

‘I feel trapped’: The role of the cell in the embodied and everyday practices of police custody

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Abstract

This chapter explores the police custody cell from the perspective of policing staff. Legally it is the cornerstone of the criminal investigation process, being the place where arrested persons are taken while charging decisions are made. Police custody is a liminal space, one where detainees are monitored extensively and where detainees are ‘betwixt and between’ their previous existence. It is therefore a complex and multi-faceted environment that has, until recently, been treated in a fairly monolithic way. This chapter draws on 15 hours of observations and 12 interviews with police officers and custody staff. It argues that the police custody cell is a space of monitoring risk and emotional turmoil are managed by staff.

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Introduction

Once someone has been arrested, they are taken to police custody in order for investigations into the allegations made against them to be examined. Legally, therefore, police custody is the cornerstone of the British criminal investigations process, facilitating decisions taken about whether to charge or release detainees (Skinns et al. 2017). Until recently, police custody was interpreted as a fairly benign space where detainees were held before decisions were taken. Recent work, however, has argued that far from being a passive experience, the cell becomes a place of emotion where detainees contemplate and consider the impact of detention on their future lives (Wooff and Skinns 2017). Liminality is a useful concept for exploring this emotional uncertainty of being in a cell. More commonly applied in health and education settings (Atkinson and Robson 2012), it refers to the ‘interstructural state’ in which

the person is 'betwixt or between' socially constructed identities (Turner 1967). Although I have argued elsewhere that police custody in general can be considered a liminal experience for many detainees (Wooff and Skinns 2017), the cell in particular is frequently the period where, emotionally, detainees experience the liminality of custody. Not only are they cut off from the outside physically and metaphorically, but when detainees are in their cell they are acutely aware that the decisions being taken about them will potentially impact on their future life. Jewkes (2011: 278) argues that, in the context of those who are on indeterminate sentences, liminality is frequently experienced when we go from a period of stability to 'one of ambiguity'. The cell in police custody is the space where detainees experience those feelings.

Indeed, environmental psychology can provide theoretical understandings of the impact of the building design on the social interaction among users, with a growing body of scholarship linking prison architecture to the way that prisoners and staff interact (Beijersbergen et al. 2016; Jewkes 2013; Laws and Crewe 2016; Liebling 2004; Moran 2011; Moran et al. 2017). Understanding the role of the police custody cell in the way(s) that relationships between risk, emotion and resistance can be managed by staff at the scale of the cell can elucidate understandings of this carceral space. In particular, emotions in police custody tend to be intensified (Wooff and Skinns 2017). These emotions can be heightened by the physical environment of the cell, where the detainee is kept in a highly controlled, windowless and stark space, often uncertain of the outcome of their case. It is also a space where staff exert control over detainees by monitoring, regulating and managing emotions through their (in)actions in a bid to minimise risk to detainees and staff. Frequently the cell is used to de-escalate situations, where detainees who are arrested and are too violent, un-cooperative or incoherent through drink or drugs to be dealt with immediately, are taken straight to the cell. This makes the time a detainee is in a police cell an inherently risky

period, where risk of suicide and self-harm is heightened (Williams et al. 2017). As a result, the cell can be a place where the detainee exercises their power in the context of custody, resisting, being violent and, importantly, a place where emotions are actively managed by staff.

As in prison settings there is a complex interaction between risk and emotion, with resistance commonly being the culmination of the emotional turmoil experienced by a detainee in a police custody cell. Following Laws and Crewe's (2016) work on emotion management in prisons, the police custody environment can impact emotionally on the detainee in a number of ways. This includes the cognitive change, which refers to how we 'reappraise or transform' and 'how we think of situations' (Laws and Crewe 2016: 538), but can also refer to the emotional realisation that often occurs when someone is brought in to custody that their life may alter significantly once a decision has been taken about whether to charge or release them. In other words, although the average time someone tends to be held in police is 9-10 hours (Skinns 2011), the particular spaces in a custody suite elicit different emotions and these can cause 'emotional aftershocks' in the life of an individual once they have been released (Wooff and Skinns 2017). The role police staff have in managing these emotional transactions is also significant and it is the police cell that is a site for this.

