

Surviving in the Time Machine

Suicidal prisoners and the pains of prison time

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ABSTRACT. Because of the nature of prison, with its forcible suspension of everyday life and its emphasis on time-discipline, prisoners are forced to confront the issue of passing time and personal identity. Suicidal prisoners experience time as an acute source of suffering and connected to the deterioration of their sense of self. The nature of their relationship with time can be profitably explored by qualitative research which focuses on prisoner accounts, since prisoners themselves are valuable sources of knowledge about the prison experience in general and suicide in prison in particular. The accounts of prisoners demonstrate patterned differences between suicidal and coping prisoners in their relationship with prison time. Suicide awareness and prevention policies will be enriched if they acknowledge the special pains of prison time and their connection with personal identity, and aim at addressing these in regimes and care. **KEY WORDS** • identity • prisoners • suffering • suicide • time

Introduction

Time is integrally and internally bound up with our sense of identity. Psychological definitions of personal identity, such as 'I am all that I inherited as well as all I have acquired' (Mann 1991) are always propositions about the essential temporality of identity formation and development. The self-organization of events takes place against the backdrop of two primordial experiential principles, (1) that certain phenomena repeat and (2) that life change is irreversible (Leach, 1961).

The force of these principles in prison is monolithic: prison life consists of endless repetitions, and prisoners are aware that although their free life in society has been suspended, their bodies and identities continue to age and

change. To cope with prison life is to cope with this painful awareness without letting it destroy self-identity.

Culturally and historically, experience of the form of temporal reality is open to subtle change. Time itself was enlisted as a tool in the structural power/knowledge relations (Foucault, 1979) of industrial capitalism, in the form of timetables and ritually ordered time. The time-discipline of emerging capitalism (Thompson, 1967) produced a range of cultural and social effects, one of which was to facilitate ideas of progress and development within the concept of linear time, ideas with which we are all acculturated and which we implicitly build into the fabric of our lives.

In prison, the time of inmates is appropriated in the name of punishment, and individuals must learn to live by prison time, which necessarily involves the destruction of temporal autonomy. Time-discipline is enacted through the routines of each day which are compulsively thrust upon inmates. The timetable itself is a structural practice (Foucault 1979) with historical roots in rational and Enlightenment views on the achievement of order and discipline. The rigidity of timetables, the preoccupation with counting and observing prisoners, the compilation of personal files, are all disciplinary measures seemingly designed to produce psychological effects in inmates (Scraton et al., 1991). Accompanying these measures is, however, the phenomenon of dead time, those stretches of time which are emptied of events and human interaction, and generally passed in a cell, so that the features of spatial deprivation and hardship accompany the temporal deprivations.

In a literary evocation of his own imprisonment Serge (1970: 30) describes the resulting relationship of unreality with the landscape of time:

'Here I am back in a cell. Alone. Minutes, hours, days slip away with terrifying insubstantiality. Months will pass away like this, and years. Life! The problem of time is everything. Nothing distinguishes one hour from the next: the minutes and hours fall slowly, torturously. Once past, they vanish into near nothingness. The present minute is infinite. But time does not exist.'

It was Serge's depiction of time that struck the prisoners in Cohen and Taylor's (1972) study of a maximum security wing as the most accurate in relation to time and their fears of deterioration over the passage of their life sentence. The painful problem of time for lifers has been long recognized (Sapsford, 1983). But this recognition is implicitly predicated on the assumption that it is only the length of sentence which produces a painful relationship with the passage of time.

My research, however, focuses on the interaction of *suicidal* prisoners with the nature of prison time itself, regardless of the length of sentence. I chose a large local male prison for the study. Suicides in prison are most prevalent in male local prisons, where overcrowding, operational pressures and high

numbers of receptions of remand prisoners are daily stresses. In 1878, the medical inspector for local prisons observed that rates at local prisons were four times greater than at convict prisons, and surmised that remand prisoners underwent specific torture through suspense and anxiety about future outcomes (Second Report of the Commissioners of Prisons, 1878–9). In the 1990s, local prisons and remand prisoners still figure persistently and disproportionately in the suicide statistics: 39 percent of those who took their own lives in prison in 1997 were on remand. Remand prisoners have not been convicted and many will be acquitted or receive a non-custodial sentence: their time is still appropriated in the same manner as for convicted prisoners.

During the 1980s, suicides in the general population among men between the ages of 15 and 44 rose steadily, with a 16 percent rise in 1988. It is this age group which dominates the male prison population, and the social trends which underpin the rise in suicide in the community also contribute to the heightened levels of vulnerability within the prison system (H. M. Prison Service, 1992). In 1984, the rate in the general population for males between the ages of 15 and 59 was 14 per 100,000; the rate for male prisoners in this group in the same year was 52 per 100,000. In 1997, the total rate of self-inflicted deaths in prisons in England and Wales was 115 per 100,000 population (Samaritans, 1998).

