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Sport and physical activity in a high security Spanish prison: an ethnographic study of multiple meanings

Daniel Martos-García^a, José Devís-Devís^b and
Andrew C. Sparkes^{c*}

^aUniversidad Católica de Valencia, Spain; ^bUniversitat de València, Spain; ^cUniversity of Exeter, UK

Drawing on data generated by a two-year ethnographic study in a high security Spanish prison, this article explores the multiple meanings given to the social practices of sport and physical activity. We provide details of the following key themes that emerged from the analysis: (a) escaping time; (b) perceived therapeutic benefits; (c) social control; (d) gendered dimensions; and (e) performing masculinity. The findings suggest that a diverse and contradictory set of meanings are associated with sport and physical activity within this particular prison culture, and that the performance of specific kinds of masculinity is both a process and product that shapes the construction of experience in powerful ways.

Keywords: *Ethnography; Prison; Physical activity; Time; Therapeutic benefits; Control; Gender*

Introduction

Less than a decade ago, Simon (2000, p. 290) lamented ‘the disappearance of inmate social life as an object of knowledge outside the precincts of prison’. This stance was supported in a review by Rhodes (2001) that illustrated how ethnographers in the USA had devoted little time to the study of life in prisons. Likewise, commenting on the situation in the USA, Wacquant (2002) talked of the curious eclipse of prison ethnography in the age of mass incarceration at the very time when they are most needed on both scientific and political grounds following the turn towards the penal management of poverty and the correlative return of the prison to the forefront of the societal scene. He acknowledged that the situation was somewhat different in Europe where British and French field researchers in particular had investigated the carceral settings and drawn fine-grained portraits of ordinary social relationships and cultural forms between walls (e.g. see Sparks *et al.*, 1996; Combessie, 2001; Edgar *et al.*, 2003; Liebling, 2004).

*Corresponding author. Qualitative Research Unit, School Sport and Health Sciences, University of Exeter, St Luke's Campus, Heavitree Road, Exeter, Devon, EX1 2LU, UK. Email: A.C. Sparkes@exeter.ac.uk

This said, as Crewe (2005, p. 458) noted, ‘on both sides of the Atlantic, then, the inverse relationship between incarceration rates and the available knowledge about the social organization and culture of prison life is a worrying trend’. This is particularly so when set against the findings of a recent report by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) (2007) that revealed how European countries have experienced a steady increase in their prison populations since the 1970s, with Spain recording one of the largest increases among these countries during the last 10 years. Against, this backdrop, Wacquant (2002, pp. 386–387) argued that there was a need to reinvigorate field studies of the prison world, and that researchers should worry less about challenging the terms of the discourse that framed and supported prisons and more about ‘getting inside and around penal facilities to carry out intensive, close-up observation of the myriad relations they contain and support’. In a similar vein, Liebling and Maruna (2005) stressed the need for more research into the effects of prison life on prisoners in order that we might not only better understand the potentially brutalising aspects of institutional living, but also provide insights that lead to the lessening of pain suffered by prisoners during their incarceration.

Alongside, the rapid growth in prison populations in the Western societies has been an increased interest in the use and value of sport and physical activity settings in prisons. This is especially so since ‘The Bristol Experiment’, a study developed in UK at the end of 1960s, that suggested that sport, physical activity and recreation might have a positive role to play in the rehabilitation of prisoners (Hagan, 1989). However, just what sport and physical activity *means* to those living in prisons has received less attention. Such meanings and their consequences within a penal institution are likely to be multiple, complex and contradictory.

Accordingly, in this article, drawing on data generated by a two-year ethnographic study, we attempt to take the reader inside the confines of one high security prison in Spain with a view to examining the myriad relations they contain and support, and how these operate to shape the meanings given to sport and physical activity by those involved. As such, in this article we present an overview of our findings, touching upon a number of key emergent themes. In so doing, we have opted for what Geertz (1973) has called ethnographic *thick description*, and what more recently Wolcott (1994a) has called *rich description*, as a preliminary form of analysis to provide a broad cultural portrait of a specific institution. With regard to the themes focused on, we acknowledge that each in their own right demand more fine grained description and greater in-depth analysis if conceptual justice is to be done to each one. Given the limitations of space, however, this task will necessarily be undertaken in a series of publications that focuses on each theme in greater analytical depth.¹ Furthermore, since we are painting with broad thematic brush strokes in this article, we further acknowledge an eclectic use of theory with regard to the themes identified that may appear to lack coherence or logic in terms of their connections to each other and how they shaped the study. In part, this is due to the nature of ethnographic work that begins with a range of theoretical sensitivities that react to happenings in the field, rather than imposing theory and interpretation a priori on action that has yet to take

place. Here we are reminded of the following conversation provided in Wolcott (1999, p. 19):

First ethnographer: Where are you going to do your fieldwork?

Second ethnographer: I don't know yet.

First ethnographer: What are you going to study?

Second ethnographer: That depends on where I go.

Thus, the work of various theorists have moved into the foreground while others have receded into the background as our ethnographic study has progressed and we have tried to make sense of what is happening in the field. Again, we would stress that the work of key theorists will be brought into sharper focus and dealt with in more depth in future articles devoted to each specific theme. With these points in mind we now move to describing the prison setting in which our research took place.

The prison setting

'Varoic Prison' (a pseudonym) is a high security Spanish penitentiary institution with a population of 2500. It is divided into two sections. One section is devoted to prisoners awaiting their sentences, while the other is for those who have already been sentenced. The latter section, where our study took place, is made of 12 buildings housing different kind of offenders with approximately 1300 prisoners. Most of the buildings are for men although one houses women prisoners. There are specialist buildings for new arrivals, prisoners in isolation, and those involved in drug rehabilitation. One building acts as an infirmary.

