-depth interviewing, focus groups and questionnaires in the later periods. Methodological choices have been driven by research aims as well as wider and often extremely turbulent economic and social climates that influenced access to research sites as well as the duration of the fieldwork. The dates are: 1997 (6 weeks: Moscow, Ryazan and Western Russia), 1998 (1 week: Moscow), 1999 (5 months: Smolensk, Western Siberia, Ryazan and Moscow), 2003 (5 weeks: two Siberian regions), 2006 (10 days: Ryazan) and 2007 (12 days: Mordovia). My current research, with the Universities of Oxford and Birmingham, is a major ESRC project on the relationship between distance and punishment in women's prisons in Russia. This is the first research of its kind in the world. See http://www.geog.ox.ac.uk/research/transformations/projects/russia/ for more information. Theoretically and conceptually, this project draws from the disciplines of human geography, the social history of Russia and prison sociology and seeks to build theoretical insights into modes of penal punishment and the experiences of being 'distanced' from home for this cohort of offenders.

travel to Russia on my own to carry out a research project, or travel with research partners (which has been the case since 2006) all of the criminology research I do continues to be conducted during extraordinary political, economic and cultural change, the effects of which are still being felt today. The paper reflects on past and present experiences of researching Russia's vast penal territories between 1997 and the present, and covers three areas, beginning with a discussion of the tension between *hiddenness* and *visibility* in prisons generally. This is followed by a brief history of Russia's penal system. The paper's final section describes some of the methodological concerns I faced in researching this hidden penal community. My aim is to say a little bit more than how to gather data from Russian prisons. I aim to look beyond penal politics and towards history and culture to examine whether the tension between hiddenness and visibility, that characterises Western penal systems, occurs in Russia and the effects of this.

Prisons: hidden and visible

All prisons are, essentially, hidden. The institution through *exclusion* functions to punish, control and supervise those committed to it. Prisons are mostly unseen and almost always unfelt spaces. Few in the public enter but of those held captive, many return. The prison is a bounded community and captives and custodians must negotiate this physical isolation. Generally speaking, prison life provokes extreme views because with the exception of those who work and live in prisons, nobody really knows what happens inside. The persistent stereotype is that prisons are either disturbingly violent or frustratingly lenient. A further institutional stereotype has more than a ring of truth to it – prisoners live behind high walls, there is a mistrust of prisoners, and nobody cares about staff or prisoners

(Crawley & Crawley 2008). The prison is also the persistent material and metaphorical measure of state power and is, therefore, heavily symbolic. First, what happens in prisons cannot be separated from the publics' view that crime harms communities and that victims' justice is often perceived as unmet. Thus, prisoners are different from 'us' and moral responsibility must be taken for true rehabilitation to occur. Second, there is tacit agreement among academic prison sociologists that penal policy, legislation and media-fuelled anxieties over 'what works' in prison have rendered prisons an abiding feature of contemporary Western societies (Jewkes 2007).

Prisons are also *not* hidden insofar as prison workers and officials engage constantly with the outside world; with social workers, bureaucrats, businesses, housing organisations and a range of services allied to education and mental health, to enable the process of re-entry into society and to ensure that captives do not return. As a visible community prisoners and guards share a common emotional, geographical and physical isolation from the outside world. So while there are clear lines of status between workers and prisoners, there are also inextricable linkages and proximities because order, accommodation and compromise must be negotiated. Also common to both prisoners and prison staff is being held captive in social isolation and subject to movement control and regulated interaction. This common experience can break down these clear lines of difference to create shared social solidarity and shared identities that can sustain life on an everyday level until the prisoner is released or until the guard returns home. Yet, while prison personnel work 'for' society, in the profession of prison guarding there is also, at its core, an occupational culture which is highly visible and undervalued by managers and the general public (Crawley & Crawley 2008).

The tension between the hiddenness and visibility of imprisonment is captured well in the description of penal systems as subject to a political 'carnival ride' (Jewkes 2007, p.24). As prison populations soar at an almost breathtaking speed across the world (Piacentini 2004), there are two conflicting messages: while there is the hope of rehabilitation, there must also be severity. If you add to this that the majority of prisoners return to jail within two years of release in the UK, [3] then the prison can be understood as a normalised, visible presence in the life course of imprisoned criminals. It is, therefore, undoubtedly the case that imprisonment is a laboratory of humanity where a change process is expected to occur (change is hidden and out of sight) but where the demands of the public are paramount (visible accountability).