Adopting what Corradi di Fiumara (1990) defined as a ‘philosophy of listening’, I conducted semi-structured interviews in a large local male prison, using the strategy of disciplined empathy. The capacity of the human scientist to empathize with other human minds is distinctive and indispensable, particularly useful in social research in difficult environments. The most important aspect of disciplined empathy as a research strategy is an epistemological recognition of the nature of the human sciences. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), like Kant, took human experience as the foundational base for the human sciences. But he was critical of the cold model of knowing reason at the heart of Kantian consciousness, preferring instead to stress the categories of willing, feeling and imagining at the heart of the knowing human subject, for these are the distinctive bases of all human experience (Dilthey, 1976: 197, 201–2, 224). It is to the fidelity of these bases that this research project strives to adhere, for it is in prison, and in the phenomenon of prisoner interaction with the difficult environment of prison, that these bases are expressed in such exemplary fashion.

Experience is the product of mental activity which shapes and structures the data it receives. When prisoners respond to organized and systematic enquiry about the manner of their interaction with prison, they are producing utterances as social phenomena which can be hermeneutically analysed *as if* they were texts. Hermeneutic enquiry aims at an understanding which relates a complex whole to its parts, believing the former to be comprehensible in terms of the latter, and the latter meaningful only within the whole (Dilthey, 1976: 203, 259, 262). It is this principle which guides the selection and analysis of extracts from

the whole body of data of recorded prisoner accounts. In following certain epistemological and procedural principles, the interior experience of prisoners can be expressed, transcribed, and analysed as 'texts', and this analysis is one valuable component of the policy debate on suicide awareness and prevention.

As far as the conduct of the interviews is concerned, the establishment of empathy is 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 respecting their confidentiality. Prisoners live in an environment which is not conducive to high levels of self-expression, frankness and trust of others' intentions, and yet they have a great need for talk. When they meet with an interviewer with explicitly empathetic operating principles, they tend to respond frankly and openly about their deepest and most painful interior experiences.

Criteria of empathy in the actual interview were developed as a result of the pilot study, and then applied to the data gathered. If these were not met in interview, the data gathered was not used. Limitations of space prevent a full discussion of the criteria, but they can be summarized as concerned with the frequency and duration of eye contact, the quality of body language, the consistency of voice before, during and after interview, the establishment of mutual listening, and the maintenance of mutual respect.

The interview focused on the time and place aspects of prison which are experienced in entirely individual and personal ways by each prisoner: the questions regarding time, with which this paper is concerned, are listed in the Appendix. After a pilot involving six prisoners, 40 male prisoners ranging in age from 21 to 55 were interviewed. Half of my sample were defined by the prison as 'at risk of suicide' by virtue of being placed on F2052SH documentation.

The F2052SH documentation was developed following the setting up of the Suicide Awareness Support Unit in 1991 at Prison Service Headquarters. The F2052SH can be initiated by any member of staff who is concerned about a prisoner who is judged to be at an unacceptably high risk of suicide (Towl and Hudson, 1997). It is completed by staff, and kept in the same location as the prisoner. It serves as a fully available summary of the prisoner's history since the form was opened, and of the difficulties experienced and expressed by that prisoner. The F2052SH prisoners in my sample were largely located in the health centre as the chosen site of management for prisoners defined as at risk.

The other half of my sample were defined as 'good copers'. There are no formal procedures for identifying prisoners in this way, and I was obliged to rely on the considerable experience and expertise of senior officers on the four wing locations where these prisoners were being managed. As far as possible, the number of remanded and convicted prisoners were matched in each group, as were the range of offences.

'Poor copers' have previously been identified in research typologies (Dooley, 1990; Liebling and Krarup, 1993) and the distinction between poor and good copers has been a fruitful and useful one in previous prison research. But my pilot work disclosed that distinctions between 'poor' and 'good' copers, and between 'suicidal' and 'coping' prisoners, *cannot be sustained across time and changing circumstances*. Additionally, 'coping' itself is defined by prison staff with reference to their own interests and responsibilities. Nevertheless, despite these reservations, the official definitions were a useful primary organizing principle. The full complexities of this definitional problem cannot be addressed here. It should be noted that to gain access to prisoners' accounts in such a sensitive area is difficult and rare, and the rarity value has to be balanced with the fact that the prison does not offer perfect conditions for the implementation of an ideal research methodology.

Research which recognizes the necessity of including prisoner accounts has not been valued enough in the past, despite their many contributions since the Woolf Report (HMCIP, 1991). Prisoners are valuable sources of information about prison life and death: they are *knowledgeable agents*, and their practical consciousness of everyday life (Giddens, 1984) means that they 'know' much which experts can never 'know'. In defining them as agents, I do not claim that they move *wholly* purposively through prison life, exercising subjective choice and decision-making. The term knowledgeable agents, within Giddens's structuration theory, involves a recognition of the realities and symbiotic connections of both structure and action. Action cannot be viewed from the perspective of universal laws, because 'the causal conditions involved in generalisations about human social conduct are inherently unstable in respect of the very knowledge (or beliefs) that actors have about the circumstances of their own actions' (Giddens, 1984: pp. xxxii).

The questions asked in interview were prosaic, yet potentially troubling. They fulfilled my methodological aim of weaving a circle of relevance, and approaching painful points in a flexible fashion, so that I could if necessary retreat from that point and return to it later when intimacy and trust were greater (Douglas, 1985). My initial questions (see Appendix) were attempts to access the personal time-sense of each prisoner before he came into prison.