Although the charge bar¹ and the broader custody environment is important (see Roach Anleu et al. [2015] for a discussion of emotions in courtrooms), particularly in considering 'emotion zones', this chapter focuses specifically on the cell within the custody suite. The cell is where the detainee tends to spend most of their time when they are in police custody: it is where, aside from being interviewed or getting fingerprints and DNA taken (which tends to be brief), the detainee will be held. It is also the site where rights and entitlements can be given or denied, underscoring the lack of control the detainee has in the situation and the power differential between the staff and suspects. Uniquely in the criminal

justice estate, police custody cells increasingly have closed circuit television (CCTV). CCTV is one way that officers manage the risk of detainees self-harming, putting those deemed as a high-risk in cells (where available) with CCTV. However this also raises complex questions about privacy versus risk and the extent to which officers can monitor and intervene to support and manage the emotional turmoil of detainees. The chapter will draw on data gathered as part of a research project examining risk and efficiency in police custody in Scotland and will use the lens of the police custody cell to consider how the emotions of the detainee can be managed by considering the risk posed by the person and inter-relatedly, their emotion as often expressed through forms of resistance. This chapter will argue that understanding the cell as a site of risk, emotion and resistance in a dynamic way allows interrogation of the way(s) that the cell can be used to manage emotion.

Methodology

The chapter draws on data from a study funded by the Scottish Institute of Policing Research, entitled 'Measuring Risk and Efficiency in Police Custody in Scotland' (2015-2017). In order to develop an understanding of the varying nature of police custody across Scotland, two contrasting case study locations were selected. The urban case study was a large, inner-city custody suite operating a fairly typical management structure with 52 cells. The rural case study operated a dispersed custody model, where the remote rural custody estate was managed by a central urban-based custody Sergeant and team. These contrasting locations offered varying opportunities and challenges and offered insights in to how the cell was a site of risk, emotion and resistance.

This chapter focuses exclusively on how staff manage risk, emotion and resistance in the police cell and draws upon 12 semi-structured interviews with staff and 15 hours of observation across the two custody sites. Participants included Custody Sergeants, Custody

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Inspectors, Police Constables (PCs) in custody and Police Custody Support Officers (PCSOs). Strategic interviews were also conducted with senior custody managers, at the rank of Superintendent. Non-participant observation was conducted by observing different shifts working in a custody suite on different days and times, including Friday and Saturday nights and recording 'systematic description of events and behaviours' (Marshall and Rossman 2011: 79). Data was transcribed, coded and analysed and thematic analysis allowed themes to be developed such as the ways that risk, emotion and resistance were managed by custody staff via the space of the prison cell.

The cell as a site of physical and emotional risk

Managing risk and 'risky' populations is a core part of role of working in custody. As Williams et al. (2017) note, a lack of bespoke training on mental health and a 'one-size fits all' approach to risk assessment leads to custody staff feeling under pressure and ill-equipped to deal with the multitude of risks related to health. Those detainees coming into custody frequently have complex healthcare needs that pose a risk to the detainee and also to the staff managing them. As Rekrut-Lapa and Lapa (2014) note, those coming in to police custody with mental health issues are over represented compared to the general populations. Hence it is likely staff are required to managed complex healthcare risks of detainees.(see Rekrut-Lapa and Lapa 2014; Skinns 2011; Williams et al. 2017) As this chapter will demonstrate, the custody cell is a site where many of these risks, such as those of self-harm and violence, can be amplified. The cell, then, is a site of increased risk of harm where the 'corrosive effects of the custody environment' (Cummins 2008:41) can be observable. Staff are therefore tasked with managing and monitoring these acts of harm and the space of the cell is central to this interaction.

Some forms of self-harm in custody can be understood as a form of resistance that allow the detainee to exert some control over the situation (Cummins 2008). Staff practices are significant in order to mitigate further risk of harm and the process of monitoring is central to their work during containment within the cell. In Cummins' (2008: 44) study, he notes that in the cell, the 'most common methods of self-harm used in these incidents were ligatures and head butting/punching the cell walls'. Preventative methods are often deployed such as putting detainees in a rip-proof blue suit. However, interestingly, Cummins (2008) notes that the blue paper suits, in themselves, do not prevent incidents of self-harm taking place. Conversely they discovered that due to the indignity detainees felt while in these suits, being placed in them might actually be a contributory factor towards self-harm (Cummins 2008). Dignity and the conditions of the custody cell therefore appear to be important in helping to reduce self-harm in the cell. That is, the cell itself can impact on the emotions of the detainee. As a result staff have to navigate and respond to these situations.