Cells measure approximately 10–15 square metres and are typically occupied by two prisoners even though they were originally designed for single occupation. Hence, conditions are cramped. Daily life is organised around a number of regimes, schedules and norms that operate to control movement within the prison. These are reinforced via a range of sanctions. Outside each building there is an area marked out as a five-a-side football pitch that can be used by prisoners for recreational activities. There is also a dedicated sports hall that is available for use to all prisoners.

Prisoners can gain voluntary access to, and use of, the sports hall facilities in two ways. They can use the facilities (e.g. weights room) during set times that are booked and allocated to their particular building. These sessions normally take place in the afternoon (16.45–19.30) and at weekends (10.30–13.00 and 16.45–19.30). Prisoners can also use the facilities by signing up as participants in supervised and structured sport and exercise programmes that normally take place in the mornings (09.00–13.00) and are led by specialist staff. The main sporting activities within the programme are martial arts, bodybuilding, five-a-side soccer, preparation for outdoor activities, squash, yoga and swimming in the summer. Approximately, 105 of the prison population are involved.

The programme is nominally under the control and guidance of the prison's Treatment Committee that consists of the principal of the prison, the Treatment Assistant, the Medical Assistant, the Social Services Coordinator, the Education Officer and various personnel who provide a range of services to the prison. However, in practice, it is the part-time Sports Education Officer, named Alex (a pseudonym), who decides the nature and content of the activities that take place in the sports hall. The Treatment Committee tends to defer to his views and is normally happy to confirm the programme of activities he proposes. Accordingly, Alex is a key person in the organisation and development of sport and physical activities in Varoic Prison. He decides the timetable, the sporting activities made available, and he chooses the prisoners that will use it as part of their Treatment Programme. He also organises the monitors who are typically people with basic coaching qualifications that are paid to run specific activities within the programme. Alex also organises and selects the prisoners, known as *destinos*, who assist in the sports hall with the equipment and keeping it clean. If a *destino* has a good background in a particular sport then he, or she, might also be allowed to act as a monitor and assist with the supervision and organisation of that sport within the programme.

Alex has a degree in law and criminology. He is also a karate coach and would like to be full-time sports educator at some point in the future. Currently, he has a dual role in Varoic Prison. He first began there as a general educator working with prisoners prior to taking on the role of Sports Education Officer on a voluntary base. This voluntary acceptance came about in the context of a severe staff shortage and under-recruitment of prison personnel throughout the Spanish penitentiary system (Ayuso, 2003). With regard to this role Alex only works in the morning as do the contracted monitors from outside the prison. During the afternoons and weekends, the *destinos* organise and run the sports hall.

Method

This paper draws on data generated from a two-year ethnographic study (2001–03) of Varoic Prison and, in particular, life in the sports hall. In keeping with many attempts to study life in prisons, gaining access proved problematic. As Wacquant (2002, p. 387) comments, 'An all-too-obvious reason for the precipitous decline in prison ethnography in the USA has been the lack of openness of correctional facilities to inquiry and the limited cooperation forthcoming from the various authorities that oversee them'. Two early attempts to negotiate access by the primary investigator (Daniel Martos-García) to Varoic Prison were unsuccessful. However, one contact made during the second unsuccessful attempt proved a valuable resource for the third and successful attempt. This contact was with an official of a non-government organisation that worked on behalf of prisoners to assist their rehabilitation both during their term in prison and on leaving. Via this organisation Daniel was able to apply for a position as a volunteer sports educator in Varoic Prison with a view to conducting research on the meanings of sport and physical activity. Having had his

application for the position and the rationale for his research project accepted by this organisation, both were then passed on to the central penitentiary institution in Madrid, the Ministerio del Interior, who, having run security check on him, confirmed that he could adopt this role and conduct the research.

Daniel spent three or four hours per day in Varoic Prison for four to five days per week from February to July in 2001, three days per week from September 2001 to July 2002, and two days per week from September to December 2002. During the period of the study, he moved from the role of observer to that of participant observer in the sports hall. For example, Daniel originally began just by observing life in the sports hall and surrounding areas and initiating contacts with those involved. As rapport was gradually developed, he began to take part in some of the activities within the sports hall, such as, football, basketball and bodybuilding. Daniel also taught and supervised these activities when asked to by Alex.

Throughout his time in Varoic Prison, Daniel kept a field diary and utilised a chronological recall strategy to assist in remembering the events of the day. Given the overt nature of his role, he also discreetly took field notes when he was inside the prison of conversations and events. Documentary sources were also utilised. For example, timetables and announcements posted in the sports hall, and public information on Varoic Prison. In total, 39 participants were formally interviewed, some of them several times. These included 20 prisoners, 12 educators/monitors, plus five guards and other officials. The deputy director of Varoic Prison was also interviewed, as was one educator from another Spanish prison.

The analysis involved categorising the data generated from the observations and the field diary and subjecting the interviews to a content analysis in order to identify key emerging themes in relation the meanings attached to sport and physical activity in Varoic Prison. Throughout this process the co-authors adopted the role of 'critical friend', providing a theoretical sounding board to encourage reflection and critique regarding the connecting of emerging themes to data and their ongoing interpretation (Sparkes & Partington, 2003). The themes identified will now be presented in greater detail.