If prisons are both hidden and visible communities, then they could be described also as having a porous periphery and this makes them peculiar locations for social research. In these well-bounded spaces, enormous bureaucracies and conflicts can render officials suspicious of the research and the researcher and prisoners weary and afraid. Yet penetrating the unique physical barrier of the prison educes burdensome non-physical barriers in terms of gathering information (by building social rapport while suspending moral judgements); coping with an intricate ethnography (by establishing position and purpose in an unfamiliar hidden place); and navigating the complex relationships between captives and custodians (by recognising the myriad power relations operating within this unique scenery). I discuss these issues in relation to Russia further on but it is worth noting Denzin here where he argues that as social researchers, we are integral to the social world we study: '…the Other's presence

[3] See Scottish Government (2008).

is directly connected to the writer's self-presence in the text' (1994, p.503). Knowledge and understanding of social phenomena, therefore, are contextually grounded. Clearly for the prison researcher, the method and the data analysis are not separate entities but are instead reflexively interdependent. Yet because of the tensions outlined above – between severity and rehabilitation in punishment, and between hiddenness and visibility – prison research demands methods that cannot be neutral or mechanical and instead carry with them the epistemological, ontological and theoretical assumptions of the researcher who develops them (Mauthner & Doucet 2003). In terms of the theme of this Special Issue, there is the hiddenness of the social group that each paper explores. For prison scholars, when penetrating the porous periphery of prisons, it comes down to the issue of taking sides (Becker 1967; Liebling 2001).

Criminologists tend to agree that prisons produce misery and that researching prison institutions demands a special research stance. There is a strong history of prison sociologists being self-consciously sympathetic towards 'deviants' or subordinates. Liebling (2001), discussing an article by Howard Becker published in the journal *Social Problems* in 1967, argues that it is technically and morally impossible to be neutral when doing social research because 'personal and political sympathies contaminate' (Liebling 2001, p.472). These sympathies might include a concern for the human and legal rights of prisoners, miscarriages of justice or even deaths in custody. Drawing sympathy from one side of the research is a particular moral conundrum for prison researchers deriving from a long-held 'deep sympathy' (Becker 1967, p.240 cited in Liebling 2001, p.472) towards deviancy; a sympathy that is embedded in the intellectual ascendancy of prison scholarship from the 1960s onwards. If imprisonment is painful then one cannot view the prisoner as an

object of neutral analysis in terms of whether prisoners suffer 'pain' in the way that they experience imprisonment.

In summary, somewhat surprisingly, prison scholarship continues to direct the sociological gaze on how the tension between the hiddenness and visibility in the prison arises from the coming together of politics, crime and punishment. Less well documented is how *alternative methodologies* can be employed to explore for evidence of the tension between hiddenness and visibility in penal jurisdictions in Western prisons; while there remains very little prison scholarship beyond Western jurisdictions more generally.

In the following section I outline what makes Russia's hidden penal community exceptional and distinctive and say something about the politics of imprisonment in that country, which has been likened to the break-up of an ideological fiction and an immense piece of punishment machinery.

Russian prisons

Nowhere is the penal landscape subject to such tension between hiddenness and visibility than in Russia. Russia has the second highest prison population in the world with over 889,948 persons held in prisons and pre-trial prisons (The World Prison Brief 2009). This is an increase of 18,255 since 2007.

I am not the first Westerner to have entered a Russian prison. I am, however, the first Western criminologist to have conducted theoretical and empirical research on Russia's contemporary penal system having stepped into a Russian prison for the first time in 1998. Operationally and culturally, Russia has a unique penal system, which for almost an entire century remained hidden from the international community. Aside from work published by political dissidents and reports from Non-Governmental Organisations, few

knew what went on inside Russia's hidden prison system (Piacentini 2004). Indeed there continues to be an acute paucity of criminological research in this area.