What prisoners remembered of their embodiment in previous time reached me empathetically, so that I could imagine the man in front of me as a free body, in different moods and different settings, looking forward to a football match, to meeting the children from school and to all the prosaic timetabled events of domestic life. They spoke of their previous plans and dreams for the future, of job applications, of winning the lottery, of reunions with long-lost friends in smoke-filled pubs, and family responsibilities. In this way, I was able to establish that *all prisoners, regardless of their background, have a personal identity integrally bound up with their sense of personal time, and this is thrown*

into crisis upon entry into prison. This initial talk, saturated with painful nostalgia, helped to develop the empathy which was so necessary to the rest of the interview.

Constraints of space mean that this paper can only focus on a small yet representative selection of responses to the questions about time. The fieldwork for the larger study, from which this paper is drawn, took place over the period of a year, and examined prisoner perceptions of space and place in prison, as well as of time, and how prisoners felt that the spatial and temporal characteristics of prison impacted upon their self-identity and propensity for suicide.

Separating the time relationship from the place relationship is only justifiable analytically: in terms of the prison experience, the temporal and spatial aspects of existence, so important for the focus of the overall study, are experienced synthetically. As Lynch (1972) points out, 'we live in time-places'. Inmates' experience attests to the fact that the prison is a sophisticated time-place, where the temporal and spatial characteristics are structurally productive of prison life and culture.

The extracts in this paper, then, have been chosen because they faithfully represent the patterned differences found in the body of data as a whole, in the way in which time is experienced between 'coping' and 'suicidal' prisoners, henceforward referred to as *now 'coping'*, and *not now 'coping'*, to emphasize their status at the time of interview. The *not now 'coping'* prisoners leaned towards a relationship characterized by denial of, retreat from and/or distortion of time. Some veered painfully over the two-hour interview from denial to retreat to distortion, narrating these different moods in bewildering ways which were incomprehensible to them. When they entered upon a relationship of positive struggle or innovation in relation to time, this appeared to offer the best hope of transition toward the qualitatively different relationship with time enjoyed by the 'coping' prisoners.

Denying the Enemy

On the level of regret for the crime or event which has brought inmates into prison, reflection on time proves a great source of suffering for all prisoners. Many speak obsessively about turning the clock back to a time prior to their offence. This is particularly true of those who have committed crimes on impulse. 'If only . . .' is a stream of thought which produces its own form of torture, especially for lifers. But even those with a few weeks to face speak of the implacable enemy of time. This enemy is central to individual fate, for each has been sentenced to either a known or unknown slice of time, and yet it is an enemy too elusive for inmates to grasp in thought.

The response of the not now 'coping' prisoners is to deny the centrality of this

enemy. The pain of this enemy is so great for them that they cannot bear to acknowledge it. Bud's emphatic denial is typical:

'With the issue of time, the only thing you can do is shut your mind off from it, and just get on with it.'

After a pause for reflection, the same speaker continues:

'Everyone deals with the thing differently: my way is to shut myself off from the time. If I looked at my sentence, I'd probably be in awe of it, and totally daunted. But I'm not expecting to be here too long, I'm hoping to die, so it's easier.' (Bud, not now 'coping', medical centre)

There are several circuitous ironies here. Bud is avoiding looking at the issue of the 'time' he has to serve, in case he is 'totally daunted'. But he is on his twelfth day of hunger strike, and as he goes on to demonstrate in our interview, it is precisely the issue of time which is so distressing to him and which he thinks and talks about obsessively. Here he speaks of the pains of 'empty' time:

'My time here is so very empty. I've used my mind all my life, but all I can do in here is write. You can only write so much, and read, and you can only read so much before you get bored. I listen to music, I play Gameboy, and that's it. When I first came in, I wrote about six letters a day, but there's only so much you can say in a letter, and only so many people you can write to. I tend to spend a lot more of my time thinking now.'

In complete contrast to the claim that he has shut himself off from time, he goes on to say:

'Time passes extremely slowly. I've been in 12 days, and it seems like four weeks. Time just doesn't go. It was the same situation on the wings, when I was on remand.'

Bud's sentence is only 19 months, and it is a light sentence for his offence. Friends cannot understand his inability to accept the time that must pass before his release:

'They say "Are you a bit touched or something?" – but to me, it seems that 19 months is a hell of a long time to be separated from the life you're used to. To be separated from your family, your partner, your friends . . . that length of time . . . well . . .' (Extremely articulate, Bud cannot find words to express his response to the sentence time, and stares down at his hands)

Later, he returns to the struggle to express the unhappiness he associates with the length of time he has to serve:

'I can't do 19 months. I could probably just touch on nine months or a year, with it doing me in completely. But 19 months . . . No. No hope. I'm strong enough mentally to know what I'm capable of withstanding, and I just can't address 19

months. I can't keep myself going. It'd just break me down. I know they will . . . I've experienced unhappiness before [when a relationship broke up] . . . but that unhappiness didn't even begin to touch this, because this is like . . . although it sounds like a year and a half isn't that long, when you are in here it is, it's a tremendously long time. It's too frightening.'