As this chapter highlights, the cell environment often makes it challenging to effectively manage risk due to the custody estate dating back many years (Skinns et al. 2017). This impacts directly on the conditions of the cell and type of environment, with older buildings described as 'subterranean' with a lack of light and ventilation problematic in custody suites across the Police Scotland custody estate (Skinns 2011). The impact of the environment of police custody on staff and detainees is beginning to be examined, with Skinns and Wooff (forthcoming) noting that detainees felt they were treated with more dignity in custody suites in which detainees perceived as having better conditions. As one sergeant explains the cell remains the key space of risk within the custody suite:

Yes, when a detainee is put in the cell that can be risky. We obviously do risk assessments [these are a set of standard questions asked to all detainees] when we are

booking people in and anyone I am worried about I tend to put in the observation cells, and make sure they are being monitored. But sometimes it isn't possible to do a risk assessment straight away or people deteriorate ... you need to constantly be thinking 'what if?' (Sergeant, urban suite)

This quote highlights that risk is the lens through which staff in custody most often view detainees, particularly inside the cells. It shows the importance of considering risk in a dynamic way², but also highlights the cell as a key site of risk within the custody suite. This is particularly the case when detainees are sent 'straight to the cell' (Williams et al. 2017). This tends to happen to detainees who are particularly drunk, heavily under the influence of drugs or are being violent:

When people are first brought in and they are a potential threat, the cops will have done their part, i.e. they will be maybe handcuffed to the rear, fast strapped on the legs around the knees and the ankles, and if they're going to spit, they'll have a spit hood on the prisoner as well. Generally someone like that isn't going to stand here and give their name, date of birth, whatever, so they are then taken up to a cell with no risk assessment. (PCSO, urban suite)

When a detainee is taken straight to cell, the 'risks are amplified' (Williams et al. 2017). That is, the risk to both the detainee and staff is increased if the detainee is taken to the cell without going through the normal 'booking in' processes. Yet, in these instances the cell is deployed as a safe space for the detainee to calm down and be closely monitored. Safety of the detainees is compounded by the safety of staff. The risk to staff emerges as both the

physical risk that a detainee may harm them because they are being violent and from the wider threat to their livelihoods if someone dies in police custody:

We're trained, there's officer safety training that we do once a year, and it's about a two man teaming or three man teaming someone into a cell, to get them safely into the cell and unwrapped from handcuffs and restraints and such in a safe way for the prisoner and the staff ... it's about everybody getting out of that cell safe and the prisoner being safe as well. Risk wise, when someone is in a cell and we know they are a spitter or whatever. (PCSO, urban suite)

In this example the cell is an area of risk for the officer especially when a detainee is being violent. This is particularly true in the older custody estate, where cells tend to be enclosed and cramped and it can be hard to carry out approved cell-exit tactics³. The cell in these circumstances becomes a key point where the physical (and emotional) risk of harm is heightened to both staff and detainees and the cell becomes a containing space for the staff to manage the emotional outpourings of detainees. Furthermore in older custody facilities, the cell space can be an extra burden for the staff to manage, where the physical design can hinder the approved cell exit tactics by having narrow doorways which reduces the number of staff able to carry out the procedure. In this sense, the police custody cell has the potential to become a physical site of danger for the staff and resistance for the detainee (see later section). When detainees are put in their cell, they can be placed there for a number of hours before being processed, receiving their rights and accessing an appropriate adult or lawyer as required. Minimising risk in the police custody cell therefore requires careful consideration of the health of detainees, both physically and mentally. As one Sergeant notes, '[managing]

that risk is about making the right decision, particularly when they are in cells to avoid the worst scenario of death in custody’.

The risk of harm to a police officer is only one dimension of the cell as a site of risk. As Skinns et al. (2017) highlight, risk in police custody appears to be more about the risk posed to detainees, usually as a result of a complex set of vulnerabilities. As McKinnon and Grubin (2010) note, mental health issues feature frequently among people coming in to custody, with the police cell being identified as a time of particular risk. One of the best ways to minimise the risks to inmates is through the use of CCTV (Williams et al. 2017). The Royal Commission on Criminal Justice (Doxford 1993) recommended the use of CCTV in custody, while as Newburn and Hayman (2002) note, the Police Complaints Authority recommended CCTV was expanded beyond police custody areas and into individual cells. In Scotland, most custody centres have at least one cell with CCTV, most have a two or three cells with CCTV and newer suites are being designed with CCTV in every cell. Naturally, risk assessments and decisions have to be taken about which detainees to put in the cells with CCTV – normally those designated as most vulnerable. All respondents to Williams et al. ’s (2017) study suggested that CCTV in cells was invaluable in helping minimise risk in these spaces. In my study, respondents also highlighted the importance of CCTV in helping minimise risk in a custody cells, drawing a clear link between the built custody environment, risk in cells and CCTV:

CCTV is invaluable, but you’ll have seen, some of our estate is pretty old ... not very modern and lacking in technology. It’s not very modern and the cells, well without CCTV you feel a bit blind. As a custody sergeant I’m wary when people are in cells without CCTV, yes PCSOs [police custody support officers] are doing checks, but you never know. CCTV adds a safety net. (Custody Sergeant, urban suite)

CCTV in these circumstances is there to help staff monitor detainees, but it also underlines the social control that it enables. At the scale of the cell, CCTV symbolises the exertion of control by the officers in a space which, albeit temporarily, is someone's private space where they use the toilet, sleep and eat. Although in cases where there are specific worries about a detainee they may be put under 'constant observation' (monitored by a police officer or PCSO at all times), there is a larger group of detainees who may not need immediate healthcare input, but who nevertheless pose a risk of self-harm or alcohol withdrawal (Skinns 2011). The case study locations had limited CCTV provision and as Skinns (2011: 83) notes, 'CCTV is only as good as the people monitoring them'. In one of our case study locations, police officers were expected to sit in a room and monitor four small TV screen CCTV cameras for up to two hours at a time:

As the Custody Inspector shows us round what feels like a rabbit warren of corridors and cells, we reach what looks like a cubby hole. In there are five TV screens, not the modern flatscreen type, but old square thick monitors about 14 inches across, two flickering. It is possible to make out the blurry outlines of two detainees. There is a PC in there staring at the four screens with his phone out. Walking in behind, the Inspector snidely remarks that he shouldn't have a phone out whilst on constant observation duty. He says he has been there for two hours, his radio battery has died and he needs relieved by the next shift. He hasn't been able to call the booking in desks because they are too far away and he hasn't been able to leave his constant observation. (Observation notes, urban suite)

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I'm not sure strip-searching is the best example of an activity that takes place in a private space since it is itself an exertion of control. Perhaps simply eating if you need a third aspect?

The College of Policing (2018) have guidelines on the monitoring of CCTV, with clear evidence that someone should not monitor more than four CCTV monitors at a time and that the monitors should have a clear picture. Additionally, a recent inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (2018) noted a number of deficiencies in the monitoring of CCTV in the custody estate in Scotland:

For example, at one centre we visited, no one was monitoring the CCTV screen on which a detainee should have been constantly observed and, at another centre, we found magazines in an area only used for constant observations, suggesting staff may not be sufficiently focused on their task. Custody staff also told us about officers engaged in constant observations using their mobile phones. (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland 2018: 15)

These accounts highlight the limitation of CCTV and the challenges of monitoring someone constantly on a small CCTV screen whilst they are located in their cells. Aside from the physical limitations of monitoring CCTV, questions also remain about whether the proliferation of CCTV is entirely beneficial to the detainee or whether it is a mechanism through which the police can be more readily held to account. It enables the cell to be a site of constant observation, where although risk can be minimized by its use, the notion of constantly being observed in a private space could be problematic for some detainees. Such is the routinisation of CCTV being deployed in custody cells, this nuance is rarely considered. Officers routinely talked about CCTV helping reduce the risks *to them* in relation to CCTV in cells, enhancing their own feelings of safety:

The cameras are there; I see them as my protection. I know that it protects me. Some of the prisoners know it's there, so they play up to it. But ultimately I'm more concerned for what it would mean for me. So it is my protection. (PC, urban suite)

For this PC the CCTV helps to mitigate against physical risks. Interestingly, whilst CCTV is encouraged in police custody cells, it is not commonplace in prison cells (Allard et al., 2008), perhaps underlining the different purposes of the cell. In custody, advocating the widespread use of CCTV in cells suggests that the right to monitor and surveil a detainee is more important than a right to privacy in the cell. In prisons, the cell represents a (more) private space, with Laws and Crewe (2016:535) arguing that 'personal cells were used as spaces where more challenging emotions could be processed and ventilated'. However, despite what the application of widespread in-cell CCTV might say about the ways that staff view the custody suite cell, this study identifies the cell as a site of pain – where boredom, anger, fear, shame, guilt and worry coalesce as detainees are forced to spend a lot of time reflecting on what has happened.