What is now known is that the penal system operated way beyond crime control in the typical sense insofar as it became an industrial monolith that was economically and politically central to the advancement of the Soviet regime. Yet prisons were built (primarily) in the frontiers and at the peripheries, so geographically there was considerable institutional distance from the central power of the regime. Prisoners worked on ambitious industrial projects that included agriculture, forestry, road-building and mining. The social function of imprisonment was political correction: prisoners were 'rehabilitated' as builders of the communist utopia. Unlike other prison systems around the world, a Soviet prisoner's crime was judged according to the extent that it wrecked Soviet harmony. In this sense, all crime was that which was politically and culturally harmful to Marxist/Leninist ideology. This is a departure from conventional criminal justice discourse, which fuses social engineering arguments with social-psychological approaches aiming to redeem and reform offenders. What is also distinctive about Russia's hidden penal community is that jailed criminals took their place alongside teachers, doctors, mothers and fathers to commit to labour that would create the long cherished dream: a 'kingdom of heaven on earth'. In a sense, the prison population was highly visible due to the fact that the boundary between 'prisoner' and 'worker' was blurred and presented as thus in propaganda and media discourse. In 1934, the Russian Gulag, an over-populated and hidden slave labour system, was created:

> We were from the powerful tribe of zeks (camp prisoner), unique on the face of the earth. And the Kolyma was the greatest island, the pole of ferocity of that amazing country of Gulag, which though scattered in an Archipelago geographically, was in the psychological sense, fused into a continent – an almost hidden, almost imperceptible country inhabited by the zek people (Solzhenitsyn 1973, pp.xvi-xvii).

Prisoners were transported all over Russia and the penal system grew in excess of 12 million prisoners in the late 1940s (Figes 2008). For the entire Soviet period, prisoners were displaced, compressed and distanciated from their previous selves. Once lifted from home, they were compelled to live under a new set of social relations. Essentially, the Soviet system exiled its mass prison population to far-off lands.

The environment that I stepped into, when I set out to research the system, was in a scandalous state, out of reach and out of sight for decades. Human rights abuses saturated the system. Massive overcrowding, disease and torture were commonplace. TB was rife and prisoners died of overcrowding and malnutrition. Victims of AIDS had joined the prison population. The scale of human rights violations was horrifying with conditions described by the Special Rapporteur to the United Nations as 'repulsive and torturous' (Piacentini 2004). The current penal system is a direct legacy of the repression of 25 million Russians between 1928 and 1953 (on average 1 in every 1.5 families in USSR in 1941 was 'repressed'; that is, shot or deported or sent to the Gulag) (Figes 2008). Lives have been damaged in disturbing ways with profound social consequences still felt today. The 1990s marked a sustained campaign to rupture the system through a reduction of the population and reform of the legislative and organisational structure of law and criminal justice.

Yet it remains a visible penal system in that it is frequently the subject of highly critical human rights reports and sustained political pressure to reduce the population and improve human rights (Piacentini 2007).[4]

Invariably, when confronted with the reality of Russian prisons (a population with acute addiction problems, often severe overcrowding and human rights abuses), I was faced with the balancing act of giving an intellectual account of 'what is happening' while suspending 'what ought to be', particularly when the overwhelming knowledge base on Russian jails came from human rights reports and not academic research. Indeed a good example of the complexities of suspending, or not suspending, moral beliefs about what ought to be done to improve prisons is the powerful international penal reform movement, which time and again reminds us that terrible inhumanities are often committed in places of confinement. Given what has previously been documented in Russian jails, in a penal landscape scarred by oppressive human rights abuses, the position of neutrality is vulnerable to pressure to appeal to the position of the prisoner. Time and again, the demanding transition from free citizen to prisoner is described in graphic and at times harrowing detail in ex-prisoner literary accounts, campaigning web-sites and human rights activism.[5]

As a prison sociologist, with an interest in Russian social history, a primary consideration of mine in understanding the conditions in Russian jails is adopting a more enlarged perspective that embeds the research findings within a cultural and historical analysis of crime and punishment in Russia. The enlarged standpoint

[4] In 2005 there was a mass self-harm protest of prisoners recorded across the international news media.

[5] See www.robertamsterdam.com for detailed and regular news and academic articles on Russian politics, criminal justice and law.

position is outside of, and different from, the social world of the guard or the prisoners. It is a question of style and approach as to how that standpoint is reached, and the techniques used to avoid settling on either 'side' can be achieved by interviewing both the superordinates and the subordinates. That is, having all those who shape the standpoint present while being intellectually attentive to history and culture, the complexity of hierarchy, and the nature of agency and power. When it is again considered that in a country such as Russia, where there was a blurred boundary between prisoner and guard, such an enlarged perspective has growing importance.