Although by his own admission Bud is 'petrified by fear' and utterly degraded by the routines of prison, his daily life is marked by some things worth anticipating. But the time he has to serve appears to him, a young man, as *long-term*, and while he could bear short-term suffering, he cannot face what appears to him to be long-term suffering:

'On a day-to-day basis, there's different things, speaking to my partner or my family on the 'phone. But on a long-term basis, all I look forward to is dying. That's it, it ends there.'

Bud's failure to accept his sentence, the length of which strikes others as bearable, is typical of prisoners whose relationship with prison time is filled with fear and pain. They cannot see the sentence length as manageable: the length is immaterial in a way, because the present-timeness of it is so filled with terror. The only escape route seems to be through death.

Retreating from the Enemy

Sean (not now 'coping', medical centre) echoes Bud in finding the emptiness of time a source of acute suffering. Despite their best attempts to fill the time, they both fall victim to the grip of empty time in which destructive thoughts can get a hold:

'Most of the time when I try to read, you just can't focus on the books, you know what I mean? So you spend most of the day daydreaming, thinking things, things you shouldn't think . . . I spend most of the time sitting by myself, looking into the distance, you know. There's nothing. Empty. Nothing.'

This retreat into oneself is partly forced upon inmates who do not necessarily feel themselves to have much in common with the surrounding talk:

'You try to talk to people, but when you talk to people in here, all they want to do is talk about crimes, you know. I can't really talk about them sort of things . . . they are always effing, swearing and blinding you know. Talking about what they are going to do when they do get out. Them's the things I don't want to know about, you know.'

Like Bud, Sean tries not to think about the years ahead, but inevitably finds that the subject he most tries to avoid, is in fact the one he thinks about constantly:

‘You don’t lose track of time, no matter how you try. You just keep thinking of the years ahead . . . You just take each day as it comes, but the date’s always in your mind, the years ahead you know. Each day that goes by, you’re one day closer to getting out, that’s the way you do think about it, all the time, you know.’

Sean looks forward to sleep, ‘but not to waking up’. The nights are painful for him, because he expects the time to pass in a flash, and yet, because he cannot sleep properly, it drags as slowly as the day. He marks the passing of the time in the night by a series of regular noises:

‘When you go to sleep at night, you hate waking up in the morning, you know. Every morning I hear one noise first, and that’s the noise of a plane going up, so I know it’s half-four in the morning. Then the noise I wait for after that is the noise of keys. So that’s what I wait for every morning. The noise of the plane and then the noise of the keys. You keep thinking, Oh let me go to sleep again. I want to go to sleep again, but you can’t, you know. So you only get four hours’ sleep a night . . . Makes the days even longer, you look at your watch and it’s 6 o’clock and you try your best to go down and sleep again, but you still keep thinking of how you’re waiting for the keys, you know, so you end up staying awake.’

He does not find anything else to look forward to on a daily basis, except the television being put on in the ward:

‘I wait for the TV, at 12 or 1.30. Then again, at 4 o’clock, it’s on again. Then, once it goes out, you’re lost for things to do. You might play a game of dominoes or draughts, but people aren’t into that, you know, you just can’t focus on things you know.’

But one of the problems with looking forward to supposedly regular occurrences, such as the TV, is that they cannot be relied on, as Marty (not now ‘coping’, medical centre) explains:

‘I look forward to the television going on in the evening from 4 till 8, because it makes the time go a little bit quicker . . . But if someone doesn’t get out of bed in the morning at half seven, then they turn it off an hour earlier. And if it happens twice in a row, it’ll be two hours, and so on.’

So even these time-markers are precarious and cannot be relied upon. But Marty, like the others who are not coping, gets over-involved in present time and the slowness with which it moves. Like many, he is trying hard not to think of the time ahead:

‘I try not to think about the future . . . if I do think about it, it gets me thinking about all the things I could be doing, and it knocks me back, and I end up feeling very depressed and contemplating suicide. Time just drags . . . one day seems like three days. Like I say, I can’t deal with time, even a day seems too long.’

Jimmy (not now ‘coping’, medical centre) is a person who has never thought of

the future. With intense highs and lows of mood, he says ruefully: 'The present has always been abundant enough for me.' But he experiences the passing of time acutely painfully:

'It's just like a matter of waiting for the end of waiting, you know. Killing time before time kills you. Like I say, I am able to retreat into an inner world. And I do write a bit . . . sometimes I'll just sit there, still, for three or four hours . . . I'm self-contained in a way.'

Speaking of his feelings in his last, almost-successful suicide attempt, Jimmy tries to express the torture he suffered, and the part played by his internal time-sense:

'I was tormented, I was so stretched. There are no words to describe how I felt . . . in those dark days . . . you feel tortured, your spirit feels like it's stuck in sticky pitch blackness. But imagery . . . like inky crows and blind men's dreams . . . none of it comes even close to a description. Literally, the seconds ticking away, that's the Chinese water torture of what it's like.'

Distorting the Enemy

The long periods of empty time, which Jimmy refers to as 'enforced idleness', are harmful for inmates whose mental state is very precarious. It can sometimes lead to 'lost time', where the thinker retreats entirely into another world. Time can even seem to speed up, as Pradeep's remarks show:

'It's so terrible here . . . there's nothing to do. I can be sitting on my chair thinking about a lot of things in life, and before you know it, time has just gone. Time just flies past, I don't really know it and it's dark again.'