Managing emotional turmoil

Because of the nature of police custody, painful emotions are undoubtedly a feature of the detainee journey. Emotions have been considered as 'deviations from rationality' (Mercer 2005: 98), but as Hughes (2009: 199) argues, emotions are at the heart of human existence and 'take on even greater importance during times conflict', stress and pressure. Indeed the cell is a space of emotional pain, where detainees regularly vent their frustration and anger; focusing on the way that the cell is a site for this emotional turmoil is important for understanding how emotion management in a custody suite operates.

The cell is a particular spatial context, where connections are imbued with power, a lack of explicit choice and a space where the detainees' bodies and environment are impermanent, but are affected by interactions between and with others in generating new forms of embodied materiality. The design of a police custody cell, for example, is stark, without any form of stimulation. There are no televisions, the cells are painted in beige monotone, books are rarely offered or available and there is no way of telling the time (see Wooff and Skinns [2017] for further discussion). A mattress is available in most cells, while pillows and blankets are offered to detainees considered not at risk of self-harm.

In contrast to the stark visible nature of the cell, it is often the site of the most colourful emotional outpourings in custody. In part this is because when in the cell, the detainee is 'behind closed doors' and in the most private sphere in custody, notwithstanding the impact of CCTV discussed above. As Skinns and Wooff (2017) have argued, it is the space in custody where the physical space impacts on the body and the reality of the situation hits home. Indeed, the transition to the cell from other spaces in the custody is significant, with different areas of custody eliciting different emotions. Previous work argues that 'emotional realisation tends to happen at the charge desk, whilst cognitive change and a more contemplative mood tends to happen in the cell' (Wooff and Skinns 2017: 11), highlighting the importance of understanding the cell as a space within a custody suite.

This is particularly clear with detainees who experience 'a cognitive change', described by Crewe and Laws (2016) as the ways that we reappraise or transform how we think of specific situations. Police custody cells are the site where this often happens in a police station, because it is the site where people are sent to calm down when they are brought in and are acting violently. As one police officer noted:

We send them straight to cell if they are being argumentative or violent. It's not worth the hassle. (Custody Sergeant, urban suite)

Not only is this disorientating for the individual – particularly if they wake up from alcohol- or drug-related sleep – but the cell becomes a site that is used to try and encourage an emotional change in detainees. Here they are actively encouraged by staff to calm down and manage their emotional outbursts. As one PCSO notes:

You do see a lot of detainees change when they go to the cell. Sometimes they come in kicking and screaming and within a few minutes are really upset. (PCSO, rural suite)

The cell in this context can be a site of distress, pain and panic. This is something which reinforces the findings of other studies, underlining the importance of understanding painful emotions in this context (Williams et al 2017; Skinns et al 2017). In the study by Skinns and colleagues, a detainee talks of being 'devastated ... the fact that I was sitting in that cell, the room just felt like it was closing in on us' (Skinns et al 2017: 11), highlighting the link between the physical environment of the cell and the sense of reflection and despair.

These emotions were heightened through the deprivation of particular liberties and staff are thus significant in regulating entitlements. At the time of the observations, the cell represented a place where additional punishment could be metered out by depriving detainees of particular entitlements. This was particularly the case for detainees who were assessed as high risk by staff, with reading material being an example which was given to detainees in an ad-hoc way and used as a way of getting detainees to behave. When asked about reading material in cells, a Sergeant explained:

We don't routinely give reading material, but if someone is in here for the weekend or has been behaving we'll usually give them something ... depends [on behaviour] really. (Sergeant, urban suite)

HMICS (2018) also noted that the provision of books and magazines was dependent on local custody staff. While giving detainees something to read may seem like a small point, the deprivation of small humanising elements of the cell can have a broader implications for understanding power within the custody setting. Beyond this, without the distraction of something to read or do, boredom, claustrophobia and deep self-reflection are more likely (Wooff and Skinns 2017). This is even more apparent with entitlements such as sanitary ware and toilet roll:

When I ask about the toilet roll when we are walking round, a PCSO remarks that 'we don't give it out routinely because of risk of harm', when I ask what sort of harm, he states that 'we had a swallower once.' (Observation notes, urban suite)