Escaping time

According to Adam (2004, p. 1), 'Time is lived, experienced, known, theorised, created, regulated, sold and controlled. It is contextual and historical, embodied and objectified, abstracted and constructed, represented and commodified. In these multiple expressions time is an inescapable fact of social and cultural existence'. In this regard, as Vasseur (2001) points out, prison life is characterised by long and sustained periods of inactivity. There are huge amounts of 'free time', and there is an overwhelming sense of boredom with many 'dead' hours and routines that can become an additional punishment for inmates. Not surprisingly, as Jamieson and Grounds (2005, p. 51) note, 'The prisoners' experience of imprisonment tends to be

framed in terms of managing time: inmates “serve time”, “do time”, do “hard time” or “easy time”, they “kill time” or “get through ‘dead time’”. They have a dual sense of time passing and standing still’. Importantly, as Goifman (2002) points out, time is experienced very differently by inmates as opposed to those outside the prison:

Beyond the prison walls we ‘feel time’, we ‘notice its presence’ by its scarcity, by its lack. In prison, time is often represented as an immense, boundless entity. Everybody there seems to reflect somehow on this notion. The inmate meets time though the excess in which it presents itself and that leads to an interesting duality: simultaneously ‘time lost’ and ‘time in excess’. When one is faced with the excess of time as an ‘entity’, making time pass and ‘killing’ it are recurring and quotidian tasks. But weapons are too weak in the face of such an enemy: One may kill a portion of the day, but tomorrow it will come back to you whole again. (Goifman, 2002, p. 440)

In short, as Cohen and Taylor (1978) argue, dealing with time in prison is an aspect of survival is getting through each day, let alone each month, or year, or decade, is part of a precarious and problematic journey. As part of this survival strategy Scarce (2002) notes how prisoners accomplish the ‘doing’ of time by consciously manipulating, bending and moulding this phenomenon.

For many prisoners in Varoic Prison, engaging in sport and physical activity was a way of ‘filling in’ ‘occupying’ or ‘passing’ time with others who were also seeking similar outcomes. As Sabo (2001, p. 62) observed, ‘sports and fitness activities in prison engages men’s minds and bodies to varying degrees and, in the process, help them do their time’. The following is a typical comment from one of the prisoners:

There is a lot of time to fill in here and there is not that much you can do with it. Playing sport fills in the time, helps your appetite, and helps you to rest better. It also raises your self-esteem and fitness level. You are more motivated to do things if you practice sport. Also, if you don’t do anything, you put on weight. You can become a pig in here, you have so much time to spare. In the street your time is filled, you work, or meet your girlfriend or friends ... In here, you have lots of time. Almost all of the time you have is for you. You have a lot of free time to occupy. (Male prisoner)

Alex and several of the monitors support the view that playing sport and being involved in physical activity in the sports hall is a way of coping with the excess of ‘free’ time that prisoners have:

As you can imagine, here in prison, one of their fundamental problems is how to occupy time. Keep in mind that to be in a building without making anything for the whole day is very boring ... there are many hours ... They need to fill time once they are confined. Perhaps an enjoyable and easy way for many of them to do this is to play sport. (Alex)

I suppose that most of them [prisoners] search for the same thing—to pass time. They look for an exhausting run so that they are tired when they go to their cell. Otherwise, they just get up, do a siesta, and so on ... Time passes and that’s all. This is the most immediate benefit that it [sport] has for them ... I think it has no

more benefit than a masonry course. It is the same, to amuse, get out from the routine, to pass time. Perhaps it is the most immediate and most evident benefit. (Monitor)

Besides occupying time, playing sport was also acknowledged as a way of escaping the feelings of confinement and existentially locating the individual in a different 'space'. As one women prisoner commented: 'I do it (sport) in jail, mainly because I like it. But it's also to amuse me and to liberate me from this place. When you do sport, you don't think that you are in the jail'. Another women prisoner stated, 'The most important thing is sport. Here, inside it is the most important thing, to be able to escape for yourself'. A women prisoner also said, 'Sport helps you to lose the sense of inactivity. Here, when you are fed up with the world, and you can leave the block. In addition, you get to know other people. In the sports hall I have known people that have given me a lot, and they are good friendships'. This relational aspect of activities in the sports hall and the chance to be with others, for a variety of reasons, is also noted by a Monitor: 'Some do it [sport] because they like it, that is clear. But, it is a minority. Others I believe, use it to escape . . . I think that the main reason is to get out, to see the woman, to see the lover, and that's all . . . There are people that like it, and also for escaping'.

There was general agreement among the prisoners, Alex, and the other officials that playing sport offered the inmates a temporal and spatial suspension of the confinement they experienced, and provided them with a necessary coping strategy to survive their sentence. Again, how this process operated was seen to depend on the individual prisoner. As one guard commented: 'It depends on the prisoner. For some, it (sport) is good for doing time and contributes to making their time inside seem shorter. Others use it as a daily activity to get them out of their block. Some use it so they can meet people in the sports hall, or even in the corridors on their way to it'.