In the following section I aim to make a contribution to prison scholarship by exploring how the strands of penal punishment in Russia connect to culture, thus raising new and interesting questions on long-established debates about hiddenness and visibility.

Entering a hidden penal community

In this section, I discuss some of the challenges to conducting research in Russian jails and how I responded to these challenges in the field.

My journey through Russia's penal terrain has been epic and turbulent, combining acute fear of the unknown with carrying the weight of a hitherto unknown area of prison scholarship. It was once said to me: 'Nobody knows and nobody wants to know what happens here' (female prison officer, L'Govo Penal Colony for girls, 2006).

There was clearly a story to tell and a variety of experiences to be had in reaching this hidden prison community that, in the 1990s, began the process of engagement with the outside world and becoming visible. It began in the first year of my Doctorate when I

was sent to Siberia by a senior prison official to 'get me out of the way', compelled to live with prisoners and watch as they navigated severe over-crowding and survival. I lived inside a decrepit and dilapidated system where conditions were scandalous and nutritious food scarce. I have been buried inside jails, unaware of the turmoil outside. I heard nothing about the 300 people murdered in apartment bombings in Moscow in 1999, or about the Russian economy collapsing in 1998. Even the then little known oligarch Roman Abramovich buying Chelsea football team escaped my attention. I have been chased by a soldier with a rifle as I strolled around the vast perimeter of an open jail in Siberia. He thought I was a spy. Yet in these very places, I chatted to Siberian prisoner cowboys who ploughed the land and rode their horses with pride. As one prisoner remarked to me, '[w]ith towns some 300 kilometres away and with all this open space, escaping would be pointless'.

Such turbulence has not, thankfully, continued but in my current research, I have been concerned to see women prisoners perform beauty pageants for senior staff; an activity presented as a form of 'rehabilitation'.[6] It thus appears that the riddle of post-Soviet penality continues to be controversial, misshapen and subject to the ebbs and flows of Western ideas coming into the country at different points and at different moments.

The Russian prison research site is still going through a form of transition. Ten years ago, the economy was turbulent and brought to a total collapse. Nowadays, the economy is more stable but the political structures continue to ignite frustration and concern (and often humour). For example, over the years, senior public officials

[6] This is an ESRC funded project 2007-2011 in partnership with the Universities of Oxford and Birmingham (ESRC Award RES-062-23-0026).

would tell me that they must turn up to work even if they do not get paid because that is the Russian duty. In the prisons, over vodka, pickled herring and poetry, I have mourned the loss of a distinctive 'Russian identity' – because Russia's transition has been chaotic, volatile and tragic. As Russian society engages with the world community, the once over-powerful penal system is trying to shake off the Gulag legacy and move towards openness, the rule of law and democracy. Yet to understand as fully as possible how the temporal shift from the autocratic Soviet society to a modern democracy impacted on the prison system, it was essential to embed myself deep inside Russian culture to establish some form of concrete knowledge of post-Soviet penal culture. When it is considered that for much of the twentieth century, a punishment 'fantasy' endured – that through forced labour and political correction, prisoners would be builders of the Communist Utopia – the scope for employing approaches which engaged with the political and cultural past surfaced increasingly throughout the research fieldwork.

In all of my work I operate 'inside' Russia: I first enter the field, I position myself inside or as close as I can to a prison, I share in relations and I engage in culture (speaking in Russian, giving English lessons and participating in cultural events). The assumption (from a research methods text-book point of view) is that I then 'disengage' from the achieved insiderness and from the deep ethnography. In Russia, the dimensions of culture were expressed acutely in the penal world. Culture was a collective entity that operated under the political doctrine of Marxism/Leninism and as a 'site of ritual performance and cultural production' (Garland 2006, pp.420-421). If the culture was changing into something new and unrecognisable from the past, then the status of my insiderness would be subject to some change and shift (as a woman, as a Russian

speaker and as a Westerner). In a community of such chronic tensions and change, the epistemological approach I adopted (and continue to adopt) was based on the motivations for, and management of, my own transition from my home communities to a researcher of a vast hidden community. For example, I engage in two processes when exploring the hiddenness and visibility of Russian penality.