That this kind of 'speeding up' is not healthy is illustrated when Pradeep (not now 'coping', medical centre) goes on to say:

'One thing I do when I'm sitting, I've got a few pictures of my wife, and sometimes when I'm looking at them for a little while, she actually starts talking to me. Sometimes I snap out of this place, and I see people walking around, sitting next to me, and I actually talk back to them.'

The phenomenon of time seeming to be utterly empty and yet moving too fast seems to be something that many inmates experience from time to time, when they are in extreme distress:

'Sometimes when I've been on the wing, it's just too fast, you can't think to yourself, you just can't think. You lie there, you want to think, people go past your door, keys clanging. You want to concentrate on one thing, but you can't, with keys jangling, steps going past, everything too fast. It makes me angry.' (Jock, not now 'coping', medical centre)

Pradeep, like the other non-copers, cannot bear to contemplate the length of his sentence, but that is just what his mind returns to again and again. The thought of what will happen to loved ones, and being powerless to help, is an agony that many cannot help reflecting on:

‘If I was to walk out of here tomorrow, I’d have a chance of pulling my life back – but when I think of the time ahead, the 12 years, I just slip into depression. I start thinking of all the possibilities of things that could happen in that time, what will happen to my parents. And what could have happened if I’d been outside . . . I just can’t seem to get out of that.’

An additional pain suffered by the non-coping prisoners is the knowledge that, along with the placelessness they suffer, the space they occupy and the time they spend is in no sense their own. It is distorted by the purposes of the prison, because they are observed all the time:

‘I just feel suicidal, but I’m being observed all the time. I am being watched and watched and watched. It’s been over a month they’ve watched me, sitting in that chair.’ (Pradeep)

The lack of a private space and a private time means that inmates on the wards are deterred from requesting a visit from a Samaritan. Their perception is that this encounter would take place in full view of all.

‘Who wants a Samaritan walking across the ward and sitting down beside you, with everyone watching? If you talk to them, you’re going to cry – it’s like being in a goldfish bowl.’ (Marty)

Lifers must cope with the pains of the present, and accept that the future means more of the same pains. Brendan (not now ‘coping’, medical centre), a lifer who has served time previously, finds an added pain in that there is no point in looking forward, and this contrasts bitterly with past times in prison:

‘In my first sentence, I used to look forward to going home and being with my girlfriend. And music – I’m a musician and I’d look forward to hanging round with my friends, and being loved in a physical aspect. It kept me going. But in a life sentence, there’s absolutely nothing to look forward to. There’s visits, letters, phone calls, canteen – that’s about it. No future.’

He describes his time as empty, and slow-moving, but tries to cheer himself up by mentioning markers which, ironically, could only be relevant in a cheering sense if he were free:

‘Time’s slow, yes it is. Since I got sentenced. You know . . . maybe it’s just because it’s the tail end of the year that passes slowly for me. Because once Christmas is gone, I’m sure Christmas will be round again before I know it. Then my birthday, my wife’s birthday, Christmas, New Year – those are all points in time.’

Brendan has not yet received his tariff, but already he is learning to block out thoughts about the length of sentence:

'I don't think about it. I'm numb. If I think about it, it gets me down, so I stop. I black it out. Most of the time I try numbing myself. I'm quite . . . "Oh, well! It might be 18, it might be 20 years!" . . . It's just a number, you know. I don't know whether I'm ever going to be released, so it's not exactly something I can look forward to.'

Positive Struggle with the Enemy

Of the non-copers, Brad (not now 'coping', medical centre) is the only one who is managing to confront the future. He has attempted suicide many times, in overdoses on the outside, and two attempted hangings in this six-week remand period. He is in visibly bad shape: his eyes droop involuntarily, his speech is slurred and he cannot control the movements of his mouth. He is aware that he cannot control his suicidal impulses, and needs an enormous amount of help. But an extraordinary spirit blazes from him, although he speaks slowly and with difficulty. Although aware of his own extreme vulnerability, he is beginning to believe that he is on the way to putting suicidal behaviour behind him. There are long pauses between every sentence, and he concentrates hard to say exactly what he means:

'I still take things one day at a time, but I do look ahead now. Yeah. I've got time on my hands so, – how can I put it – instead of putting my energies into destructive ways, I will put 'em into constructive ways, I hope. I'm expecting to go to hospital and get psychological help for my past, because I'm a manic, I'm . . . I get depressed a lot, and that's why I take drugs . . . I think about the future a lot. I think about what I want to do with myself.'

But it is only the thought of constructive help in future time which is giving him something to hold onto:

'My time here is just wasted, and wasting. I'm wasting time being here, I'm wasting time. I just sit around, or sleep. It's a waste of my time . . . I talk to the others, sometimes we have a laugh. But we're just wasting away.'

Brad has done time before, and never achieved this impulse toward a positive relationship with time that he seems to be experiencing:

'I've realized a lot. I've done a lot of thinking, like I always do when I come into prison. I do a lot of thinking. But I kept on coming out with the attitude that I've done my bird, and it was nothing, and I can do it again. But now, I look at it now as wasted time.'