Therapeutic benefits

In addition to escaping confined time and space, sport and physical activity were also perceived as having physical and psychosocial 'therapeutic' effects for the prisoners. As Sabo (2001, p. 62) observed, for them, playing sport has the potential 'to sustain sanity in an insane place'. He notes that stress and emotional conflicts in prison can be reduced by meditation, breathing exercises and physical activity. In this regard, there was general agreement in Varoic Prison that involvement in sport and physical activity had various health benefits that countered the negative effects of incarceration. As Alex commented, 'most of the stress, or part of the stress generated by prison is avoided by sport'. The following comments from inmates support this view:

One of the main problems in prison, if not the most important one, is the stress. The stress doesn't allow you to study, it doesn't allow you to have social relationships. Sport helps you. Sport is a palliative to the damages of confinement both the physical and psychological ones . . . You have two roads in here, drugs or what you do by yourself, either to study, watch TV, or play sport. With sport, a lot

of stress is eliminated. Stress and anxiety, mainly, are something normal here, keeping in mind that it is a mandatory situation, not voluntary, and that you are trapped with long waits for everything, such as, letters from home. (Male prisoner)

I like exercise because of its many benefits. I feel well. It gets rid of toxins and bad thinking ... I lose myself doing sport, I feel free. If I am going to the hall it is because I feel well ... I don't know how to explain it. I forget I am imprisoned, I feel relaxed. It is not about having a good shape. What happens to me is that I feel clean and stress free. (Women prisoner)

You notice it, when you don't practice you are tense ... the sport relaxes you ... I relax myself, I am not so tense. (Women prisoner)

I do sport because it makes me feel good. I love it and, because it calms my anxiety and relaxes my nerves. You have close contacts with other people everyday ... With sport, you spend energy and you can control yourself better. (Male prisoner)

Other activities that were non-competitive were also seen to have some value as the following comment from a Monitor indicates, 'I think many inmates come because they have heard yoga helps them to relax and reduce anxiety. And, obviously, most of them have problems related with anxiety. Some are also depressed. Then, they come looking for a remedy'. Indeed, one male prisoner claimed that meditative exercise such as yoga and Tai Chi helped him to avoid madness after 12 years in the prison, much of which was spent in isolation²:

When I was in isolation, I got a book on yoga and I did meditation and Tai Chi to overcome it. The isolation is very bad and yoga helps you to be very patient. Among those who were in isolation, yoga was appreciated a lot. We had no teacher, and we didn't know if we did it well, but we practiced it. You know, it was not a technical yoga like I practice now, but it was a very necessary resource ... I was 12 years in isolation and there were few alternatives there. Yoga helped me to avoid madness. (Male prisoner)

Although drugs are forbidden inside Spanish prisons, they are freely available and in ready supply in Varoic Prison. In this regard, as Sicilia and De Haro (1995) suggest, physical activity and sport have the potential to offer an alternative to drug use. The following comments provide support for this view:

I like it [sport] and it relaxes me. I am very jumpy normally and doing sport gets rid of my energy. When I didn't take drugs, sport was the best thing for me. I have been able to take drugs and practice sport. When I was feeling all right, it was OK, but when I was feeling bad it was hard ... Now, I don't do drugs and the sport helps me keep off them. I hope that when I get released. I now want to be fit, to be strong and feel well, and to avoid taking drugs. (Women prisoner)

How does it help me? To me sport makes me feel physically well, and to move away from drugs. Sport helps me to leave drugs. It also helps people to avoid confused thinking. I used to play seven-aside football in the street. Now in prison, I have spent a year and a half practicing full-contact karate, and I have also put myself on the list for Aikido. I played for fun and amusement in the street. But here it is different. Sport balances you. It makes you keep away from drugs. (Male prisoner)

It [sport] is everything. I'm in prison for seven years, and if you compare people that go to the hall and people that don't, you will notice differences. I know people who have lost their drug addiction, from being involved in full contact. They got out of taking drugs thanks to sport. (Women prisoner)

The general agreement by those involved in Varoic Prison regarding the therapeutic aspects of sport and physical activity finds support in the academic literature that has indicated some positive mental benefits with regard to stress, anxiety and depression for those in the general population who exercise on a regular basis (e.g. see Biddle *et al.*, 2000; Faulkner & Taylor, 2005), and for those within a prison population (e.g. see Libbus, 1994; Wagner *et al.*, 1999).

Social control

While sport and physical activity can provide a sense of well-being in stressful situations, fill or occupy time, and give momentary feelings of liberation and being outside of oneself, these need to be tempered with their potential to operate as mechanisms of social control within Varoic Prison. The benefits of these mechanisms to produce 'docile bodies' in Foucauldian terms can over-ride the significance of any other outcomes that might accrue. An awareness of this tension is displayed in the following comment by Alex:

Maintaining the number of activities and filling the places on each is the main concern for them (prison senior management). I think they are more worried about maintaining a variety of activities ... rather than a concern with the objectives I am planning ... For them, the ideal would be for inmates to be occupied with activities from waking up in the morning till they go back to sleep at night. That is, sporting activities in the morning, and workshops or cultural activities in the afternoon. I think these are ideal to occupy time and avoid the idleness. There is also a direct relationship between an idle inmate and conflict, either inmate against inmate, or inmate against guards. Having busy prisoners means a decrease in prison conflict.