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (2018) also highlight the importance of maintaining the dignity of menstruating women in custody, highlighting the need for 'providing a varied and adequate supply of sanitary protection, changes of underwear, access to handwashing facilities and more frequent showers' (2018: 19). The inspection highlights a number of deficiencies across the custody estate relating to access to handwashing in cells and a lack of female custody staff at many of the smaller facilities. When in the cell, this means female detainees are often required to ask male staff for assistance. Not only is this lack of provision degrading to the detainee, but serves to underline

the way that the physical custody cell can negatively impact on the both the body (with a lack of physical sanitary ware) and the mind. Beyond the emotional turmoil caused by being arrested and held in a cell, the deprivation of these particular entitlements also symbolise a broader power being applied by Sergeants in police custody (Wooff and Skinns 2017). Additionally, the loss of dignity through deprivation of particular entitlements within the cell reinforces the emotional burden that being locked in a cell can impact on the detainee.

Beyond the loss of dignity experienced by some detainees, the deprivation of everyday items can also enhance the emotional isolation felt within a custody cell. For example, the deprivation of a phone, a clock or music can make the detainee feel particularly isolated, reflective and 'in limbo' (Skinns and Wooff forthcoming; Wooff and Skinns 2017). Time is intimately linked to experiencing liminality, with our sense of time being linked to the organised daily rhythms (Hale et al, 2010). The 'temporal disruptions', through for example waking up in a police custody cell disorientated and confused after being arrested, is heightened by a lack of sense of time in the cell. None of the Police Scotland custody cells have a clock, which, alongside the lack of natural light in custody suites, means that detainees (and staff) are often unaware and disorientated when it comes to the time:

The detainees forever buzz us [from the cell], constantly some of them. Often it is to ask for the time, when they are getting out ... but you can't ignore it. (PC, urban suite)

Detainees can press a buzzer to either summon staff or speak via an intercom to staff, on top of being checked at a minimum of hourly. Staff often take a long time to respond to buzzers, especially when it is busy, underlining the isolation of being held in a cell with little mental stimulation, where time tends to pass slowly particularly when reflecting on what life may be like once released from the cell and the 'emotional aftershocks' which may ensue (Wooff and

Skinns 2017). The cell here becomes a closed, locked and isolated box. Rather than minimising the emotional turmoil, through the simple action of not responding to buzzers in a timely fashion, staff can heighten the distress among detainees. At least in other spaces in the custody suite outwith the cell, the detainee is accompanied at all times and therefore has the opportunity to communicate with staff.

Time and the liminal nature of being in the police cell, therefore play an important role in understanding the way(s) that the negative emotions associated with being in custody can be minimised. Not only are detainees deprived of everyday interaction by 'being cut off', but also experience a loss of control over the processes, both metaphorically (they do not know the outcome of the case and the implications of this on their life) and, sometimes, physically (the police using coercive control to force the detainee into complying with processes) (Skinns and Wooff forthcoming). The way the cell is designed physically and used to exert control by staff leads to it being the site of much emotional uncertainty and anxiety, which both makes it a particularly risky place, but can also lead detainees to resist in different ways.

The cell as a site of resistance

The custody cell not only provides a space of risk and a space of intensified emotion, but frequently is also a site of resistance. Resistance is a concept which has been discussed at length in both the prisons and carceral geographies literature. As Moran and Jewkes (2015) note, the carceral geographies literature has focused on, among other things, the role of the incarcerated body in creating spaces; and draws on Sibley and Van Hoven's (2009: 1016) call to understand space as 'produced and re-produced on a daily basis'. In particular, Jewkes (2013: 128) notes that 'the powerful construct and exercise their power, but the weak tactically create their own spaces within those places; making them temporarily their own as

they occupy and move through them'. The relatively short temporal nature of the police custody environment means that cells are only occupied for, on average, 9 or 10 hours (Skinns 2011). This means that there are limited opportunities (and materials) available for detainees to exercise their power in creating the custody cell as their own.

Thus, resistance in police custody tends to be relatively short lived, most clearly being articulated as physical violence (either to the self or others), banging, shouting and swearing and some more passive forms of resistance in the cell (such as continually pushing the cell buzzer, refusing to leave the cell or damaging the cell). A lack of material goods (pens, pencils, paper) means that bodily fluids can be a form of resistance in custody. Much of the literature on 'dirty protests'⁴ focuses on prisons, with, for example, the dirty protests of the troubles in Northern Ireland being highlighted (Aretxaga 1993; Conlon 2016). While dirty protests do occur in police custody – I have seen this situation twice when undertaking fieldwork – they tend to link to the anger and frustration at being deprived certain rights and entitlements (e.g. toilet roll) rather than as part of a wider, more coordinated political statement. It is therefore an overt protest to their containment.