So Brad, like others on the cusp of change, is changing his internal time-awareness: he is becoming aware of a future with possibilities, and he is trying to map his awareness of future possibilities onto a horrific past filled with abuse and pain:

“Time is a great healer”. [Sighs] Maybe I’ll always keep certain barriers up, so I can’t get hurt like that again. But, maybe I will trust someone again, I don’t know.’

Living with the Enemy

The relationship that the now-copers have with their internal time-sense is qualitatively different. They have far less to say than the non-copers about the phenomenon of time, and are not helplessly immured in the agonies of present time. Somehow, they have learned to put time into the general perspective of their prison experience, and their time-sense sits in their consciousness in a less obsessive way. Hal (ambivalently ‘coping’, through repeated self-cutting, in the medical centre) is subject to the life of the ward which the other non-copers find so difficult to adjust to. But, in contrast to them, he describes himself as ‘always busy’, making greeting cards which he then sells to other prisoners.

‘Time goes slowly, yes. But I’ve only got four to five weeks left to do, and next Thursday, I’ll have exactly 28 days to do. And believe me, the further it goes down, the more happier I feel! I feel happier getting out, but of course when I do get out . . . I just don’t want the problems I had last year when I got out.’

Some, like Ken (now ‘coping’), have improvised their own personal time-sense:

‘I telephone the wife every day, and twice at weekends. We get up at 5 a.m. and write to each other. Then we have a cup of tea together at about 8 o’clock. She’s changed her meal times, so that we eat together at lunch and tea.’

This ‘time together’ occurs between two people who are 300 miles apart, and demonstrates the innovative ways in which ‘copers’ deal with the issue of time. Ken’s wife has reorganized the domestic clock of her life, and is living to the timetable of prison with her husband. This is a source of emotional comfort and strength for them both. Ken feels that it has been significant in pulling him through from a suicidal to a coping stage.

Alistair (coping, ‘C’ Wing) lives according to prison time. His life, spent in one institution after another since the age of 9, has trained him perfectly for the prison experience. He grumbles tolerantly if he is banged up early, but does not feel any unusual discomfort if his time is disrupted in this way:

‘I don’t like to say it, but I’m an institutions person. You just go along with the

flow. I just take each day as it comes, really. There's not a lot you can do about it. If they decide to bang us up early, you've just got to accept it.'

He sits passively enough in present time, but admits that toward the end of all of his many sentences, he begins to orientate himself in rather an automatic way toward future time, and looks forward in time to his release, but it is difficult even for him to understand why he does so:

'What keeps me going is looking forward to the day I get out, and what I'm going to do when I get out. I look forward to getting out, and my problems start the day I get out. Once you walk out that door, you've gotta think where you're gonna get money from again, and that's the tragedy about prison. You can be in prison 10, 12, 14 years, easy. The trouble starts the day you walk out, because you've got to try and get somewhere again. How do I cope in prison? Well, it's more a case of having to, really. I mean, there's no alternative. You go out there, you do what you do, you know full well at the end of the day that you're gonna get caught, and you're gonna end up back in prison. What can I say . . . my life has been H.M.P. from day one to the end, you might near enough say, because that's how much time I've spent in prison custody.'

So Alistair's *life-time* has been appropriated by Her Majesty's Prison Service. From somewhere far back in his past, he still has a personal time-sense which embodies looking forward and making plans. But this time-sense is dissonant with what he has learned – that he can cope easily with prison time but not with time outside.

Mike (now 'coping', 'C' Wing), with a life sentence behind him, gives a succinct summary of prison:

'Everything in prison works through time. It's like a time machine. At a quarter past eight, you do this. At half past eight, you do that. Time controls your life.'

But this adjustment has been a long process for him, and a painful road to self-knowledge. In the first four years of his life sentence, he was simultaneously 'in a trance', and belligerent and violent. Eventually he was stabbed by a fellow inmate and nearly lost his life. He took a long look at himself and began the process of adjustment to prison time. He followed every course that was on offer, and he began to read voraciously, taking a special interest in the history of slavery. He says that it was *looking at the past* of his people that began to give him the tools to look at his own future. Over the years, he learnt to exercise autonomy over his time:

'I didn't choose to come to prison, but I can choose how to spend that time. I choose to watch a film – that's a positive choice for me, and so I'm passing those couple of hours positively.'

Bill (now 'coping', 'C' Wing) is only five months into a life sentence, and is

perhaps still in the ‘trance period’ referred to by Mike. In his case, it has not made him belligerent.

‘I just keep my head down, and try to do what is asked of me. I don’t look forward to anything, I just keep busy, with my cleaning job. I don’t ever sit there thinking how I’m going to pass the next couple of days or couple of hours. As soon as I’ve done one thing, I do another, without thinking about it.’

An overriding desire to seek the positive structures George’s (now ‘coping’, ‘B’ Wing) approach:

‘There’s enough negativity about, so you try and fill your time with a focus on good things. You might get out at exercise, and see someone from another wing, so you focus on talking to him. Sometimes I’ll be able to go to the gym and meet some lifers who have done a lot of time already, so I like to talk to them, and they try to point out how things are, and how things were, and how things will go . . . I find that useful . . . you think to yourself if you can get onto the right plane even when you do talk to the ones that have made the mistakes and caused uproar, they will admit it, and be straight with you, and say, well that’s not the way you want to go . . . So it’s helping you through it as well: if you can get into it, and keep in a predominantly positive frame of mind, then the time will take care of itself.’