As the following comments indicate, this interpretation of the 'official' view regarding the control benefits of sport and physical activity was supported by the monitors and guards:

The first thing they (officials) tell you is that the objective of this (physical exercise) is they (prisoners) go back tired to the cell, so they worry less about causing problems. And, that's about it ... It doesn't matter what sport or activity is, or how well it's taught, as long as they do it and don't do nothing: 'You tire them out and they don't create problems', they say ... The principle is of having them entertained. (Male monitor)

While only a very small percentage of prisoners practice sport, it would suit us if a lot more did because it relaxes them a lot. Sport makes them forget their problems, it relaxes them, and helps them to avoid trouble ... The activities are also good for us, When the prisoners are entertained, they are not bothering us. (Male guard)

It would appear that sport and physical activity in Varoic Prison are valued by the majority of officials for dissipating inmate energies, diverting their attention from

their problems during their confinement and, therefore, making them more placid and docile. Such a view is located in the here-and-now. It is short-term and immediate with no implications for the long-term development of the prisoner in terms of their rehabilitation into Spanish society at the end of their sentence. Given this perception, sport and physical activity are afforded low status within the hierarchy of treatment activities on offer within the prison that include literacy courses to develop prisoners reading and writing skills, and occupational courses in, for example, gardening or hairdressing. Those courses leading to some form of certification and the enhanced possibility of employment on leaving prison are in greatest demand with the prisoners. Prisoners can also opt to undertake a drugs rehabilitation programme run by non-government organisations. If this programme is successfully completed and the prisoner is prepared to continue with the programme when they leave prison then there is the possibility that their sentence will be reduced. Set against this, the benefits of participating in the sports and physical activity programme in Varoic Prison, such as, good reports that allow for extra prison visits, are not deemed to be the most valuable. For the most part, the main reward of participating in sport and physical activity is the actual participation itself rather than some long-term benefit.

Indicators of the lack of importance given to the educational objectives and potential long-term benefits of involvement in sport and physical activity include the lack of accountability of the staff involved in these areas. That is, their curriculum objectives, planning and quality of the programmes offered are not scrutinised in any detail by officials on the Treatment Committee who seem most interested in the number of activities offered and the number of inmates who can be occupied in them. As Alex explained:

They demand nothing of me. They are only worried about the number of inmates involved in sport activities. They are not worried if we have achieved anything with them . . . They don't ask me for my goals or plans. I do have goals or objectives, but nobody asks me about these and what I have to achieve. I don't know whether this is because they trust me or they just don't care at all about it.

Set against the official view that sport and physical activity perform important social control function and maintain an 'ordered coexistence' in Varoic Prison, lies a level of complicity among the inmates. Here, inmates recognise and understand the dynamics of the official view and construct their behaviours within it so as to gain benefits for themselves from an implicit system of rewards and punishments that operate in relation to sport and physical activity. Thus, inmates acknowledge the kinds of behaviours and attitudes that need to be displayed within the sports hall in order to get themselves defined as a 'good' prisoner. The level of compliance required is intensified with regard to gaining access to popular and high status activities, such as, full contact martial arts:

They [prisoners] go, for instance, to some courses and then they [monitors or officials] give them extra prison visits from friends or relatives. Then they know that if they finish the course they receive an extra prison visit. If you have a troublesome

prisoner, you tell them 'if you behave well you can go to full-contact'. (Male monitor)

If you behave well you go to the hall, and if you behave even better they make you a *destino* inmate. It happens in the hall and other activities as well, like the theatre. If you have behave well, and if you are polite with monitors in the sports hall, for instance, then it's the same, you get favoured positions in the prison. It's also the same in the education classes here. I think that everything works the same way. From my point of view, I think that it is not a good procedure but things actually work this way. (Women monitor)

Importantly, good behaviour and displays of compliance are key criteria used in the selection of inmates for sport and physical activity programmes in the hall. Given that only 10% of the Varoic inmate population are able to gain access to such programmes, being selected is perceived as a 'reward', while being taken off a programme is deemed a punishment. The use of predetermined behavioural criteria along with the category of crime committed is most evident in the selection process for martial arts activities. Here, as Alex points out, 'Previous behaviour is very important, as is the type of offence. For example, if the offence involved homicide, violence, or serious injury, they don't get selected'.

Within this control system, *destinos* or inmate collaborators, play a role in the monitoring of behaviour in the sports hall as they are often invited to make recommendations about the suitability of inmates to stay in a programme or to be selected for others. Thus, a behavioural surveillance system becomes multi-layered in Varoic Prison. As Alex commented:

In terms of the trajectory of an inmate here, the information gathered from the observations of other inmates, or any documentation about them, is important. The *destinos* in the sports hall can give you 'secrets', the information they give you is relevant to the decisions that get made. This is an important source of information. They know the inmate better than you do as they share confidences.

Set against official notions of social control, however, lie a number of underlying tensions with regard to the nature and content of the specific activities offered to inmates in the sports hall. These tensions are particularly pronounced in relation to the martial arts sessions. For example, one view is that this kind of activity releases aggression and so makes inmates calmer:

Martial arts channels aggressiveness. They transform aggressiveness into something playful. So you control and gain security. You learn to be aggressive some hours per week, but before and after it, you smile. It is just a sport goal, it is all very positive. (Male prisoner & assistant in martial arts classes)

Full contact is a lifestyle that transcends the hours that you dedicate to training. Any martial art is a lifestyle. It transcends training hours, you have to adopt certain habits, a lifestyle that allows you to improve, and train ... There are people that think these activities facilitate a persons aggressiveness, but I think just the opposite, it channels aggressiveness. It is obviously necessary to have an exhaustive control on inmates that come to the martial arts classes. (Alex)

The view that teaching martial arts within Varoic prison reduces levels of aggression and makes it a safer place is supported by the following comments:

Martial arts make you a more serious character. It is not like soccer or basketball where you can be saying silly things. It requires concentration, seriousness. People, at the beginning, can easily react but, over time, they gain a martial spirit and they become more serious. (Male prisoner)

Whenever I can I avoid fights. Well, if there is an affray I will use it [martial art knowledge] because I cannot avoid it. But in one year and a half I have had no fights. Moreover, if we fight we lose the opportunity to practice full contact karate in the sports hall. (Male prisoner)