First, as preparation I establish historical and political sensitivity by examining the relevant historical texts on Russian history (social and political). I strive to evade the trap of thinking that present-day versions of Russia's trajectory are unproblematic and not subject to revision. This involved gathering documents from the Central Lenin Library in Moscow and conducting a discourse analysis of various Russian language, penal policy and criminal law materials. Interestingly, I found an abundance of literature on Soviet penality, which revealed something distinctive about tension between hiddenness and visibility. Looking beyond the sentence, it was evident that the verbose language of punishment in Soviet times was coherent and naturally occurring when considered alongside the political doctrine of Marxism. Prisoners are discussed not as criminals in need of punishment but as fallen comrades in need of correction. If we compare this to UK penal policy changes in recent times, the difference could not be starker. Knee-jerk responses, contradictory presentations from politicians and emotional and frenzied approaches to imprisonment have become the principal feature of UK penal trends since the mid-1990s (Bottoms 1995).

There are managerial and political interests driving prison population rates so it was important, as a criminologist, to grasp penal politics in Russia by querying official definitions of problems and issues as they arose. I had to maximise both my criminological

perspective and my Russian Area Studies perspective. For example, as a criminologist, Russian penality presents a fascinating challenge as for almost 70 years culture was deployed in incarceration in the form of 'penal fantasy'. Such audacious myth-making allowed the penal system to operate way beyond crime control in the normal sense and the penal system grew and grew to excessive and inhumane proportions. As a Russian Area Studies specialist, I was entering a new territory – in every sense – and investigating a phenomenon not widely researched in contemporary social science but widely known and discussed among social historians. Being clear on these distinctive branches of scholarship and mastering the disciplinary nature of each proved useful in creating contextual sensitivity and safe-guarding against contamination of the research problem with my own values.

Second, as soon as I arrive in Russia, I employ a note-taking system that I revise daily, updating the ideas as I formulate them and developing confidence that there is no finality to the note-taking system. Fluctuations in the note-taking process assist me hugely in how to bring Russian prisons out of hiding. For example, in the past there has been regular scrutiny and judgment of my motivations (both personal and professional). This would take the form of small tests of my knowledge of Russian history, literature and culture, or stating publicly before interviews how I would organise my work and what ideas were informing the decisions to ask specific questions. On several occasions in the prisons, I have been asked to recite poetry and engage in vodka-drinking to demonstrate my veracity and 'Russian soul'. This has been a wearying and contentious form of scrutiny but it was also revealing of how hierarchies of power and order operated, and of how this hidden community itself changed and saw me first as a curious novice, and then as an expert. In the

following section, I describe and explain some of the methods I have employed in Russian prisons.

Employing cultural approaches

As mentioned previously there has been a great deal of academic interest in the process of doing research in the contested environment of the prison; an environment that is both hidden and visible and which operates under acute contradictions (Jewkes 2007). I've learned a lot from discussing prison research with other prison sociologists all of whom work in the field with integrity, professionalism and negotiation by establishing their own 'standpoint'. Yet these accounts tend to exclude the interplay between cultural ritual and doing research (ritual being an artefact of culture) (see Ferrell & Hamm 1998; Burawoy 2003; Garland 2006 for debates). Since conducting empirical work in Russian jails, the questions that have perplexed me over the last 13 years are thus: is Russia subject to the same or similar tensions between hiddenness and visibility in the penal realm? If so, what forms does this take and how can it be explained? The first answer could be found outside of the prison. The problems, pitfalls and experiences I face are not Russian-*prison*-specific, per se, but rather Russian-*culture*-specific because the cultural context and temporal shifts deeply influence the research process, as well as the ontological and epistemological assumptions and outcomes.

The emotional response of feeling as if one is an outsider is a constant burden for researchers who operate in completely unfamiliar cultural realms and where points of physical and emotional exit from the researched world seem blurred, oscillating and fleeting. Related to this is location. While I have acknowledged that political events can shape and define the contours and direction of incarceration,

often overlooked is how *culture mediates researcher identity* and the research process. My use of the term culture here relates to how a network of beliefs and attitudes underpin and codify practices that embody ideology. Rarer still do researchers recall how the chaotic bigger picture then necessitates radically altering one's language, lifestyle, dress and diet. The point I wish to make here is that Western research accounts expose a taken-for-grantedness possibly because there is a degree of material, economic and political stability in Western societies. Such a state of affairs, argue Ferrell & Hamm (1998), creates a form of Western scholarship that is conventional in its criminological complexion. Sibley takes this even further arguing that conventional methods produce *dangerous knowledge*:

> The defence of social space has its counterpart in the defence of regions of knowledge. This means that what constitutes knowledge, that is those ideas which gain currency through books and periodicals, is conditioned by power relations which determine the boundaries of 'knowledge' and exclude dangerous or threatening ideas and authors. It follows that any prescriptions for a better integrated and more egalitarian society must also include proposals for change in the way academic knowledge is produced (Sibley 1995, p.xvi).