Unlike the non-copers, George does not over-invest the dimension of time with painful meaning, even though he is a lifer. For him, prison time naturally inter-relates with the efforts he makes to turn the prison into a place where he interacts with others and lives in a positive way. Other lifers have valuable and special time-knowledge: they can say *how things are*, *how things were*, and *how things will go*. This is the significance of learning to cope in prison – acceptance of the time-frame, and knowledge of what it permits the imprisoned self in terms of self-development. George is eager to learn from prisoners who have adjusted to this time-frame, and enlarge his own time-place perspective.

Conclusion

Within the prison, the subjective experience of time produces discomfort. Whether an inmate is in prison for a month or for life, the horrible mismatch of one’s internal time-consciousness and the reality of prison time produces dissonance. As Serge (1970: 35) pointed out, ‘there are swift hours and very long seconds. Past time is void. There is *no chronology of events* to mark it; *external duration no longer exists*’ (my italics).

It is the comparative eventlessness of prison life which produces discomfort, stress and enforced passivity (Toch, 1992: 28). Time in prison seems cyclical rather than linear, in its endless repetition: events either repeat endlessly, or, just

when inmates have come to rely upon them, fail to repeat because staff are too hard-pressed. So acquiring a manageable personal and internal time-sense is a major challenge. The external duration of each life has been brought to an end: henceforward the prisoners must live to prison time, unable to choose freely how to spend any time inside, and unable to participate in the chronology of events that made up their life on the outside and helped to construct and maintain their identity. Family birthdays, football matches, religious feast days, leaving parties for work colleagues – all the chronology of birth, life and death flows on outside the prison, and the prisoner remains bitterly aware of it while forcibly restrained from participation in it. Liberal theorists may assert that people are sent to prison as punishment, and not for punishment. But the fracture of their time-sense is an ongoing and punitive experience for the entire duration of their stay in prison. It is the nature of prison to produce repetitive experience and enforce normalization practices (Foucault, 1979).

This capacity of the prison causes cruel and unusual pain to prisoners who are suicidal for a wide variety of reasons, some of which will undoubtedly reside in the nature of prison itself. For non-coping prisoners, time itself is a source of pain, and the linear view that has been implicit in their socialization pattern cannot help them adjust to prison time. Foucault (1979) points to the historically grounded capacity of the prison to make bodies docile in particular places at particular times. But because his analysis is structural, and methodologically screens out any consideration of human agency or experience (Medlicott, 1994), he fails to convey the forceful capacity of the prison not only to order time in seemingly highly organized ways, but also, in terms of personal experience, to render time itself as a source of terrible pain and suffering. For, paradoxically, time-discipline and the ordering of bodies in prison time is combined with the ruthless emptying of time: opportunities for personal development and the expression of autonomy are largely absent. Coping prisoners such as Mike can construct these; non-coping prisoners cannot. Prison Inspectorate reports have consistently and frequently stressed that the provision of meaningful activity is an imperative responsibility for the Prison Service. In this particular local prison, there was an enormous variation in this aspect of the regime. Some prisoners had jobs which proved a source of satisfaction and personal development; very many others had endless tracts of empty time to cope with, especially if they were confined to a ward in the medical centre. Non-copers, with the most need for time to be filled meaningfully, suffered the most in this respect.

The non-copers exemplify the way in which time can be the most potent instrument of punishment. It is empty, slow, relentless, and it has been appropriated by a powerful agency. This agency has the power to fill the time, but, for those defined as needing the special 'care' of the medical centre, it chooses not to do so. During the period of my research, staff shortages meant that no one in the medical centre was able to visit the library on a regular basis. No one I

interviewed in the medical centre during the year of my research had had the benefit of anything approaching the six hours of daily purposeful activity, which is the standard of the Health Care Directorate.

Stretches of empty time can produce the breakthrough into consciousness of much material which the prisoner would rather not revisit, or a retreat into fantasy (such as Marty described), or an obsession with activities to kill time (Toch, 1992: 28). So the time-markers are trivial matters, such as the television going on. Even these markers are tenuous and unreliable, since they lie within the control of the staff, a power which they exercise as a weapon in the maintenance of conformity. The 'care' is of the body, as the object which must be sustained in order to serve the sentence of the court, or in order to be produced for trial.

The non-coping inmates feel both in the grip of an obsession with time and yet a peculiar *timelessness*, in that they have failed to evolve a workable relationship with their internal sense of time. Some feel watched, but are not aware of any source of help or comfort which might slacken the grip of the obsession, or enable them to develop a *personal timeness*. For others, time either speeds up or stretches out in unpredictable and disorientating ways. Their responses to prison time tend to fall toward *denial, retreatism and distortion*, as the necessarily limited quotations in this paper have shown.