In contrast, many of the guards and the monitors felt that the availability of martial arts to inmates had the potential to make Varoic prison a more dangerous place to work in:

Those that do martial arts now, accomplish some requirements. That's all right. But who is to say what they will turn their skills to in future years. It is a sport that teaches people to attack. If he knows where to hold on to, if he is prepared, this can cause you many problems. (Male guard)

Contact sports should be removed as soon as possible because I see them as very dangerous . . . One day I was speaking to them [inmates], they said to me they will not use it [martial arts]. But, who will ensure you that they will not use such a range of kicks. (Male monitor)

Despite the tensions inherent in the practice of martial arts within Varoic Prison that can act, potentially, to undermine the control of individual guards and monitors, the dominant perception remains that of sport and physical activity playing an important and multi-faceted role as a social control mechanism.

Gendered dimensions

According to Kruttschnitt (2005, p. 146) the rapid growth in women's imprisonment since the 1960s has meant that 'women offenders are increasingly encountering physical surroundings and disciplinary regimes that were once reserved only for their male counterparts'. As such, she argues, the character and meaning of women's imprisonment will be very different from those of men (also see Britton, 2003). This was certainly so in the heavily gendered atmosphere of Varoic Prison as evidenced in the dynamics that pervaded the organisation of sport and physical activity. Thus, of the 15 sports-based treatment activities, only aerobics and volleyball were exclusively available to women. However, only a few women prisoners (between 6 and 12) actually participated in these activities. Swimming sessions in the summer were divided by gender, with the only female *destino* acting as a life-guard in these sessions. Yoga, basketball and the outdoor activities were made available as mixed gender sessions. Only two women participated in the martial arts classes during the course of

the study and none were involved in bodybuilding. The five-a-side football was available to men only.

At one level, the lack of female participation within the prison reflects the lower levels of women's participation in sport when compared to men in Spain as described by García-Ferrando (2006). This situation is shaped by deep-rooted cultural stereotypes and assumptions regarding gender appropriate sports and activities that influence both access and participation choices. Such assumptions and stereotypes appear to permeate Varoic Prison at several levels. For example, a very masculinised and 'macho' view of sport and physical activity is held by Alex the sports educator who determines both the content of the programmes and how it is divided by gender. Furthermore, a number of monitors held negative views about women's involvement in sport and physical activity that drew on notions of presocialisation and structural reasons that included a hint of biological determinism:

Of the hundred and more women inmates, only ten do sport. The rest of them are not motivated to do it. There are many of them that spend their time on the patio laying under the sun, taking drugs, taking pills. It is because of them being reluctant to take part as well as to the lack of activities for women. I would introduce more activities and, if they don't work, then you can remove them. But at least it needs to be attempted. (Women monitor)

But, in general, it [the sports hall] is wasted. There is little to offer for women and most of them don't like full-contact or sports like soccer. There is aerobics but little else for women to do. The women are on the patio the whole day, dancing or taking drugs. They do not see the point of sport. (Women monitor)

Women don't like sport very much and most of them are old women and drug addicts in here. Many are gypsies and for them sport is no good. There are not many women doing sport out there [in society] as men ... And those men, when they are imprisoned continue practicing. Women come here because they are drug addicts or dealers, but they didn't like sport before they came in. Men are born liking sport, it is in their genes. Women only like sport on TV! (Male monitor)

Such views serve to support prevailing patriarchal attitudes within Spanish society as a whole by reinforcing gender stereotypes of women as passive and uninterested in physical activity or sport. As such, wider social meanings regarding sport and physical activity that provide limited possibilities in relation to gender are reproduced within the confines of the sports hall in Varoic Prison. Set against this, however, are the reasons given by some of the women prisoners themselves for their lack of involvement. These include the ways in which the spaces of the sports hall become defined by a male gaze that locates them as sexual objects rather than sporting women:

Women are discriminated against here. We are partly to blame. It is hard motivate ourselves [to practice sport] if someone doesn't help you. It has been an effort to gain some time for us to have a women's activity in the hall on Friday's afternoons. They don't consider this a worthwhile addition. Also, many women have a partner, a boyfriend, and if they go to the hall, it seems like you want to flirt with monitors. Actually, most of them go to flirt in the hall! If we are with men in the sports hall it

is a mess, and that's why they have discriminated against us. We are marginalized. In addition, most of officials think we go to the hall to fuck when I go to exercise. (Women prisoner)

It is not the same as in the street, because if you think about it, there are many more men than women here. Then, they burden you, as you make up a little. They don't stop saying you things like 'bonita' or 'I envy your boyfriend' ... As I now have a boyfriend here inside, then they respect me more, as they know him then they don't pull my leg so much. (Women prisoner)

Sexist views reinforce such perceptions and are evident in the following comment from a male monitor, 'You think only ten percent of prisoners are women and they are older and take drugs. They go to the hall to get drugs or see their boyfriends. They have no other motivations to go there, they don't enjoy the activities there'. Another male monitor confirmed this view as follows, 'They already have their circle of friends formed. I believe that they go down to the hall not for the sport activities, because they don't like them, but for social relationships, to met men and talk with them ... I think they use sport to come down and talk with boys, and if it is possible something more, much better, do you know?'