Indeed in all prison research, a researcher can be turned away because the researcher possesses a stigma and a different-ness (free/law-abiding/'clean'). Yet in pursuing signs of hiddenness and tension, I was presented with the challenge of unravelling the symbiosis of the carceral and the cultural because the cultural in Soviet penology produced an artificial manufactured notion of deviancy.

Hence an approach close to cultural anthropology was adopted. Russian history provides many clues to penality's cultural

sensibilities. For example, in the USSR, like the penal environment, it came down to one of two sides: alienation from the USSR against a need to find a place in it. How do you trust a government you fear in such a culture? And what of today's government and the forms that criminal justice and criminal law takes, now that they are no longer used to mobilise the masses into a slave labour system? For example, as I am interested in mapping out structural changes in imprisonment (such as changes in penal practice and penal philosophy) part of that includes an examination of how deeply ingrained criminal justice attitudes, values and assumptions, which once projected an extraordinary and indeed remote (hidden?) ideology, have come to be transformed. How do penal actors attribute meaning to their actions in post-Soviet society and how truthful is this meaning in a fleeting, moving transition?

Journey over, getting closer

All of the papers presented in this Special Issue will invariably be connected by one common theme – that research into 'hidden communities' demands getting 'up close', with the researcher situating her/himself socially and emotionally proximate to respondents. I have already described the journey into the penal territory and the preparation I undertake. Once in the field, the research interview would often be prefaced with a form of social activity such as a stroll in the park, generous Russian hospitality with other prison officers or a visit to a museum at the weekend followed by more socialising with families and friends of officers. It felt like everyone who was connected to the prison through employment fell directly under my radar because of my distinctive status as a Western woman conducting research in men's jails. Conversations away from the formal research site of the prison focused on feelings from staff

about 'belonging' to an international profession of 'prison employment'. Staff felt neglected and misunderstood. Roles were rarely clarified by managers because the long-standing cultural norm of being a custodian of Soviet values, with its confident morale boosting mantras, had collapsed and given way to confusion, fear and isolation. Some of the dynamic features that embodied this confused penological environment can be summarised as deriving from a complex penal history inextricably linked to an autocratic political ideology; a penal culture that was audacious in its myth-making. This environment was a 'storied place' whose landscape was intended to enable the Soviet Utopia through a penal expansion that criss-crossed the country like a gigantic patchwork. Now no longer hidden in any sense, this penal landscape was scarred. Indeed, from a criminological perspective, this remains an *exceptionally visible* penal environment marked by confusion and inertia over what kind of system it can and should become. With some participants over the years weeping when probed about what it felt like to live and work amid such penal turbulence, culturally, for me at least, my research revealed a wounded society scarred by penality.

I have written about the effects of developing a cultural anthropological approach in this hidden community where the power between the researcher and the researched can shift radically. The conceptual framework I developed was based on the notion of the socially constructed self (Goffman 1963). I argue that deep immersion in prison worlds and their associated hidden landscapes creates 'productive turmoil' where the researcher, in an (often desperate) attempt to constantly feel accepted, is reduced to the role of gratifier. These methods include:

- speaking in Russian;

- deep immersion in conversations about the direction that Russia is heading;
- attending important events while living in the prison communities, to embed myself and become recognisable, stable and familiar: 'being part of the place';
- affectively sharing to create an empathy dynamic.

There were problems and pitfalls of cultural immersion as a methodological approach (over and above the standard social science qualitative and quantitative research methods that I use such as questionnaires, focus groups, semi-structured interviews and participant observation). These are discussed in Piacentini (2007). Briefly here, my concern (obsession?) to craft and communicate my empathy and commitment to the scholarship and commitment to all my respondents in a serious manner was rarely questioned in Russia and at home. The goal of becoming the expert and not solely the eye-witness was fundamental to bringing the prison world fully out of hiding. However, in Russia, this was off-set with constant scrutiny of how much I knew about Russia, surveillance, and interrogatory questions on my political views. Shame and blame sensibilities all became the stuff of the research interview. It quickly became apparent that in being sensitive to the constructed nature of hiddenness in Russian prisons, I become exploited by the environment's ideological constructedness, and my role and position as a researcher became subject to a peculiar mode of control by actors in a culture that was struggling to come to terms with itself after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In summary, cultural differences, transition and change were all surfacing in this hidden penal community and my methods had to

give each recorded shift or change a degree of structure and specificity.[7]