As Skinns (2011) explores, being locked in a police cell is the epitome of a loss of control, highlighted by the imbalance of power relations and the reliance of staff to respond to their requests, particularly personal hygiene items. In Skinns' (2011) study, detainees discussed the impact of being locked up without a rhythm and without any control over any part of the process or the custody cell. Resistance to the processes of police custody, however minor, can reinsert a degree of power over containment, for example, forcing staff to attend the cell frequently or not complying with requests for information. The staff's experiences of dealing with resistance are observable through emotional outburst as described in the previous section. At one point during my observation:

A young guy, 20 or so, is brought in kicking off and being aggressive. The sergeant at the charge bar asks his name at which point he hurls some abuse and continues to fight and shout. Sergeant instructs him to be taken 'straight to cell' where he is lifted unceremoniously and taken to the first available cell. Two PCSOs follow them down and he splays his arms and legs, refusing to go in to the cell [...] The officers perform a 'cell exit' and leave him shouting 'I f**kin hate this, I feel trapped', to which the six staff say 'well you are' with a chuckle... (Observation notes, urban suite)

This is one example of a situation which is repeated across the custody estate on a daily basis. The detainee in this example spent the next five hours banging the cell door, shouting loudly. The lack of empathy shown by staff heightened his agitation. He was monitored on CCTV, but his aggressive nature meant that the risk assessment, fingerprinting and photographing could not be carried out. Over time the staff do their best to negotiate with him:

Once the detainee has had time to 'calm down', I witness the staff repeatedly make attempts to reason with the young guy, go to the cell and tell him if he calms down he will get out quicker, he'll be able to get a cup of tea and be processed. His anger still apparent through the banging and shouting. (Observation notes, urban suite)

By constantly banging and shouting, detainees highlight their frustration by being in a cell, but also resist the suggested behaviour norm of 'getting your head down' to help the time pass more quickly (see Wooff and Skinns [2017]; See also Herrity [2018; this edition] for discussion on the impact of noise in prisons). The noise associated with a detainee banging on the police custody cell door or wall is not always seen as a negative by staff. While the staff acknowledge that detainees who resist by creating a loud noise whilst inside the cell maybe

annoying and present a physical risk to staff, the staff recognise that the noise at least symbolises that they are alive:

It's the silent ones you need to worry about. Or say they've been banging their hand in the cell, I might get the doctor to come and look. More likely than not, I have to say it would be for more psychological stuff. The injuries are easy, because injuries come in, you get them to the hospital, the likes of heart pain, get an ambulance and get them to the hospital. It's more like psychological stuff, people come in and you're a bit concerned have they got psychiatric issues. (Sergeant, rural suite)

This Sergeant recognises that physical harm is observable and treatable, however the invisible harms present challenging and complex work for staff. As has been explored earlier, the risk of the detainee injuring themselves in the cell is one of the key concerns of custody staff (Willaims et al. 2017). Yet this is perceived much easier to manage than those that present with mental health problems.

The cell is also often used as a physical space for passive resistance. Shouting and banging tend to be the most obvious forms of resistance in a police cell, however, more passive forms of resistance were also apparent in our fieldwork. For example, acts of graffiti were apparent in some of the cells that were observed. Graffiti has long been associated with resistance (e.g. Ferrell 1995) since it is a physical marker of an unwillingness to comply with the rules. Police services anticipate such acts of resistance and rules and the repercussions are clearly outlined in cell signage (similar to that in the cell depicted in Figure #.1), which indicate that if occupants' commit criminal damage they will be charged.

<Insert Figure #.1: A photograph of Bishop Auckland police station in Durham (not the case study location), which illustrates the stark nature of a police custody cell. (Source: Hill [2017]) [about here](#)>

Interestingly, Figure #.1 also evokes the idea that the custody cell is a ‘home’ (‘Would you damage your own home?’), a slightly ironic and cruel statement given how desperate many detainees are to be at home (or how many may actually be homeless) and how stark and dehumanising a custody cell environment is. Nevertheless, despite the warnings graffiti is a fairly regular occurrence in police custody. A lack of writing materials tend to mean that graffiti is scratched in to the paint and on one occasion I witnessed this being picked up on (the limited) CCTV:

I am sitting with a PCSO who is monitoring a camera, a detainee with his back to the door and blanket round. After a few mins the PCSO says ‘I think him in cell 2 is writing on the wall’ ... the PCSO rushes down the corridor and I see him going into the cell on the camera. When he comes back he explains the detainee was just scratching at the wall, but ‘luckily no damage was done or that would be another charge’. (Observation notes, urban suite)

Similarly cell buzzers tended to create friction between staff and detainees. As Skins (2011) highlights, this may be about the practicalities of continually having to respond to a persistent detainee buzzer call (or carry the associated risks of switching it off completely), but control and power were also apparent features of the interactions:

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As a detainee is taken to his cell he becomes more agitated and presses his cell buzzer lots of times. I see a PCSO reasoning with the detainee ... I presume he's asking him to stop ... At first the staff respond fairly quickly, but after repeated buzzing over a period of 45 minutes, staff are less responsive to it. There is a brief discussion about turning it off, but the detainee's cell isn't covered by CCTV so they decide not to do this. Instead they stop responding [except to normal checks] and hope the detainee will get bored and stop buzzing which he does. (Observation notes, urban suite)

This interaction shows that the buzzer is a symbol of the way that the physical attributes of the cell can be used as a passive form of resistance, while also underlining the subtle power (beyond the obvious legal power) that the staff have over detainees in this environment. Indeed, as Skinns (2011) notes, being held in a cell is a terrifying prospect for some, something magnified when staff do not respond to buzzer calls. However, for others, annoying the staff by repeatedly ringing the buzzer represents a small opportunity for them to exert some form of power over the staff in the suite. Yet, in the context of the police cell, staff often perceive that such acts, like the graffiti or the repeated buzzing, occur because the detainee is simply bored. Acute boredom is a commonplace experience during cell containment where overcoming this sensation can be a challenge (Armstrong 2018; Knight 2017). However, in this respect, the activities apparently stimulated by boredom are managed by the very recognition and reliance of that particular emotion. Here, staff express their hope that cell occupants will simply 'get bored' of their own acts of resistance.

Conclusion

Despite the small geographic space occupied by a police custody cell, it is arguably the most important part of a custody suite for understanding the relationship between risk, emotion and resistance in the police custody environment. This chapter has argued that far from being a

passive space, the cell is a space through the emotions of the detainee can be managed by considering the risk posed by the person and inter-relatedly, their emotion as often expressed through forms of resistance. The cell is a site of risk for staff, where uncertainty pervades about on-going drug and alcohol withdrawal; the implications of the emotional turmoil that being locked in a cell might have on a detainees; and the impact of forms of resistance, including self-harm, might have on a detainee's well-being.

It is important to consider the agency of the detainee in the custody setting, understanding that space and place determine personal experience and social practice (Sibley and Van Hoven, 2008). Moreover, the design of the cell plays an active role in the emotional and embodied experience of the detainee, with the bare walls, lack of basic goods and lack of a sense of time, impacting on those in the space. As Wooff and Skinns (2017) note, the physical space of custody at the micro-scale therefore explicitly and implicitly interacts with those that are contained within it, deprived of their liberty. More than this, staff harness police cell space as a tool through which to comprehend (and often alter) the detainees' experiences of emotion, risk and resistance. Understanding the way(s) that power and control are used at the scale of the cell goes some way to supporting and developing a more dignified experience for the detainee, while also acknowledging the importance of mitigating risks within the cell environment. Indeed, beginning to understand the complex links between the painful emotions of detainees, the resistance that they may exhibit and the risk that they present in the police custody cell is an important practical step for improving the police custody cell environment.

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¹ The charge bar is the desk where the Sergeant and booking in officers are located. It is where a detainee is booked in to custody; where details of the arrest are relayed; where a risk assessment is normally carried out; where the rights and entitlements of the detainee are explained; and where a search is carried out. It is also the place where a charging decision is relayed to the detainee. Most of these are raised platforms, which practically allows a better view and therefore control of detainees, but arguably also symbolises the power of the police over suspects (Skinns 2011).

² Dynamic risk assessment is the process of continually identifying potential issues, assessing risk, taking action to reduce risk, monitoring and reviewing those decisions and accounting for the actions taken.

³ These are the authorised professional practice from the College of Policing which describe how staff remove restraints from detainees within the cell and then exit the cell safely, with minimum risk to staff and detainee.

⁴ “Dirty protests” is the vernacular for smearing excrement on the walls of the cell. This rose to particular prominence during The Troubles in Northern Ireland in the late 1970s.