In contrast, one women prisoner places the blame for the women's lack of involvement on Alex because of the way he focused the activities within the hall on what the men enjoyed, and in particular on the martial arts that he clearly had a vested interest in promoting. She stated, 'The sports educator is guilty in this situation and I told him face to face ... It is true that there are women that go to the hall to have a look or to see their partners, I have also done it, but not all them do the same. We should be treated like men, with no differences. We all deserve an opportunity'. Against this, Alex pointed out that he did introduce an aerobics class but it was short lived due to 'a question of space, of the activity interfering with bodybuilding and martial arts classes'. Another monitor involved with this activity stated, 'The aerobics course was a disaster. They didn't come or they came with enormous shoes on, or they came and they didn't feel like doing it. It carried on for one month and then we suspended it because they didn't work'.

Performing masculinity

Linked to how the women experience sport and physical activity in Varoic Prison is the manner in which the sports hall is colonised by male prisoners as a social space in which to perform or *do* particular kinds of masculinity via the use of their bodies in specific ways (see Butler, 1993; Connell, 1995; Hsu, 2005; Jewkes, 2005). As Sabo (1994, p. 165) notes:

(M)any men in prison use sports and exercise to 'do' masculinity—that is, to spin masculine identities, build reputations, to achieve or dissolve status. For the men in prison, as elsewhere, masculine identity is earned, enacted, rehearsed, refined, and relived through each day's activities and choices. I'm not saying that the gender roles that men follow in prison are reinvented each day, from moment to moment, man to man. Masculinity does not unfold inside us as much as it flows through us.

It is not a strictly individual or psychological process. In 'doing' masculinity, each man participates in the larger prison culture, which scripts masculinity by supplying direction, role models, props, motivations, rewards, and values. For many men, sports are part of the formula for shaping gender identity.

Accordingly, in the sports hall of Varoic Prison, a situated accomplishment of gender identity takes place that is directly related to notions of hegemonic masculinity that are intimately bound to the production of hard, powerful and assertive bodies that not only take up space but are used in space in particular ways. This is most evident in the activities of bodybuilding and the martial arts classes. Both of these, as social practices, were used by prisoners to display specific masculine identities, gain status, and enhance individual reputations within the prison community. As a male monitor commented:

Bodybuilding is a successful activity because most inmates are men, 'machos', and they compete among them to become stronger than the other mates. In the case of the full contact [martial arts] it is because they want to learn to fight and achieve status.

This comment illustrates the symbiotic relationship of physical power and fighting ability in the construction of a dominant masculinity within Varoic prison. For example, with regard to bodybuilding and the visible display of muscle, one male monitor noted, 'with bodybuilding they also look intimidating to others. Because, the stronger you look, the easier it is for you to define your territory, and nobody touches you'. Here, as Wacquant (1995, p. 171) observed, 'muscles are the distinctive symbol of masculinity ... Surveys have shown time and again that men's self-esteem correlates highly with having a muscular upper body'. Beyond this, large muscular male bodies signal a warning of potential threat to others, that if required can be actualised in circumstances where the body becomes a weapon to defend oneself and harm others (Messner, 1992).

In a similar fashion, involvement in martial arts within Varoic Prison also had high symbolic value. As a monitor commented, 'I see them there saying hello each other with martial movements. And it's worthwhile there. They say they go to full-contact karate, that they have belts, and sometimes they kick up to air. It is a way to be respected by others'. Gaining such respect has certain consequences. For example, as the following comment indicates, it can allow the prisoner to feel more secure in their environment:

I don't know how to explain it. You feel superior because you have learned things that allow you to neutralise the opponent, and it is this superiority that makes you feel secure, and you don't need to demonstrate nothing to anyone else. You are more under control, you feel more secure. (Destino inmate)

The manner in which physical appearance and fighting ability provide status within the social hierarchy of inmates in Varoic Prison is noted by Alex:

Physical appearance is important because of their domination relationships and hierarchies in the modules. It's about physical self-esteem and is deep rooted among the inmates. If someone is strong enough, it will give him a later status in his daily

life ... For instance, if someone has participated and fought well in a full contact competition he will gain respect because of that from other inmates.

In this regard, physical prowess and fighting ability provide a form of physical capital that can be converted to social and cultural capital within the prison environment (Bourdieu, 1990). This is particularly so in relation to the discourse of 'hardness' that frames the practice of martial arts within Varoic Prison that is directly opposed to any form of 'softness'. As Sabo (1994, pp. 165–166) noted:

(T)here are many guises of hardness, which, inside and outside the prison culture, illustrate various ways of expressing masculinity from the honorable to the perverse. Being hard can mean that the individual is toned, strong, conditioned, fit—not weak, flabby, or out of shape. A hard man cares for and respects his body ... Some men strive to be hard as a way of building self-esteem, garnering the respect of others ... others find that getting good at basketball or being recognized as a leading athlete earns them the respect of peers ... Being hard can also be a defence against prison violence. The hard man sends a message that he is not a pushover, not someone to 'fuck with'.

With regard to a continuum between hardness and softness in relation to sports within Varoic Prison the martial arts were afforded high prestige. Thus, a male prisoner stated, 'All sports are good but you know, martial arts are the toughest. Contact sports are very hard. They are not like basketball. Here, you can quickly get injured'. Likewise, a male monitor noted, 'I have seen, this year, one inmate with a broken nose, another one with swollen eyes because of punches and kicks from a martial arts class'.