Conclusion

The variation in Russian culture in the 1990s and early 2000s when I was living there from time to time produced a distinctive methodology that utilised cultural rituals to assess whether there was tension between hiddenness and visibility in Russia's penal system. Organising my experiences of doing research in Russia around affect first and cognition second (that is, around how actors felt about the changing carceral and cultural landscapes) created rich textures of meaning and understanding of penal change. I was witnessing first-hand how Soviet values came to lose their grip and fall away from traditional ideological frameworks. This led me to consider what replaced them and how bodies of norms permeate states in transition. One of my findings was that Western mandates such as human rights were imported into Russia but that the mechanistic, technicist and bureaucratic manner of their delivery transformed human rights into bureaucratic boxes to be ticked. This prompted me to think about how my work can contribute to the body of prison scholarship that views prisons as distinctively hidden and visible in specific ways (penal expansion, the language of risk, media-propelled fear of crime and the restoration of state authority). Outside of North America, Western European and Westernised societies, research into hidden penal communities raises a separate set of issues about the sources of knowledge that enter penal territories to make them more visible. The trajectory of penal change is different.

[7] I refer to these shifts as 'Occasions of Penal Identification' (Piacentini 2004). The occasions are not unproblematic but they did provide me with a point of reference for researching Russia's hidden and changing penal community.

In the introduction, I referred to one abiding feature of Western prisons being the 'what works' agenda and the creation of a politics of imprisonment where offenders are viewed as threatening. In Russia, the abiding feature of *hidden versus visible* has been how the movement to modernise the penal system, to bring it closer to international visibility and therefore accountability, has been uni-directional. One aspect of this appears to be the wider political culture in the Council of Europe, which Russia joined in 1996. The membership accordingly brings with it a tacit assumption that Russia will reform its penal law, legislatures and criminal justice system to meet European standards. As an ethnographer, of keen interest was the discovery that Russia's hiddenness was countered by a visibility process constructed around bringing rights violations into the public domain. As I tacked backwards and forwards between pasts told to me and the presents I inhabited, the penal system and all those who lived and worked in it were absorbing norms brought into the country and written into its legislative frameworks for the first time in Russian penal political history. I learned that many in the prisons felt that the penal system was failing, not in the Western sense of failing to reform prisoners or failing to satisfy the national body politic, but failing to meet international 'standards' of human rights and modernisation. Through internationalisation and penal reform, Russia's penal system would be brought out of hiding and this is what makes Russian prisons distinctive as hidden communities.

In conclusion, bringing Russian prisons out of hiding, while exploring the features of its visibility, involves continual 'behind the scenes' excavation of the cultural milieu. Looked at this way, I now understand the hiddenness and visibility of the prison as a cultural question. According to Burawoy:

> […] the divergent orbits of ethnography and anthropology reflected the histories of the disciplines, but they are also responses to the era in which we live. (2003, p.674)

The Russia I inhabit is more stable to a degree now but it is also one that remains the subject of much scrutiny and turbulence. One concern is that in the penal sphere a post-disciplinary penality is surfacing; one marked not by human rights, judicial reform and the rule of law but one marked by legislation designed to curtail NGO activity and ongoing human rights abuses. Under these conditions, what does it mean now to continue work in this hidden community? The prison now exists in a country with volatile connections to other countries. In the 1990s the hidden penal community had the appearance of visible progress, gaining Western societies' trust by directing itself towards a mode of governance that was 'Western'. Today in Russia life is being re-composed back towards national interests, needs, desires and anxieties. Whether the clock is being turned backwards in the penal realm is almost guesswork. But if the past is resurrected in cultural attitudes or administrative organisation and management, is this sustainable? In the large body of prison scholarship, criminologists remain focused on researching how penal attitudes endure by exploring the tensions between hiddenness and visibility. In the case of Russia, it is certainly the case that away from the controversies, debates and scrutiny, it is those who live and work in the penal system – many of whom were absorbed into it during the Soviet period – that should not be overlooked.

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