Coping prisoners employ a variety of strategies, some passive and some more innovative, in order to maintain a reasonable coexistence with the enemy of time. Alistair (now 'coping', 'C' Wing) illustrates the passive acceptance of prison time, so common among many prisoners who have been shuffled from one institution to another all their lives. His years of training have taught him how to wait, and so he waits for time to pass. For those who have adapted to prison time, such as George (now 'coping' 'B' Wing) and Mike (now 'coping', 'C' Wing), this lesson in 'learning to wait' has been acquired in prison, and is combined with their innovative capacity to make best use of personal time, while acknowledging the inevitable constraints. George and Mike exemplify a time-place integration. Acceptance of the prison *time-place* was acquired painfully, and with it came acceptance and adjustment to the dominant characteristic of the place, its subtle management of repetitive *time*. It is not possible to generalize about the manner and order of acceptance: it is an individual journey of integration, the originating threads of which are elusive for prisoners to grasp unless they are the recipients of care in the form of prolonged talk.

For *personal timeness* is organized in different ways by each prisoner: time-consciousness is represented on different levels of complexity and integration. Most simply, there are the ordinary representations of present time. In the peculiar circumstances of the prison, the sense of being held in constraint in present time is magnified, and, for non-copers, time *now* becomes an obsession: they are taken over by an exaggerated awareness of time, in ways which copers

are not. Non-copers feel immured in *now-time*, and agonized by its pains. They are unable to engage with representations which emphasize *historicality*, and when asked to attempt the task of recovering the past, they do so with difficulty. All their energy is spent on denying, retreating from or distorting an enemy which still persists in filling most of their thoughts.

Non-copers keep returning to the issue of time; they are saturated in *now-time* awareness; they cannot move through time but must endure the feeling of its slow passing as a kind of personal torture. This saturation renders them unable to engage with the most complex representations of time-consciousness, which attempt to grasp at the unity of future, past and present. It is this deep temporal awareness which they must acquire if they are to accept the fact of the penal appropriation of their time, adapt to it and learn to talk to themselves about how best to move through the present and into the future. The story of this transition, which was told to me by some now 'coping' prisoners who used to be suicidal, cannot be addressed here in detail, but it means entering into a dialogic relationship with the different levels of personal time-consciousness. For proper care of the self in such an extreme environment can only be achieved through care of the past, present and future self.

The past of each prisoner casts a long shadow: the prison adds its own special capacity to crush identity, and prisoners speak sorrowfully of experiencing the extremes of anger, loneliness, boredom, guilt, apathy and self-loathing. Through reflective talk – sometimes with self, often with others – prisoners can enter into a dialogue with self which is grounded in time-consciousness and which provides the nutrition for overcoming suicidal behaviour and feelings. Talk with chaplains, Samaritans, senior officers and Listeners¹ was identified by prisoners as a crucial but scarce commodity. In this particular local prison, a Full Inspection Report by the Prisons Inspectorate during the period of my research disclosed that there were six active Listeners in the whole of the prison, but they could not meet as a group, and they were only permitted to attend part of the proceedings of the wing-based suicide awareness groups.

The body of data gathered in this study is a set of personal narratives, and echoes Ricoeur's (1984) view that narrative is not a dry, coded vehicle on which explanation rides. On the contrary, the narrative is a symbolic discursive form which symbolizes events, makes judgements about their status for the teller, and tells the narrator (and anyone else who is listening) what sort of a person he was, is, and could be.

Prisoners who used to be suicidal but have reached a stage of coping exemplify a sophisticated relationship with the different levels of time-consciousness. They can turn to the past and recover it in terms of personal historicality in a way that achieves a connecting thread with what is going on in the present. Despite the prison experience being productive of a grim view of future time, even lifers, if they have developed a dialogic relationship with time,

are able to consider the future, and make representations of it to themselves. In a highly demanding environment, at an extraordinarily difficult time in the life cycle, the dialogic self can manage the most complex representations of time-consciousness, which attempt to grasp at the unity of past, present and future in a lived and sustaining unity of deep and complex temporality.

This study has outlined the painful and problematic relationship with time suffered by suicidal prisoners: the anguish of this relationship, which is produced by their interaction with the prison, is a significant dimension of a larger pain which immures them in suicidal behaviour and thought. The difficulties of time consciousness have no necessary relationship with the length of sentence, and the length of time spent in prison does not have a direct relationship with the pain suffered, because the ability of inmates to handle time varies so markedly from person to person (Porporino, in Toch, 1992). Suicidal prisoners need help in order to learn to live with prison time and develop a dialogic inner relationship with their internal time-sense. Such a relationship can act as a protective factor in the struggle against suicidal feelings. Unless this qualitative aspect of suffering in prison is properly appreciated and addressed in regimes and prisoner care, policies to prevent suicide will always suffer from a major awareness deficit.

Appendix: Questions about Time

- 1 Before you came to prison, what sort of ordinary, everyday things did you look forward to?
- 2 Did you ever think about the future? Were you the sort of person who had dreams, made plans?
- 3 Do you still do that?
- 4 In terms of your everyday life here, what do you look forward to?
- 5 Does this help, with the situation that you find yourself in?
- 6 How full or empty is your time here?
- 7 And does time pass quickly for you, or slowly?
- 8 Do you have any tricks that help you with the passing of time?
- 9 Do you worry about time passing?
- 10 So what worries you the most?

Note

- 1 Listeners are appropriate prisoners who are selected, trained and supported by Samaritans to help other prisoners.

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