In part, the concept of 'hardness' within Varoic Prison is connected to the kinds of training advocated in the martial arts classes that is informed by the notion of *machaque*. In Spanish, this term can be translated as 'make or break' and refers to the use of tough and painful exercise regimes that are carried out until the point of exhaustion. Several of the inmates noted the atmosphere of *machaque* that was generated when Alex led the classes:

I see Alex as too competitive. He does *machaque*. I don't know if you have seen him take any full contact training, but I think he is does it in an excessive way. Too much *machaque*. (Women monitor)

I'm not keen on the martial arts here in the prison. Mainly because of the way they train ... I've seen Alex arrive and develop a military physical training system ... Having someone stand on the stomach of someone else until they are red in the face ... No stopping ... He did some real atrocities and outrages against the health of the inmates. One day Alex said to instructor 'Today *machaque*, leave them with their liver out there to die'. (Male monitor)

Others within Varoic Prison recognised that Alex did not reserve the enactment of *machaque* solely for martial arts classes. It was a general orientation he instilled in all activities he led as the following comment from a male monitor illustrates:

We went to do some trekking and that's all about enjoyment. But for him [Alex], it is *machaque* ... It is about him demonstrating his fitness levels in front of the group and going quicker. If some people get left behind, then so much the better, he goes

even quicker. And he was saying: 'These bastards are burnt out'. It is called a therapeutic outdoors but it is not therapeutic at all with him . . . He also said to Xavi [a monitor] in football the first day: '*Machaque* for them-to die'. That was the first day! If you want inmates to participate in the long-term in exercise, then they need to enjoy it and stay healthy—not die.

In summary, the comments made support Sabo's (1994) view that the prison culture provides a script for the *doing* of masculinity that is enacted and reproduced on a daily basis via the social practices that the inmates engage with. The comments also resonate with the findings of Hsu (2005) and Jewkes (2005) in their studies of how men perform masculinity within a Taiwanese and British prison respectively. For Jewkes, with regard to the constructed nature of the self in the mediated world of a male prison, she found that displays of 'manliness' became a coping strategy par excellence. Importantly, she noted within the prison culture, that the performance of certain kinds of hypermasculinity are unsurprising within a system that produces and maintains hierarchies of domination for those involved. Likewise, in her analysis of the patterns of masculinity embedded in the daily conduct of a prison, Hsu noted how this constructs the notion of the macho male as a 'real man' who always hides his feelings and performs the 'tough guy' role. Thus, Jewkes' notion of 'manliness' alongside Hsu's views on the 'real man' can be connected to the display of 'hardness' within Varoic Prison that is itself framed by the symbolic meanings and value given to particular sporting activities in relation to others with full contact martial arts being afforded the highest place in the hierarchy. Here, the centrality and explicit promotion of *machaque* by Alex operates as a powerful legitimising process for the desirability and accomplishment of particular kinds of masculinity over others that provide a limited script for those men choosing to enter the arena of sport and physical activity within the prison. Furthermore, this process places severe constraints and limitations on female prisoners in Varoic Prison with regard to both their access to the sports hall and the meanings constructed around their presence in this highly gendered social space.

Summary

In this article, we have attempted to provide some insights into the lived meanings of sport and physical activity in Varoic Prison in relation to issues associated with escaping time, perceived therapeutic benefits, notions of social control, the gendered dimensions of prison life, and the ways in which certain kinds of masculinity are performed on a daily basis. Clearly, our analytical separation of these issues for the purposes of presentation should not be taken to infer that each operates in isolation. Rather, as we have tried to indicate, they interact in complex and dynamic ways to produce a diverse and contradictory set of meanings within this particular prison culture. Thus, for example, sport and physical activity in Varoic Prison operates simultaneously as both a source of personal liberation and as a tool for social control. As such, our findings provide support for Sabo's (1994) observation that prison sport and physical activity can mean different things to different men:

I have learned that a great many motives, messages, and contradictions are crammed into the muscles and athletic pastimes of men in prison . . . For some men, especially the young ones, athletics are no more than a fleeting pastime, a simple form of physical play, something to do to get to the end of another day. For others, sports and fitness activities are a crucial survival strategy, a life practice that is intended to create and maintain physical and mental health in a hostile, unhealthy place. For still others, working out or participating in sports helps them to displace their anger and frustration, to get the rage out of their bodies and psyches before it explodes or turns in on them. And for some, the goal is to get big and bad, to manufacture muscle and a jock presence in order to intimidate and dominate. (Sabo, 1994, pp. 62–63)

Given the strongly gendered nature of experience within Varoic Prison we would add that the same can be said of female prisoners and that the dynamics of gender relationships with regard to sport and physical activity within prisons deserves much greater attention in the future. Such a move would be part of a revival of ethnographic studies that enable intensive, close-up observations of the social relations that prisons contain, sustain and construct over time, and how these shape the experiences of those involved in both positive and negative ways.

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Notes

1. One of the reviewers expressed concern about the amount of ‘rich description’ in our paper at felt that it needed a deeper level of analysis and a stronger focus. She/he suggested that we should focus on one key issue or idea for the paper. While we accept this concern it raises issues for us about how one begins to disseminate findings from extended, rather than condensed, ethnographic studies in the context of scholarly journals that operate with specific word limits. We feel it is necessary to first present the broader cultural picture before focusing on selected aspects of the culture in depth. Often, in the field of anthropology this problem is overcome by the findings being presented in a monograph. In contrast, another reviewer liked the rich description but felt that more observational data as opposed to interview data could have been included in the paper. Again, we appreciate this concern and the balance between data generated from different sources will change in future presentations.
2. Martin Sostre, an African-American black power activist and inner-city book store owner was framed by the police in 1967 and imprisoned for nine years. He also used yoga and other physical exercise to survive long spells in solitary confinement (see Copeland, 1970; Sabo, 2001).

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